

**RON
OLSON**

THE STEAMIST

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THE STEAMIST

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THIS BOOK WAS WRITTEN FOR MARIAN

THE STEAMIST



The Little Snowy Mountains of central Montana were an inconstant beacon for Owen Bannack. As he rode steadily across the rolling plains toward them, the faraway white peaks would rise up from the horizon as he would top the rounded crest of one ridge after another. Then, as he would ride down the north facing slopes into the little coolies and valleys, the distant peaks would sink out of view, falling each time behind the line of another hillside.

Although the skyline did not seem to change, Owen knew that each time he saw it come into view the little mountain range was a bit closer. Slowly, but steadily, as each hour of the day came and then gave way to another, the jagged edge of the horizon grew and took on a more distinct and more familiar form. The tiny white sawteeth slowly became a sharply pitched, irregular ridgeline still capped with winter snow. Then, the lower regions of the mountains, at first a bank of cold blue haze, began to emerge as a wide crumpled land mass and then, as Owen drew near, was revealed as a range of forest-covered slopes and hillsides.

Finally, Owen could see the full breadth of the Little Snowys, and he could see how the eastern end of the mountains tapered off into long foothills which in turn trailed away and became lost in the plains. He could also see the higher and more rugged bulk of the Big Snowys looming against the sky in the West.

Yet, even as the mountains seemed to come ever closer, the distance to them gave way stubbornly. Owen understood the eternal limitations of time and space, and had set for himself the goal of reaching Ketchel Creek as an evening campsite. That would mean the mountains would still be almost a full day's ride away, but Owen, who had the patience of a man accustomed to the vast distances of the prairies and mountains, was content with the progress he had made.

As he shifted his weight in the saddle and flexed his long legs, Owen hunched down into the high collar of his thick sheepskin coat. The disappearing sun made him look anxiously ahead at the approaching tops of the trees along the creek. The rapidly cooling air concentrated his attention on the unpleasant prospects offered by the late March evening. That portion of the day would soon close in with its sharp, biting cold and make camp life more than a little uncomfortable for those who had no shelter or fire.

As he felt the powerful horse stride against the sharp rise of a knoll which rose up between him and the approaching creek, Owen realized that on this day he had asked much of his big chestnut, Cocoa. As

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always, the animal had responded and with his smooth, long stride, had covered a considerable number of miles, never seeming to falter or tire. Yet, Owen knew the horse was beginning to grow trail weary and was in need of a good rest.

With such thoughts in his mind, Owen welcomed the familiar land forms which came into view. The long, gently rising upslope meant that a watershed was just beyond. Near the crest was the final steeper pitch of ground where the grass was more sparse and the soil was weak, thin and given over to small, broken plate of shale. The reward for the climb was the sight of the long, nervous crack in the face of the earth which was Ketchel Creek.

The thin trickle of water which was the normal flow of Ketchel Creek was not more than a few yards wide, but it ran year around. Although it almost disappeared into a muddy imagination during the hot, dry months of late Summer, it more than made up for low water by its broad, wide, muddy rush in the Spring. In fact, it might have been said that the creek seemed to have something of a nasty streak about it, because it used its high water to conduct an annual war with the brush and trees which lined its banks.

One combatant, the brush, mostly sage and sand berry, insisted on bravely growing almost to the water's edge. The jealous little creek would bide its time during that invasion. Then, periodically, when extra heavy runoff would provide more than normal volumes of water, the mean little stream, in possession of more power than it knew how to use responsibly, would rip and tear at the brush, carrying most of it away.

Up off the sandy bottom, on higher ground, cottonwood trees flourished, but in false security because, in turn, they too had to deal with the temper of Ketchel Creek. Not often, but when flash floods, would fill the entire creekbed with thick, muddy water, Ketchel would show its worst side to the world. Whirling and broiling, the holy terror would rampage and rush about grabbing and snatching at tree limbs and trunks. Having weakened them above and having eaten away the soil from around their roots, the Creek would triumphantly tear the trees from their sockets and float them away. Later, when the waters receded, the trees would be abandoned to dry in the sun, stark reminders that Ketchel was not always the peaceful citizen it might appear to be.

The sand and dirt bottom of the creekbed, thus swept clean, would lie fertile and innocent, slyly inviting the process to begin all over again. Of course, the tough, scrubby little brush and new, ambitious cottonwood

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seedlings always accepted the challenge, and, of course, Ketchel ambled along waiting for rain.

The force of the water in Ketchel Creek, wearing against one bank, sweeping away and wearing against another, had caused the creekbed to develop as a series on long lazy loops. The uncountable years of continual erosion had channeled the creek deep into the prairie, and, except for occasional paths worn into the bank by buffalo and plains animals in early years and by cattle and wagons in later years, the bank lining the floor of the drainage was sharp and treacherous.

Owen rode along the creek until he found just such a caved away and worn path to the creek bottom. He then leaned back and let Cocoa pick his way carefully down the sloping bank. Owen then made his way down the creek until he came to the wide and high end of one of Ketchel Creek's many loops. There he picked the lee of a little sandhill for his camp. The nearby creek offered water, on the bank there was a generous supply of dried trees for firewood, and in the area generally, there was a stand of straw colored water grass. Even though the grass contained little nourishment, it would offer Cocoa something to munch on after he cleaned up his grain.

Hot coffee, a large handful of wheat mush fried with a strip of bacon, and a dried biscuit filled Owen's menu if not his stomach. But the little fire was welcome and sitting with a fallen cottonwood at his back, Owen was comfortable enough.

Standing in the outer ring of the dancing light, Cocoa looked at Owen as if reviewing the day's events and wondering if the next day would be as long and tiring as the one he had just completed. Perhaps he was glad to be so close to home range, and it may have been that he understood that a long ride was almost over.

As he thought of his ranch, a day's ride ahead, Owen looked into the flames of the campfire. Suddenly, the flames seemed to rise. They became an inferno. They were burning and consuming his house.

Owen rushed into the flames. The smoke and the heat immediately began to smother him. He couldn't breath and he couldn't see. Yet, he fought his way through to the interior of the house.

There, in the stark light of the maddening flames, Owen saw his wife's body. Nearby, he saw the bodies of his two sons. In death, their positions were grotesque and horrible. Blood stained clothing was ripped, and the wooden floors were smeared with red. Owen lifted his wife, and as he did, he knew life had left the sagging body. Somehow, he pulled and dragged the bodies out of the house into the night air.

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Kneeling by his family, Owen saw that the boys had been shot, many times. It was worse for his wife. Shooting would have been merciful. Owen cried out into the night.

As he sat boldly upright, his mind was filled with the images of two of the depraved killers who had committed the atrocity. They were the two he had pursued and hanged. Yet, one remained alive, somewhere. The cruel memory was as strong as though it were real, and Owen knew the nightmare would stay with him until the third killer was found and brought to justice.

Shaking off the torturing nightmare, Owen looked into the little campfire, Owen thought back on the ride of the last three weeks and the events before that which had kept him away from his ranch for almost two years. It seemed as though time had stopped and it was only yesterday the rampaging killers had raided his ranch.

Owen could recall every detail of the angry meetings and long, bone tiring rides of the vigilance committee. When the trail began to lead out of the Snowy mountain area, the Committee had been forced to give up the hunt and had agreed that Owen should be commissioned to follow the one lead they had and try and track the men into Wyoming where they seemed to have fled.

Sid Andrews, Owen's friend and neighbor, had agreed to mind the ranch. With that settled, Owen had ridden in pursuit. He picked up the trail near a small, hard bitten little river town and had captured one of the killers. Unable to find a judge or an honest sheriff, Owen had hanged the whimpering, craven Lupe in front of the town saloon.

The rushing events that followed were still strong and fresh in Owen's mind. He recalled the search for clues which might lead him to the remaining two marauders. During that time, Owen became fast and close friends with a freighting man and his daughter. That part of his time in the town and the surrounding area was a warm and close memory. Amos Carpenter and his blonde-haired daughter, Jane, had quickly become a sort of second family.

With some luck and the help of some stockmen, Owen found the trail of a second killer. Since Amos and Jane were looking for a new place for their hauling business, away from the dying little town, they accompanied Owen to the mining camps of Colorado. Again, Owen ran the killer to ground. Dirty, treacherous Serill, when cornered, spat out hatred to the end of his life. He died at the end of a long rope and a long fall into a mine shaft. However, the trail then grew cold. Without any clues or even any thoughts about the whereabouts of the third killer, Owen

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had stayed for a time with the Carpenters. As the winter had begun giving way to early spring, Owen realized he had to decide on whether to stay in Colorado or return to his ranch in Montana. Steady, thoughtful Amos said nothing. He had seemed to know all along what Owen would decide. Jane, with her brave heart, concealed her feelings, and, with her intense blue eyes, watched for a sign which would tell her what Owen would do.

Leaving them to return to Montana had been difficult, but necessary. Owen had felt he could not abandon his ranch and neither could he expect his neighbor, Sid Andrews, to keep it going for another season.

When he had left Jane and Amos in Colorado, Owen had promised to write a long letter. He also made a solemn promise to look into the possibilities of a freight business in the area, perhaps between the railroad in Billings and the growing little town of Lewistown, located on the North side of the Snowy Mountains. There had been much discussion by Amos and Jane about moving their hauling business to Montana, but a decision had been postponed until Owen decided what to do with his ranch.

Parting from those treasured friends had been more difficult than Owen wanted to admit, even to himself. It had been especially difficult for Jane who had tried to make him believe that she understood the reason for his return to Montana. Owen had given her his word that he would be back in Colorado before the first snow in the Fall when they could talk more about their plans for the future.

He remembered the morning he had left and how the mountain breeze had tossed Jane's hair across her eyes and face as though it had been trying to hide the girl's tears. Standing straight and biting her lips, she had not spoken, but pain was there in her forced smile. Owen also remembered how Amos had frowned, fussed more than usual with his big black pipe, and expressed his thoughts that there wasn't much sense in making a long ride to Montana in the early spring.

Old Jess, who had worked with Amos for years, seemed to understand the reason for the trip better than the others. He took the opportunity to offer some very strong words about the danger of a man riding such a long distance alone. Jess, as usual, had expressed his warning in his own crusty way and suggested that Owen, riding by himself on the open prairie, would be "like a tall weed on the path to the garden." Old Jess also suggested that Owen might want some company along the way to "Help fight off two-legged sage ticks."

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Even Jake Ritter, who had failed in his attempt to be an outlaw and was now dedicated to a program of reform by working under Jane's supervision, had offered to ride along, "jest as company, nuthin' more, jest company." Owen had laughed off the offers of Jess and Jake Ritter and directed them instead to watch after Amos and Jane.

Owen had wanted so much to stay with the little group in the little mining town that he almost abandoned the notion of returning to his ranch, and in the first days of the long ride north, he had very nearly turned back. Yet, something made him go on. He had tried a hundred times to define it, to give it a name, to identify the true reason for his return, but nothing came to him. He only knew that he had a feeling that something was unfinished, that something was in need of being done. For the time being, Owen satisfied himself that the unfinished business was his ranch, either selling it or taking it up again and operating it.

As he looked into the burning black skeleton limbs from the cottonwood tree which made up his fire, Owen pulled his blanket closer about his shoulders. The little nook in the hill was proving to be a snug and protected campsite. As the warmth of the fire reached out to him, the coffee cup in his hand tipped and then tipped even more. Finally, it settled to the ground, half of the cold contents spilling out onto the ground.

His eyelids again began closing out the night. The long ride of the day and the longer ride of the past weeks had tired his body to the point of exhaustion, and with the indistinct thought that tomorrow he would be on his home range, Owen found the comfort of sleep.

The little fire drew down closer to its fuel. A burned out limb collapsed throwing a flurry of sparks on its neighbors. Another spat out its last pocket of moisture with a little snap.

Then with a sudden angry roar, somehow louder and stronger in the night than it would have been in the day, the darkness was torn with the shock of a great blast. Like a clap of thunder close enough to be felt, the sound ripped through the dark silence and seemed to pound the very earth itself.

As if lost in the little valley of Ketchel Creek, the noise quickly rippled away cascading off the surrounding hillsides. As abruptly as it had come, it was gone, leaving only the unsettled, shattered darkness.

Even as the roar gave birth to its first echo, Owen rolled away from the light of his campfire. The polished wooden handle of his navy colt filled his hand as he kicked free from the blanket and found protection

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amid the covering branches of the fallen cottonwood which an instant before had supported his nodding head.

In the silence which followed, Owen tried to see an outline or a sign of Cocoa. Owen guessed that the horse had lunged through the fire scattering the burning ends and pieces of wood in a dozen directions. The noise would have startled the animal, but Owen was sure that training and instinct would keep him close and would keep him from running out of control along the creekbed in the darkness. Owen's guess was that the frightened horse had skidded to a halt somewhere, but only a few yards from where he had been standing.

Owen's next impression was that he himself must have been shot. At least the trickle of blood down his cheek suggested that he had received a head wound. His immediate thought was that he had been grazed by the slug from a sixgun.

As second and third impressions began to arrive and the surprise began to wear down a bit, Owen realized the noise had been much greater than a handgun or even a hundred greeners like the one old Jess carried, even if they had all been fired at once. He immediately dismissed the idea of a natural roll of thunder. There had been no flash of lightning, it was a cool night near the end of March, an unlikely time for such a event, and besides, the sky had been cloudless only a few hours ago.

Feeling his head, he found a thin razorlike cut above his eye running along his forehead into his hairline. As the spurs of the dead tree began to overpower the shock of the noise and make themselves felt on his chest and arms, he realized the cut was almost certainly from the sharp end of a broken limb.

Other than Cocoa stepping on dry limbs and punishing the ground with nervous hooves, there was no sound, at least none that Owen could hear. It was different for the big horse, he was obviously upset, and the source of his concern was something other than the rush of noise which had now faded away, lost forever in the night.

With the campfire now reduced to a few random flickers spread and scattered on the ground and through the thin grass, Owen could barely see the horse. Yet, as he eyes adjusted to the darkness, and as he listened to the swish of mane and nervous tail and the thump of hooves, Owen finally decided that Cocoa was not injured and that he was only a few yards away. Cocoa's behavior also told him that a sound or a smell or the remembrance of the blast coming out in the darkness was still spooking the horse.

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Then, frail, thin sounds, so slight they might even been thought to be imaginary, came to Owen's ears. Perhaps the sounds came to him with aid of the night air that stirred a bit and expressed discontent with such night chatter which was too indistinct and too inconstant to have meaning. Still, whatever or whoever disturbed the unseen world somewhere along Ketchel Creek was persistent. Maybe it was only the weak aftermath of the violent noise; perhaps the tiny fragments of sound came because they were being created with great force but faraway; or perhaps they were not there at all and were in fact the creations of a puzzled and startled mind. Owen wondered.

In the next moments, the stillness gave way to more sounds which were decidedly not the productions of Owen's mind. They were real, and they were loud enough to be recognized as voices. Far enough away to present no apparent danger, they rose and fell and, after a time, were punctuated with a clanging, much like a smithy hammering red hot iron on an anvil.

Hearing enough to be satisfied that the distant voices and the strange metal on metal ringing were down the creek and not an immediate threat, Owen carefully rose from the cover of the thick logs, holstered his colt, and recovered his high crowned hat. Remembering the wound on his forehead, he tossed the hat to the ground and worked for a few moments gathering the fire back into a respectable heap which, encouraged by a few dry twigs, began again to give wavering light to the area.

After calming the skittish horse who continued to peer into the downstream darkness of Ketchel Creek, Owen dampened his kerchief in the stream and cleansed the scratch on his head. Finally, the cold water stopped the bleeding or at least slowed it enough that an occasional dab at the wound was sufficient attention for the time being. That done, Owen turned his attention to the matter at hand, namely the sounds from around the bend of the creek.

Giving the cut on his head a final gentle pat with the wet pad, and donning his big hat, Owen left the camp and began making his way along the creekbed toward the mysterious voices and the metallic hammering sound. He moved slowly and carefully, choosing the sand along the muddy little stream as his path. That approach gave some assurance of silence and also gave him a line of reference. It was also a good bet that those, in the darkness ahead of him, would be on higher and drier ground, not expecting anyone to approach them from the creek itself.

Ketchel Creek immediately made a looping turn and then another. As he carefully moved around the third bend in the stream bed, Owen found

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that he could hear the voices clearly enough to sort them out, and he could even make out some of what was being said.

"Hold the damn thing steady, yuh dirty string," came a nasal order which sounded every bit as though someone was pinching the nostrils of the speaker.

"Watch how yuh swing that hammer or give it tuh me, and you hold fer a while." This reply to the pinched nose order came in a voice which was thin, so thin that it cut through the darkness like a the highest note on a reed flute, but sharply and in violation of any musical key known to man.

Owen carefully worked his way up from the creek bed and through a closely bunched stand of sage which had grown thick and tough and had thrived in its creek bottom location. It was slow going, and as he approached the voices, his need for silence grew. Still, he was glad to find the brush thicket because it offered excellent cover and it was close to what appeared to be a campsite.

"Maybe we oughta cut outa here," piped the thin voice.

"Jest as soon as we bust this damn hasp and get them guns," agreed the other through his nose.

"Yeah, but that boiler coulda been heard fer miles and yuh can't tell who'll come ridin' in here."

"Ain't nobody within fifty miles. Now hold that chisel steady."

With that there was more chiseling, at least there were more blows of a hammer on metal. Accuracy and effectiveness were noticeably lacking. The hammer was striking the box or was glancing off the support braces as often as the blunt end of the long chisel. Nor was the project advanced by the almost constant snarling and arguing which continued, sometimes loud and threatening, at other times as mere grunts and semi-words.

By carefully parting the last branches which stood between him and the camp, Owen finally had a reasonably good view of the area. The operators of hammer and chisel and the owners of the two voices he had been hearing were on the opposite side of a healthy log fire. They were kneeling between two high wagon wheels.

One of the two men Owen could see was employing a pair of blacksmith tongs to hold the beveled end of a chisel against a steel box. The box was slung under the wagon and between the tall wheels, seeming to sit on the axle. The working area of the two men was close and awkward, the fire provided imperfect light, and the two arguing men were making a difficult job close to impossible. Their obvious goal was to break the lock and open the box.

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The second figure revealed by the firelight was alternatively wielding a large hammer, trying to hit the end of the chisel, and at the same time trying to observe the progress of his labor. He was doing all his tasks poorly. Occasionally, he would grab the chisel and position it, then, missing his target he would curse his companion, the box, the hammer, the hasp, and the world in general. The louder oaths were directed at his helper, who was clearly more interested in keeping his hand and head out of the path of the big hammer than in the common task of doing violence to the defiant lock.

As the struggle with the stubborn box continued, Owen let his gaze travel around the strange camp. In addition to the wagon which occupied the two men, he could see two more high sided wagons looming behind the first one. At the far end of the little wagon train, lost in the shadows, was still another wagon-looking rig which seemed to be heavier and thicker than the others, but any details of its outline were lost in the darkness.

Near the wagons he could see what appeared to be a chopping and sawing operation. There were ends of scattered tree limbs, an unstacked sprawl of cut pieces, and a double bladed axe standing imbedded in a stump.

Closer to the fire, a tent had been raised. Once white and proud, perhaps an army field tent, it now drooped black and grimy in the flickering light. Both front flaps were pulled back and draped over the sloping top. The interior boasted its own light, probably a lamp, and a shaft of weak, yellow light came from the inside, immediately getting lost in the strongerlight of the log fire.

Leaning at a crazy angle and sitting in the coals of the fire was an angular coffee pot. Wide at the bottom, its sides sharply narrowed. The lid was topped by a glass domed percolator glass. The pot had two handles. One was a long loop from one side to the other. At the upper end of the loop a hook had been fashioned by which the pot could be suspended over a campfire. The second handle was a conventional handgrip on the side opposite the sharp high pouring beak. These features combined to announce the presence in camp of a famous Burtle pot. Standard for every chuck wagon that ever bounced alongside a trail drive or a roundup, the Burtle was always the first pot filled, the one which was kept hot, and the last to be hung from the side of the wagon or stowed with the iron legs of the fire spit when camp was broken.

Owen could not see steam issuing from the beak of the pot, and he idly wondered if it was either hot or boiling. However that thought was

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interrupted by another vessel, of the human variety, who left no doubt that he had an elevated temperature.

"Hold on there you damned poison blisters."

The command came out of the night and from the direction of the lead wagon. As the two hammering and arguing men dropped their tools and whirled around, the speaker who had issued the order appeared in the dancing light at the edge of the campfire.

A stout figure, whose most visible aspect was his hatless, hairless and almost shining head, stepped around the end of the wagon and confronted the two who stood glaring at him. The stout man wore the blackened half apron of a smithy, and sleeveless red underwear which grew out of his trousers and rose to cover a powerful thick chest.

The stout man faced the two "blisters" directly, but seemed to lean or to hold onto the nearby wagon for support. One hand came up and a pointing finger aimed at the steel box.

"Now get away from that box afore I take a club to the both of yuh."

The holder of the chisel, thin and narrow in his long and shapeless black coat, piped a defense, "We thought you were kilt by that blower."

"I'll jest bet yuh did, Slide, and is that why yuh lit out when yuh seen me under that pile of pipes a wavin' fer help?" The stout man's words were wrapped in anger and disgust.

"We was only takin' what's ours, Foakes, and yuh can't stop us." argued the one who had been wielding the hammer. Nervously eyeing the box, he stood his ground. "They ain't no use in us staying around here anyhow. Yuhr boiler's busted into junk and the deal's off."

Despite his strong voice and determined words, the stout man was obviously suffering the effects of what the wearer of the long black coat had called the "blower." Foakes' bare head sank and he leaned more heavily on the wagonbox. One hand came up to an ear and pressed against it and the side of his head as though attempting to force away pain.

As Foakes wavered, the two men near the steel box looked at one another. As though testing Foakes, the pencil thin man in the long coat, Slide, called, "Yeah, yuhr whole operation went up in the blower, Foakes. Yuh been workin' us and workin' us fer nuthin. Now it's time fer a change."

While he spoke, his companion looked closer at the steel box. He even leaned toward it and reached down to test the battered hasp.

Perhaps it was the words which restored Foakes, at least momentarily. "You jaspers agreed to cut fuel and do chores all the way

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to Great Falls so's yuh could stay out of the lockup. But yuh ain't been nuthin but trouble ever since. Maybe I oughta let yuh go. But yuh ain't takin' them guns. I promised that sheriff..."

Foakes' voice failed and his legs sagged. His heavy body came down, first to his knees, then to the ground. Struggling to stay in control, he cried out, "Go ahead, git. But leave off tryin' to break that box."

"Come on, Klouse, let's scatter," urged the nervous Slide.

"Wait, I think the damn thing's open," hissed Klouse.

The two clawed at the steel box and in seconds had pulled the contents out onto the ground. The nasal voice that was Klouse angrily seized a sixgun from the items they had dumped from the box and whirled toward Foakes.

"We got our guns, yuh slicky-topped slave driver. We're takin' them and the money bag yuh had stashed in there. And fer good measure, I'm takin' my pleasure in pluggin' yuh so yuh can't go runnin' to some lawdog and puttin' a name on us."

"Better hold off on that, mister." Owen's words were a suggestion, but the tone was a clear and uncompromising order. The words, unhurried and calm, had even more effect coming from the darkness and coming as a total surprise.

Klouse stared in sudden fright in Owen's direction. Slide, still on his knees, jackknifed to his feet. Both froze in place as their wide eyes darted around the circle of light. Klouse, unwilling to drop the handgun, tried a bluff.

"I don't know who's out there, but yuh better show yhrself, hands empty, or I'll trigger one into slick head here."

"I won't tell you again," called Owen, "Forget the idea of doing any shooting. If there's a first shot, you won't hear the second one."

He had stepped out of the cover of the brush and moved around the circle of the campfire a bit. The shift in position added to the advantage the darkness already gave him. It also further confused Klouse and the already skittish Slide.

"Who's out there," demanded Slide. "This ain't none of yuhr doin' whoever yuh are."

"Robbery and killing are every man's business," answered Owen. Then in a hard voice he ordered, "Now drop that gun."

Klouse seemed to hesitate. He seemed to be calculating the odds of running, of shooting Foakes, perhaps of shooting in the direction of the voice which had come out of the darkness. Slide sensed the hesitation. He also sensed the danger it brought.

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"Drop it yuh fool," hissed Slide's thin voice. "If yuh make a play yuh could get us both kilt."

"If yuh'd back me instead of goin' scary, we could still come out of this," growled Klouse. "Yuh're a sorry burger, a twisty sock knot. That's what yuh are."

"Stop belly achin' and drop that iron," argued Slide.

"Better listen to your pardner," advised Owen who had moved even closer and further around the circle of the fire.

In a burst of anger Klouse threw the gun to the ground. "Whoever yuh are, yuh'll pay fer dealin' yuhrself into this."

"I may have just saved you from the hangman," replied Owen. "Now you two move away from the wagon and find a place to sit. I want to see your backs and I don't want either of you moving."

Satisfied with the position of Klouse and Slide, Owen took a few quick steps to where Foakes lay. Kneeling, Owen looked for signs that the man was still alive. In another moment he had found water and a tin cup from among the miscellaneous camp items scattered around the fire. Gently, he raised Foakes' head and offered him a drink. The weakened Foakes gratefully sipped at the water.

"Stranger, I don't know where yuh came from, but I thank yuh. Yuh've got things in hand fer now, but watch them two. They're bent, bad iron bent. Fire's the only thing that'll ever straighten 'em. Hell fire."

"From what I saw, I think that's a fair statement," agreed Owen. Sensing that some strength had returned to Foakes, Owen helped him sit up and arranged a pad from a sheepskin coat so Foakes could sit with his back against the wheel of the wagon.

"It might help some if I knew what's going on here," said Owen. "Are you up to talking a bit?"

With increasing vigor in his voice, Foakes agreed, "Yuh sure have an explanation comin' mister. And I must say, I'm feelin' a heap better'n I was, but the light sort of comes and goes. The blowout musta scrambled my brains."

"That kind of thing sometimes happens to a man when he's been hit in the head. It'll pass, but what do you mean by the 'blowout?'"

"Why the boiler went," explained Foakes.

"The boiler?" asked Owen.

"Yep. Pressure valve must've of stuck," then scowling at the backs of Klouse and Slide, he added, "or some lazy stoker tied it down."

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"I'm afraid we're at different ends of the pasture," said Owen shaking his head, "Are you saying you have some kind of boiler way out here hundreds of miles from any city?"

"Some kind of boiler..." sputtered Foakes sitting upright, "I'd have you know..." As suddenly as he had begun, he stopped. Then with a broad smile he called out, "Full brake, full brake, Mister Foakes. This passenger is first class and he ain't been on this train before."

Owen wondered if the "blowout," as Foakes described it hadn't really scrambled the man's wits. Yet the stout man seemed to speak in a good-natured and light-hearted way, and there was meaning and sense in what he said, even though it came out in a way that was new to Owen.

"There ain't no better way of tellin' than showin'," continued Foakes. "But seein' as how my pins won't hold me up fer a walkin' tour and seein' as how its dark and all, I'll give yuh the short of it. There sure enough is a boiler up there," indicating by pointing his thumb over his shoulder.

Foakes quite clearly was talking about the large lead wagon which was only an indistinct shape in the darkness. "She," again Foakes jerking his thumb over his shoulder, "started poppin' leaks along her seams what with all the bumpin' over these hills. So we holed up here to do some patchin'. We also needed to load up on wood."

With a sigh, Foakes spoke for a moment as a man will who recalls a time of difficulty and trial. "Yep. Wood. Seems like I've spent a lifetime lookin' fer wood out here on the prairie. Lookin' fer wood, tryin' to save water, and prayin' fer coal."

As he continued, his voice rose and the words came more quickly, "Now with one good load of coal we could do some high toned hootin'. And heat? Why yuh don't know nuthin' about heat until yuh get a coal bed to roarin' and glowin'. Mister, I could tell yuh stories about tootin' down the rails with a clean boiler out in front, fresh water in the tank, and a load of Virginee coal in the hopper. Why, it makes a man's drivers get to whirlin' jest to think of it."

With a shake of his round head, Foakes sank back against the sheepskin pad and rested his head on one of the thick wagon spokes. "Wood's the problem sure enough. Never enough of it." After a short moment he looked at Owen and added, "Water. That's as scarce as wood. And then when yuh find it, it's muddy, muddy, muddy."

Owen had helped himself to some coffee from the Burtle and sat listening to the strange man's meanderings. He knew there wasn't a railroad line within two hundred miles. There had been talk that one

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company was planning on running a line to Billings, but nothing had come of it. Still he had been away for almost two years. He wondered.

"I can see that you've had quite a wood chopping operation going on here," Owen prompted.

The words had the desired effect on Foakes who left his musing about wood and water problems to return to the camp and matters at hand. "We sure have, and if them two," pointing a stubby finger at the two backs near the fire, "had put as much work into cuttin' wood as complainin' and cussin' me and cussin' each other, both of the wood wagons would be full."

"Then there was the explosion," Owen again encouraged him to speak.

"Wasn't an explosion. At least not like dynamite," explained Foakes. "I was testin' the patch work. Seemed like she was holdin' fine. Then blewy! She cut loose. Knocked me head over cinders. Knocked out my kerosene work lamps and blew over my ladder, and most likely scattered my bolts and tools over half the territory. The last thing I seen was those two," again looking at Slide and Klouse, "headin' fer camp."

"They don't seem like the kind of hands I'd be signing on," mused Owen looking at the two hunched backs.

"Me neither," agreed Foakes quickly. "I had to take `em on. I was broke down in Nebraska, some river town under a big bluff, and my regular fireman got hisself kilt. I had two wood cutters who jest decided life on a passin' wagon train would be easier than workin fer me."

Owen thought at first that Foakes' attention was about to depart again and that the man was going to begin to ramble about his boiler or about coal. There was a pause, but Foakes continued his story, and as he did, there was a note of apology in his voice.

"The truth of the matter is that I got in bad with the sheriff." Quickly, as if wanting to avoid a misunderstanding, he went on. "Not fer a bad thing. Not like runnin' full throttle on a bad track or tryin' to run through a closed switch. I was only tryin' to give a smile to some of them town kids that had never seen a boiler."

Smiling a bit at the thought of the event, Foakes explained, "I built up a tolerable head of steam and then turned the whistle rope over to them kids. Wow! Hoot! Hoot! Yuh coulda heard that whistlin' all the way back to the main line back East. Trouble was that every damn horse in town heard it, too. They was horses on the boardwalks, up the street, down the street and some buggy footboards was pretty well kicked to

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kindlin'. The sheriff's horse left and hadn't come back by the time I left town."

"I believe I understand how that might have been," chuckled Owen. "Your blowout here gave my horse something of a start and he's about as well trained as any I've seen."

"I can tell yuh he wouldn't cotton to a good toot. No horse does. It seems to spook 'em like nothin' else does." Foakes almost seemed puzzled about the effects of his steam whistle. "I expect that Sheriff's horse is still out there somewhere runnin' down that river valley."

"But how did that get you hooked up with these two?" asked Owen tilting his head in the direction of the two backs which were still outlined by the fire.

"Oh, they was sittin' in the jail. The sheriff knowed they had been doin some stealin' and he was holdin 'em fer the circuit judge. But it seemed the judge was long overdue and the sheriff was tired of feedin' 'em so he makes me a deal. He says to me, 'If yuh take these two with yuh and promise to keep 'em workin' all the way to the Missouri River, I'll ferget about the whistlin' and the damage.' Well, that offer seemed fair enough. I locked their hardware in the strong box, showed 'em how to fire the boiler, and away we went."

"I wonder they didn't light out long ago," mused Owen.

"Oh, they would have if I'd let em have their guns," shrugged Foakes. "but ridin' along with my outfit ain't a bad way to travel, except fer the water haulin' and the wood cuttin' and loadin'. Besides, I kinda think they wanted to get out of the area. There might have been some dirty work they wanted to get shut of."

"With that kind of men, there's always trouble over the next hill and trouble dogging them from behind," agreed Owen.

"Yeah, I guess that's so," sighed Foakes. "Like bad wheels on a boxcar. If they wasn't made right in the beginnin', they jest make trouble for ever. Once they're out of round, they're out of round for ever."

While Foakes sat recovering and carefully leaning his round head against the wagon wheel, Owen again helped himself to coffee from the Burtle pot. It was good coffee, steaming strong with a rich full coffee smell. Kneeling and warming his hands around the cup, Owen studied the camp. It was unlike any other he had ever been in.

Alongside the wagon he saw boxes of black round headed bolts, and piled nearby were a half dozen slightly curved sheets of metal. Almost out of sight on the outer edge of the firelight was a pile of odds and ends, mostly assorted pieces of iron. Adding an erie note to the pile were the

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jutting angles of iron pipe. Sticking out this way and then that way, crossing each other, intersecting in the most irregular ways, and running off into the pile and running off into the night sky, the pipes seemed almost to be some kind of mechanical creature.

Owen also noticed how almost every hard surface in the camp which could be seen in the firelight was coated with a dark film of soot. Still other objects, especially those which were small and made for hand use, almost glistened from a coating of oil or grease. The wooden boxes had absorbed oil and seemed to wear some amount of soot. The cooking utensils had liberally assumed coats of oil and grease. An array of hand tools, tongs, long handled and short handled with blunt ends and bird bill ends, had known oil in liberal amounts. Mallets, wooden with splayed and splintered faces, steel with nicked edges and sad wooden handles, in a wonderful variety of small, medium and large, took no second place to the tongs in oil and grease matters. A giant clumsy wrench intended for large wheel nuts and a family of lesser associates wore their oil jackets proudly.

A mismatched pair of Grovus Brothers Lamps, intended for hardy camp use, proved by their dented tin kerosene tanks and sooted and scaling isinglass windows that they had, indeed, found use according to their maker's plan. They, too, continued the fashion of the camp, but in compromise. Their tin bell bottoms were given over to oil and their windows, lighting portals and handles tended almost exclusively to soot.

Looking away from the boxes, the iron and steel, and the utensils and turning his gaze upon the backs of the two men sitting looking at the fire, Owen realized they, too, were specimens of the camp. Their coats, Slide's long cloth coat and Klouses' shorter plaid ranch jacket, were both remarkable because the dirt, the soot, the smudge upon smudge and smudge upon dirt and soot was noticeable and remarkable, even in the poor light of the campfire. Slide's cap, flaps pulled up but not tied, and Klouse' matted, round fur hat, had fared no better than any other object worn by the men or strewn around the camp.

As the yellow light of the cottonwood fire darted and danced around the two profiles, Owen could see the shadows of unshaven cheeks, greasy hair tumbling out from under caps, and as the heads would turn, Owen could see the hungry eyes glistening and calculating in the firelight. First one head would turn and then the other. It was as though the eyes were pulling and tugging the heads around on their dark spindle necks. The point, of course, was to get a reading on the position and actions of their captor.

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As he watched the men, Owen could see them exchange occasional furtive whispers, each message hissed out in time with their quick sidelong glances in Owen's direction. From the way the heads turned and the eyes moved and from the rapid, sometimes loud, hissing, Owen became convinced they were in sharp disagreement with one another.

Foakes shifted and brought himself to a more comfortable sitting position. The movement and the sound brought Owen's attention back to the man with the strange story and the unusual way of speaking.

"Feeling better?" Owen asked.

"Pressure's comin' up some," replied Foakes. "It might help if I could trouble you for a cup of somethin' for my reservoir."

Owen filled a cup from the Burtle pot. As he poured, he realized the coffee was bubbling hot and in danger of overboiling. To avoid damage to the pot and the coffee, Owen hung the Burtle along the edge of the fire where it would stay warm but below the level of boiling hot. Like Foakes' boiler apparently had done, it seemed ready to blow itself into a coffee pot wreck.

Turning to Foakes, Owen asked, "Fixin's?"

"No, I'm afraid sugar ain't a friend of my pipes."

"Well, you look stronger, and some color is coming back into your face," Owen observed.

"All thanks to you," nodded Foakes. "Them two," nodding at Slide and Klouse, "would have been pleased to rob me and leave me here with a hole in my pressure tank."

Owen smiled to himself at the words which sounded so strange to his ears. Even more interesting was the fact that there was never any real difficulty in catching the man's meaning. Foakes also had a way of speaking so that, even in his weakened condition, almost everything he said had a note of energy about it. It caused Owen to remember a ranch hand he had known years before. Nearly every sentence that man ever uttered was accompanied by the words, "Hep, hep, I say,!" or "Hi yup!"

Foakes had the same vigorous way of speaking. The difference was that the "hi yup," wasn't spoken. It was in the tone of his voice. Even though Foakes was still weak, the "hi yup" was noticeable and growing stronger with every word he spoke.

"Well, I'd be pleased to know yuhr name, Mister," said Foakes.

"Bannack, Owen Bannack."

"Sounds good to me. I'll put it on the ticket, but before we git the coal car ahead of the engine, Mister Owen Bannack," said Foakes after a few careful sips of the hot coffee, "it appears to me we need to look

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down the track to see if there's any signal about these two who are so gol blamed set on jumpin' fer the ditch."

"It is a bit awkward," Owen mused, "knowing just what to do with a pair like that."

"Wouldn't be much sense in keepin' `em around here. They'd jest be trouble, tendin' to `em and all." Foakes sipped at his coffee for a moment. "And I ain't in no mood to be fixin' meals and watchin' over a couple of clattery clatterys like them."

"From what you've told me, I doubt any sheriff in the territory would even put them in a cell," replied Owen thoughtfully. "Any charges that sheriff in Nebraska had would take forever to run down, and you haven't got much against them."

"Ceptin' the fact they busted my keepin' box," said Foakes looking at the steel box with its lid thrown back.

Seeming to sense that they were the subject of a discussion, Klouse called over his shoulder. "Jest what you intendin' to do here, Foakes? Hang us fer hammerin' on yuhr damn box to take what is ourn?"

Slide joined in, "Yeah, what about it, Foakes? You and that tall wood goin' to keep us settin' here all night?"

"Don't you two be blowin' yuhr choky smoke over here," called Foakes, sitting up straighter and finding strength in his own anger.

Watching the reaction of Foakes, Owen realized that a dead end had been reached and there was no way there could ever be any trust between Foakes and the two who had been traveling with him. Left together, the two would very soon make another attempt to kill or injure Foakes and to rob him in the process. For his part, Foakes was in no condition to protect himself and was clearly not given to dealing gently with them.

With an easy smile Owen reminded Foakes of what Foakes had said earlier. "I think you were right a while ago. Those two are out of round and there isn't any way they can be set right again. As least now or by us. I think the best thing might be to send them packing. There isn't a town within twenty miles, but there isn't any way they could be hurt much by a long walk either."

Foakes instantly agreed. "Yuhr right, Owen, as right as a new rivet." Foakes made an effort as if to stand up. Immediately he gave it up and sank back to the ground. With a long sigh he looked at Owen. "Yuh could walk right out of here, and I wouldn't blame yuh. I'm already beholden to yuh, and I ain't got a right to ask fer more, but if yuh've a mind to blow off some more steam, I wonder if I could get you to do the sendin' of them two?"

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"Glad to," agreed Owen. He stood, looked again around the lighted circle of the camp and took the few steps to where Klouse and Slide were sitting.

"I'll keep this short, and I'll make it as simple as possible. Mister Foakes has no further use for either of you. You are free to go, but before you leave, I have two things to say to you. First, there is a town called Ryegate about twenty miles from here. You can get there by following this creekbed upstream until it runs into a larger stream. After the fork, follow that larger stream. It runs directly to the town."

"What are we supposed to do there?" whined Slide. "We ain't got money and we ain't got anything to sell or trade for food."

"You might have thought about that before you tried to rob Mister Foakes and threatened to kill him," Owen replied dryly.

Foakes who had been watching the "sendin'" carefully, called out, "I ain't a man to leave any fuel box empty. Owen, in that box they busted there's a pouch. If yuh'd fetch it out and count out ten cartwheels to each of them, that'd be more than enough fer all their wood choppin' and liftin' and carryin'."

Keeping his eyes on the two he was dealing with, Owen walked to the battered "keepin'" box, knelt and felt in the interior. He easily located the soft leather of the pouch in a corner under what felt like a stack of books. Loosening the drawstring he shook out a handful of silver dollars and counted until he had twenty of them in his hand. He replaced the pouch, still heavy and bulging with coins, and returned to the fire.

"I would guess this is more than you have earned, but Mister Foakes seems to be a charitable man," Owen said grimly as he dropped the coins into the outstretched grimy hands.

"We've earned a heap more," grumbled Klouse. "And what about our hardware?"

"Your guns are staying here," answered Owen evenly.

"But it's jest plain stealin' fer him to keep our guns," argued Slide.

"It's not even open for argument," countered Owen. "The guns stay here. I'll ask Mister Foakes to put them on the stage from Lewistown to Ryegate. You should have them in a couple of weeks."

"Now hold on," Klouse began.

Owen cut him off in midsentence. "The second thing I promised to tell you is this. When you leave here, keep going."

Klouse made the mistake of raising his fist and stepping toward Owen. In a motion blurred by the firelight and with a swiftness which took both men completely by surprise, Owen seized two coat fronts, one

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in each hand. Continuing the sweep of his hand, he lifted Slide and Klouse to the tips of their black, sooted and greasy boots. With the firelight reflecting from his grey eyes, Owen spoke with a calm and steady voice.

"Both of you listen. I have had quite enough of your cheap threats and talk. I saw you attempt to rob a man, and I heard you threaten to kill him. Here in Montana, when there is no law there is vigilante justice. If I ever set eyes on either of you again, I'll turn you over to the local vigilance committee. Do you understand that and what it could mean?"

Slide could only bob his head. His long face, the thin mouth, and the pinched cheeks joined in a look of near panic and sudden fright. Klouse, at first trying to hold back and give Owen a defiant look, saw something in the level eyes and felt something in the unyielding grasp that sent a deep chill through his body. Suddenly he gasped a out a cry that he be released.

Owen let them go. Slide went to his knees and then like a tense string straightened up. Klouse merely stood for a second, as if he could not believe he had survived the experience. Then in the flicker of a hungry flame, both were gone into the night.

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"How far did yuh say it was to this ranch," asked Foakes.

"Just over this rise," nodded Owen looking at crest of the gently swelling hillside which fanned out in front of them.

Foakes, who insisted that his head was clear and that he had recovered from the blowout of his steam boiler, had declared himself quite ready for travel. For the better part of the morning, he and Owen had ridden double, had walked and had alternated riding Cocoa as they trekked across the grassland.

Finally, however, the energetic Foakes was beginning to show the effects of the journey. He was breathing more heavily than he had earlier and was more than willing to take long turns riding rather than trying to match Owen's steady, ground eating strides.

Still, Foakes peppered Owen with questions and took a lively interest in his surroundings. Striding alongside Owen, he learned that the land they were walking over belonged to Owen's friend, Sid Andrews. Foakes also learned that the general broad sweep of prairie along the southern slopes of the Snowy Mountains was called the Ketchel Range and that it had been settled some five to ten years earlier under a government land program.

"Walkin' ain't so bad," puffed Foakes, "as long as a body doesn't fergit there's other ways of movin' down the right of way."

"Want to take a breather," asked Owen.

"Wouldn't hurt none," agreed Foakes, who came to a full stop even before the words were out of his mouth. He stood looking at the softly rolling landscape to their immediate front and at the outline of the Little Snowy Mountains which seemed only miles away. After he caught his wind, he heaved a great sigh.

"Whewey, whew, Owen. Them mountains are somethin'. They show their name too, the Little Snowys yuh say they're called. Ain't no way that old Mobilus could pull his way over them. Yuhr suggestion fer goin' around the end of `em makes a lot of sense the more I see of them peaks with their steep ups and skid and slide down sides."

"I don't have any idea what your engine is capable of, but there is a road almost straight through, called Red Hill Road. Wagons and the stages use it some, but I expect it would be a pretty hard pull for ..."
Owen hesitated, searching for the name.

"Mobilus," prompted Foakes. Then, in his energetic way of speaking, he seized on the idea, "If freight wagons use it, then Mobilus should be

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able to make it. That was my idea in buildin' the machine. And it was the idea I sold to the big payers."

"The big payers?" Owen asked.

"Them that signed up and helped to pay for the makin' of ole Mobilus," explained Foakes. "Yuh see, it was my idea that if a steam engine could run on rails, it could run on the ground. And if it was to be a ground runner, it should go anywhere that a wagon or a stage could go. Seein' that I'm the prover of the idea, I may jest take old Mobilus and run `im over yer Red Hill Road."

"From what you told me this morning, I'd guess your engine may not be quite ready to do much ground walking, not to mention running over any mountain passes," smiled Owen.

"Yuh're right, Owen," admitted Foakes. "Course, if this Andrews fella can line me up some help, `specially someone who's handy with smithy tools, it mayn't take so long as yuh might think." The energy in his voice rising, he added, "Why, I think we might have a fire in the box in a couple of weeks. Bring on yuhr Red Hill Road!"

Amazed at the man's enthusiasm, Owen cautioned him, "It's probably just as well that you'll be holed up making repairs for a while. There may still be some pretty bad bog holes and a few snow banks on the road this time of the year."

"Toot," snorted Foakes, "I been slushin' through snow fer months now. In fact, snow jest makes it more comfortable in the cab when the fire box is all het up."

Dismissing the spring weather and road conditions as being only minor inconveniences, Foakes returned to the idea of saving time by taking the pass. "Now yuh say this Red Hill Road is the shortest way to Lewistown and on to Great Falls.?"

Pointing at a gap in the mountains ahead, Owen explained, "That's where the road runs through to Lewistown. There on the left the high peaks make up what are called the Big Snowy Mountains. On the right are the Little Snowys. There really may not be two different mountain ranges, but the point where they meet is a sort of narrow waist. And that's where the Red Hill Road makes its crossing to the Lewistown side. There isn't any doubt its the shortest and most direct route."

"Why that's the way I'll go," announced Foakes. He added, "As soon as I can rivet some new plates over the hole in Mobilus' side, that's the way we'll cross the mountain. And the fixin' won't take as long as yuh might think. A couple of weeks maybe. It'll depend on the kind of help I can find. How's that sound to yuh, Mister Owen Bannack?"

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"I'm afraid I'll have to leave that to you, Mister Foakes. I know nothing about railroad engines, and I'm content to trust to the judgment of those like yourself."

"Ain't a railroad engine, Owen," corrected Foakes, "He's a ground runner. Yessir, old Mobilus is a wide wheeled, ground walkin', special made, steam powered, wagon pullin', machine of the future."

Owen could not restrain his laughter. "That, Mister Foakes, is a mouthful. Would you mind if I settled for simply calling your machine, Mobilus?"

As he spoke, Owen again took up their march toward the hilltop. Foakes joined him and continued asking questions about the pass over the Snowy Mountains and the steepness of the roads, the availability of water, the distance through the pass, and a dozen other things which entered into his fresh plan to make a steam trek to Lewistown.

The two men had not walked far before Foakes again started to feel the effects of their hike from Ketchel Creek. However, the stout engineer noticed that it was not just his shorter legs which was causing him to breath hard. It was the increased pace and longer strides of his companion.

"I get the feelin' yuh think yuh're behind schedule, Owen. This Andrews we're goin' to see, he's somethin of a special friend?"

"As a matter of fact, he is," replied Owen. We settled on this range together. I took the higher land and Sid took this lower area. He claimed he didn't care to live any closer to the mountains than necessary. We have always rounded up together, and we shared most of the other ranch work that came along, fence building, driving cattle to market, and putting up hay. Yes, he is a special friend alright."

"Yuh say this is the lower range," asked Foakes, looking ahead at the mountains. There was a note of awe in the man's voice, typical of those who see the mountain ranges of the West for the first time.

"Yes, distances here are deceiving. We've been on Sid's land since we left the creek. His upper line is a few miles beyond the ranch house. My spread begins there and goes up into the mountains. I was also lucky to get land which gets runoff from the mountains. In fact most of the water for Ketchel Creek comes from the mountains and runs across my spread. I'm never short of water and I think my grass is probably better than most around here."

As Owen finished his description of the general outline of his ranch, the two men topped the hill and found themselves looking down on a group of ranch buildings. Sitting on the south facing side of a gentle roll

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of land was an unpainted barn, a smaller shed near that, also unpainted, and set apart from the barn and storage shed, a small, neat white house introduced by a modest covered porch. On the far side of the barn there were a series of corral fences, a larger one, a smaller one closer to the barn and a line of posts and boards set close together which was designed to be a chute for working on cattle.

Three horses stood in the smaller corral, their heads hanging low in a feed bunk. As they looked at the ranch layout, Owen and Foakes could see no sign of life except the horses and, upon closer inspection, a few chickens who wandered in and out of the barnyard, busily inspecting the ground.

A line of grey smoke rose from the chimney of the house and drifted lazily away, finally disappearing in the clear sky. A buckboard stood, traces empty, in front of the small gate which gave entry to the house yard which was enclosed by a low wire fence.

"Never thought to ask, but is yuhr friend a family man?"

"Yes, and they've got two youngsters, a boy and a girl," said Owen as they began working their way down the hillside.

"Can we hope then, that his missus might have some coffee brewin'? And maybe a hot fire in the stove. I am a man fer a hot fire."

"We can hope for coffee, Mister Foakes. As for the hot fire, it looks to me like the stove is working, so you may be in luck."

A short time later the travelers had come within hailing distance of the ranch house. Owen broke the silence with a call.

"Sid. Sarah. Anybody home?"

Almost instantly the front door flew open. A woman stepped into the door frame, her hands shielding her eyes against the long rays of the Spring sun. In the space of a second she recognized him.

"Owen," she cried. "Owen, thank God."

With a rush she was off the porch, down the short path, through the gate and into his arms. Holding him as though he were life itself, the woman buried her face in his chest and began sobbing.

Owen held her close, giving her a chance to collect herself. After a long moment, he gently moved her out to arms length and looked into her face. Her reaction was to be immediately embarrassed. She raised her hands to her eyes and brushed at the tears which had spilled onto her cheeks.

"Sarah, you haven't changed," Owen said gently.

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Still brushing at her tears with the backs of her hands the woman, her composure returning, took what must have been an old, familiar and friendly tack.

"Change, indeed. How would you know, Owen Bannack. You've been away so long you couldn't remember how anybody looked. I'm surprised you were able to find your way back." Yet, despite her attempt at bravado, the tears would not stop brimming over her eyelids.

"Owen, why didn't you write that you were coming? Sid would have wanted to be..." her words trailed off and her fine white teeth bit at her lips.

"Where is he?" asked Owen immediately sensing her confusion. "He's alright isn't he?"

Looking nervously at Foakes, she quickly tried to mask her feelings. "We can talk later, Owen, after you introduce me to Mister...?"

"Foakes, ma'am," smiled the engineer. "If you have some personals fer each other, I can switch to another track fer a time."

Sarah's eyes crinkled with minor confusion at the man's words, but seeming to understand him, she firmly rejected his offer. "Nothing that can't wait, Mister Foakes. Now both of you come into the house. Owen has two years to explain and I must learn who you are and how you come to be trudging across the pasture with the likes of Owen Bannack."

It was clear that it was Sarah Andrew's nature that she would take charge of certain situations, and this was one of those circumstances. Ordering the men into the house, dismissing Foakes' strange offer to "switch to another track," and taking note of Owen's duty to account all seemed to restore her. Her spirits seemed to lift, and she became suddenly busy.

The smile she gave as she took Owen's arm invaded every part of her strong face. Her blue eyes, bright at any time, now glistened from behind the remains of her tears. Her wide mouth was one which would smile easily and naturally. Her dark brown hair, tied back with a strand of blue yarn, had only traces of grey on the temples, and was otherwise rich in color, catching and somehow seeming to hold the bright sunlight.

Later after more words of greeting and after a brief explanation of how Owen and Foakes had come together, Owen leaned back in his chair and looked around the room. It was a kitchen on the side of the house where the sun could find its way through the curtains to the hand made table and chairs, and it was a living room where the heat from the large iron cookstove could spread to a large frame chair covered with a quilt tied on every square with both red and blue yarn.

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The room was neat and clean, but there was enough clutter and disarray to suggest that the children who lived in the house were healthy and active. The kitchen walls proudly displayed flowered wallpaper while the remaining walls were pine lapboard. Fine colored needlework in an intricate pattern of interlocking squares adorned the wall over the great chair and a long oddly shaped length of hand rubbed wood faced it from the opposite wall near the door.

Owen rose and walked to the wooden ornament and ran his fingers along the curving contours. "I'd say this was some of Baskin's work. He's been a whittler and a handy man since he was knee high."

Sarah, working the handle of the red water pump and splashing water over a worn cutting board, laughed, "You'd guess right, Owen. That boy is forever shaping a piece of wood for the door, for a cupboard handle, for a window jamb, then for something else. He never stops. He's been working on the seats of that buckboard for the last week. You won't recognize him, Owen. He's nearly as tall as me and growin' faster than a summer garden weed."

"And Hester?" asked Owen looking at the needlework.

"That isn't her doin'," said Sarah noting Owen's glance. She wouldn't be caught at woman's work. She's at that difficult time when she wants to act like a boy, but she know she's a girl. Her father says she's too smart for her own good, and she knows her father's right."

"You haven't said where they are, Sarah," said Owen turning and looking directly at her. He spoke gently, but it was clear he sensed something was out of the ordinary.

"Oh, the children are at school. At least what passes for school. Last fall, Asa and Novie Kincaid's daughter came home from Omaha and offered to take up teachin' some of the youngsters in the area. There's our two, Danker's three and, oh yes, Mister Quable sends one."

"Quable," interrupted Owen, "You can't mean old man Quable down on Ring Creek?"

"The very one," smiled Sarah. "But don't look so shocked, Owen. It's his granddaughter. I don't know the whole story, but folks say his daughter was killed in a dance parlor up in Great Falls. There never was a known father so Mister Quable ended up with the child."

Owen made no reply and Sarah busied herself scrubbing the wash pan and laying out dishes she had been washing. A white cloth, certainly once a flour sack, was nearby and without comment, Owen picked it up and began drying. They worked in silence, deliberately, almost slowly as if neither wanted to break the silence.

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Foakes who had been sitting at the table keeping his own counsel had almost fallen asleep. The warmth of coffee, hackel pie, and the restful silence of the room had very nearly disposed of him. Then blinking out of his near nap, he excused himself. "If yuh don't mind, ma'am I'll take a walk outside."

"Of course, Mister Foakes," smiled Sarah, "make yourself at home."

Drawing the door open, Foakes paused and turned back. "Pardon ma'am, but do yuh keep any pets, er... guard beasts around the depot. I have some difficulty with them. I believe it's the smell of the engine in my clothes."

After a short pause and a slight frown, Sarah waved her answer. "Oh, no mister Foakes. There isn't a dog around now. Old Rip is with the children, and they won't be home til near sundown."

With an appreciative nod, Foakes stepped outside and pulled the door closed after him. Silence began to settle again in the room, but Sarah quenched it with a look at the door where Foakes had been a moment before.

"What a strange man, Owen. Is it true that he has a railroad engine down in Ketchel Creek?"

"Be careful, Sarah. It's not to be called a railroad engine. It's what he calls a ground runner, and yes it's there. I saw it this morning. Actually it's smaller than a regular train engine and its wheels, all of them, are at least a yard wide. Foakes says that's to keep it from sinking into the ground. He says the idea is to prove that a steam engine can go anywhere a freight wagon or stage can go. If it works, I suppose they will try and replace horse teams."

"Oh, that's the most foolish thing I've ever heard," scoffed Sarah. "A railroad engine runnin' around on the prairie."

"Ground runner," laughed Owen, and it even has a name."

"Oh, tosh. You're spoofin' me, Owen."

"I know it sounds like a made up story, Sarah, but as sure as I'm standing here, there's a steam engine named Mobilus sitting alongside Ketchel Creek and Foakes intends driving it over the Red River road to Lewistown."

Owen's mention of Lewistown brought concern to the face of Sarah Andrews. Her hands dropped to the washboard and she seemed taken by some hidden worry. Owen immediately sensed the change in her. Putting the drying cloth down, he gently put his hand on her shoulder and turned her toward him.

"Sarah, I believe it's time you told me what's troubling you."

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"Oh, Owen," she sighed, her shoulders sagging as though a great load had suddenly been lowered down upon her. "I don't know quite how to explain it all. When it started, Sid wrote you a letter explain' what we knew."

"You might begin by telling me where Sid is," prompted Owen.

"That's kind of the middle of the whole thing," she began. Sitting at the table she rested her head between her hands and looked at Owen who stood looking down and waiting for her to continue.

"Sid's in Lewistown, Owen. There's a meetin' there tomorrow and I guess all of the men from this side of the mountains have gone. About a month ago, two men stopped by the ranch with some papers. They said they had authority from the special land office in Great Falls. They talked about cons..." she stumbled a bit over the word, "consolidation of the ranch land all along the south side of the Snowys. Sid and I didn't understand all their words, but I remember them saying their boss had a commission from the government to resurvey certain settled on lands and that all the land would be put together into one ranch. They said that some of the ranchers would be able to keep parts of their land, but that most of the Ketchel rangeland would be consolidated under one owner." Again Sarah hesitated, as she called to mind the words spoken to her and her husband.

"Are you saying they intend to buy the land from the ranchers," asked Owen his wide brow furrowed in disbelief.

"Well, I don't know the particulars, Owen, but that seems to be their notion. They said that when the land has been surveyed, it would officially belong to a man named Paskil."

"But what if everyone doesn't want to sell?"

"The men who came here said everyone had to sell. That was what the meaning of the paper they had, the government commission."

"I never heard of such a thing, and I sure never heard of this Paskil."

"There's more, Owen. The money they're offerin' is almost nothing. Sid says the few hundred dollars they said we would get is no better'n robbery."

"Hundreds," Owen exclaimed, "Why your spread is worth thousands, Sarah. Are they telling the other ranchers the same thing?"

"Everyone we've talked to tells pretty much the same story. From what everyone had been able to piece together, there were some mistakes in the first surveys that the government did. They also say that most of the folks on the land didn't ..." again she hesitated, "didn't perfect their

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claims according to the rules. This man Paskil got the government to give him a paper sayin' he can do the resurvey and then claim the land."

The words had come tumbling out. As she finished her story, Sarah covered her eyes with her hands and spoke almost faintly.

"I expect we'll have to load up and pack ourselves off..," her voice finally trailed off to a confused halt, "off .. somewhere. Somehow it doesn't seem fair after all our work and the years..."

"What is this meeting all about?" asked Owen, "The one Sid has gone off to in Lewistown."

Pulling herself together, Sarah heaved a great dry sob and explained. "All the owners decided to get together and meet with this Paskil. None of the men really knew what they were going to ask for. They just wanted to meet and try to set things right. Owen, I'm deep scared. Sid took his gun and the Winchester. He hasn't worn that gun since ...since the night you and the others met. The night you rode after those men."

The memories of the savage attack on Owen's family by the three killers, the funeral of his wife and two children, and the furious night hunting by the vigilantes reduced her to silence. She saw the pain in his eyes as he too remembered.

Owen stood quietly, a faraway look in his grey eyes. He had just given two years of his life seeking the justice that some called revenge. Now, back on the rangeland where it had begun, he was hearing of another threat, another attack on his land and the lands and the homes of his neighbors.

This time the threat was different. Instead of armed men riding in the night, burning and stealing, it was something called a government commission and a man who claimed to have the right of the law behind his scheme to buy ranch land. And adding to the mystery was the notion that this unknown man could buy the land for a small fraction of its true value.

Owen was at a loss on how to react. Yet his instincts guided him. As he had done his life long, he faced the trouble head on and sought to get to the source itself.

"Sarah, I'll leave now for Lewistown. Could you make up a sackful of biscuits and meat? And I'll need one of the horses in the corral. Which one should I take?"

Action has a way of putting fear on the run. Action by Owen was a tonic to Sarah, a boost which had immediate effect. She spoke as he walked toward the cupboard. "Take the mare. She's been off the range longer than the other two and has been grained for two weeks straight.

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Sid had been plannin' to trade her off for a team, but then something always seemed to come up, so she's just standin' around getting fat. Use the black saddle. Baskin's been working on it and has it fixed like new."

It was only moment later that Owen's long strides carried him quickly down the path, through the wooden gate, and across the open ground to the barn. Foakes, who had been inspecting a handmade forge sitting near the barn, immediately joined Owen and followed him inside.

"I'm glad yuh didn't walk like that earlier today," said Foakes shaking his head in wonder. "I would've been left on the sidin' for sure."

"Want to see that Red Hill Road?"

Catching the sense of urgency which guided Owen's every move, Foakes too became more intense. "See the road? Yuh bet yuhr new whistle I do. I only hope it ain't a walkin' seein' yuh got in mind."

"How much horses strong did you say Mobilus has," asked Owen.

"Forty, at least."

"Well, today you're going to get to ride just one, but she won't have a busted boiler," promised Owen, picking a lasso from a nearby peg and heading for the corral.

It was a simple and routine matter for Owen to throw an expert loop on the sleek brown mare, to fit her with a bridle, to settle the black saddle on her back, and cinch it up between the resisting expansions of her belly. Looking her over, Owen noted her shoes were tight and well shaped to her hooves. Her back had a good line and her legs were straight and strong. He realized the horse was probably the best of Sid's string, and Owen guessed that his friend had been looking for reasons not to trade her for draft horses.

As Owen tied the little bag of provisions onto his saddle, Foakes climbed aboard the horse called "Bess." The engineer in his striped trainman's cap, looked out of place on the horse, but his handling of the reins made it clear he was an experienced horseman. He wheeled Bess around and held her a short distance from where Owen stood saying a final few words to Sarah.

"I imagine it'll be slow going, but with luck we'll make it before the meeting," said Owen.

"I'm sure they were planning on waitin' until late afternoon tomorrow to begin," nodded Sarah. "They wanted to make sure everyone would have a chance to get there to have a say."

"Things will work out, Sarah. Maybe this is just some kind of misunderstanding."

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Instead of replying directly to his assurances, Sarah looked full into Owen's face. "Owen, there's one thing I held back that I've got to tell you. Those men, the ones workin' fer Paskil?"

He nodded, "Yes?"

"They said they wanted to take yuhr place first. They wanted to start surveyin' it right away. Sid sent them packin', but I'm afraid they'll be back as soon as they get some men to back them up. They even talked about this man Paskil raisin' an army of men to run the ranchers off the range if anyone makes trouble."

"Don't fret yourself about that Sarah. It just means that I've got the same problem as the others. Even if they collect a few toughs to back them up, I think the idea of facing all the ranchers together may change some minds."

With that he swung up into the saddle. "Tell the kids hello. Sid and I'll be back in two, three days at the most." Looking at his companion he called, "Ready, Mister Foakes?"

"First notch on the throttle," called back Foakes, "the fire and pressure are both risin'"

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The Red Hill Road was in transition. It still wore much of its white winter coat, but on those stretches which were open and longest in the sun, the mud of spring had taken over. Here, as on the prairie, Winter was in full retreat before the onrush of the anxious and warming days of Spring.

Owen and Foakes, like riders before them, skirted the worst of the bog holes in the road. They also picked their way through a number of thick stands of timber where the snow was not as deep as it was in some places in the road.

The roadway turned and curled. It rose and then dipped down again. It hugged the sides of mountains, and in more than one place it grew narrow and breathtakingly thin. Then, as if it were somehow tired from its turning, it ups and downs and its getting squeezed between the mountainsides and thin air, it would roll into a valley and spread out, broad and easy, along a creek bank. In its end-of-winter, beginning-of-spring condition, and with its varied courses, the road could not be trusted at night. Given the fact of their late afternoon start, Owen and Foakes knew they would have to camp for the night along the road.

They selected a dry grass covered meadow in an area Owen called "Skinner's Flat." Protected by forest on three sides, the meadow would be sheltered from wind, and close to a small spring, the campers had an abundance of water. Firewood was plentiful and they were soon enjoying a hot meal and a warm camp.

Foakes talked much of the road and its challenges for Mobilus. Owen listen, or appeared to listen politely. He answered Foakes' questions almost automatically, and thought of the journey ahead.

The next morning, the two were off at first light. The crusty, frozen snow sometimes slowed their progress, but by mid morning, the sun softened the snow, turning it to heavy, wet mush.

Soon, they found themselves at the foot of a very long, steeply rising road. It angled up the side of what Owen identified as Red Hill. During the upward ride, Foakes continually made observations, often to himself, about the degree of grade and condition of the road surface.

They made one turn near the top and, after riding along a rock face for a couple of miles, they were at the summit of the pass. The descent was much easier than the climb and a few more miles put them at the foot of the mountain and alongside Spring Creek.

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Owen explained that they were only a few more miles from Lewistown. "This road follows the creek all the way in, and its an easy ride the rest of the way."

As Owen had suggested, the road did improve considerably. It was dry, had fewer ruts and even curved and angled a bit less than before.

The mountains, however, were not prepared to permit the road to make a straight and unchallenged escape through the valley. As a last barrier, a massive rock outcropping had seemingly been forced out of the side of a sharp and impossible looking mountain. The foot of the granite wall was the creekbed, and the rock and the water, needing a way to get by, had worn a narrow passageway at the toe of the rock. There, the water, foaming white at the obstacle, tumbled over the rocks and swirled in treacherous little pools made by the slowly crumbling rocks.

Spring Creek, at this point in its long and adventurous journey to the Missouri River, was vigorous and deep. Already it was gaining force and energy from the early trickles of runoff from the surrounding mountainsides. As an abrasive to be used against the rock barrier and the other rocks lining its banks, Spring Creek was also making its annual collection of fine sand and tiny particles of dirt. By whirling and mixing them, the Creek was managing to produce a wonderfully ugly brown gush of water.

Because the road ran directly at the point where rock and water met, the builders of Red Hill Road had been faced with a problem. Either they could try to wrestle the rock barrier into submission or they could build a bridge and take the road across the Creek. They had decided on the bridge.

Using some of the nearby and abundant rocks, the bridge builders had laid foundations on both sides of the Creek, as high above the water as possible. On these crude supports they had laid two giant tree bodies. Crude planking was added and the feat was accomplished, the spanning of Spring Creek.

There was easily room for two riders to cross the bridge abreast of one another. However, the common practice and one instinctively taken was single file. That more cautious approach may have been dictated by the absence of side railings, by the skittish nature of horses as their hooves pounded against the planks, or the presence of the rock filled waters below.

As Owen and Foakes reached the point where the road turned onto the bridge, they paused for a moment. Both men stepped off to give the horses a blow, to check their rigging and to stretch their legs.

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"How much longer before we pull into the station?" asked Foakes looking apprehensively at the bridge.

"Half an hour, more or less," said Owen.

"Or never."

The words came from the rocks behind them. Both men whirled to confront the speaker. At first they could see nothing. Then a battered stetson bobbed up and down. The movement caught their eyes and they could see a head, a rifle and a pair of arms planted in what was now a rock fort.

"Jest keep them paws away from that hardware," called the voice. "Now suppose yuh call out yuhr names and yuhr business."

Owen spoke first. "We can do that but suppose you first tell us who you are and why you're asking."

"That ain't a smart answer seein' that I've got the rifle. Now from where I sit, I see yuhr a tall blabber box. If yuh don't answer what yuhr asked, I promise to shorten yuh some. Now once more, hollar out yuhr name and why yuh think yuhr goin' into town."

"I don't see why my name is important," called Owen. "You wouldn't recognize it. I would have guessed my business is what you're really interested in." Before the sound of his voice had died, Owen added, "and what I'm carrying."

"I guess I'll jest pot yuh," threatened the man behind the rifle.

"I suppose you could do that, but there are some folks in town that won't be at all happy about that."

Robber or road guard. Owen didn't know, but he reasoned that it was unlikely a road agent would be working this close to Lewistown. Owen also guessed that a thief would not have any interest in their business. His guess was road guard.

"What folks?" demanded the voice, with the slightest bit of uncertainty. The tone too was somewhat less gruff and demanding.

"If you hold us up much longer, Paskil is going to have your hide," threatened Owen. He made no effort to explain and left the dire suggestion hanging in the air.

"Hell," cried the man, "nobody said nuthin' to me about someone comin' in fer Paskil."

The rifle dipped and shoulders appeared. "Hey Givus, what do yuh think?"

"I dunno, Hales, they could be storyin' us."

The second voice came from a higher pocket of rocks. "Orders was no damn ranchers fer the rest of the day."

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The head that was Hales called out again to Owen and Foakes. "How do I know yuhr workin' fer Paskil? Yuh kind of look like ranchers to me."

Foakes, his voice sharp and demanding, called out. "Are yuh blind. Do I really like a low life rancher. I'll have yuh know, my boiler's hot, my gauges say there's good steam above the box, my fireman's in a sweat, and the conductor is ready to take tickets. The train ain't settin' at track's end and until it does it ain't stoppin'. And it ain't a gonna be sidetracked by two ungreased wheels. Which one of yuh says I'm a rancher. Call out yuhr name. I'll bet a toot of the whistle that yuh been a cow chaser yuhrself. Who are yuh?"

The strange and unexpected response had its effect. Even Owen gave his companion a sidelong glance. The irritation at being called a rancher sounded real, and the demand to know who had said it was delivered with enough energy to be a clear threat. There was a long silence.

A much easier, almost polite, voice called down. "Did yuh said yuh was from the railroad? What's that got to do with this business?"

"Did someone cut yuhr safety cord?" demanded Foakes. "Are yuh goin' to sit up there and keep askin' my business. If yuh can't recognize an engine man when yuh see one, Paskil had better start lookin' fer some new help."

Neither Givus nor Hales wanted to answer. Both had been shouted and awed into silence. Foakes' words were simply too authentic to be denied and his attitude was too powerful to be answered.

Defying the gunmen, Foakes stepped up into his saddle and headed Bess toward the bridge. Then he suddenly halted and wheeled around. "Since we're goin' in, maybe yuh better tell me how many of them damn ranchers yuh seen since yuh been out here? I'll pass yuhr count along to the right people."

Anxious to please this firey man who acted as though he had taken command of the bridge, the road, and everything is sight, the guard named "Givus" called back, "Six. Early in the mornin' there was two. They turned tail when Hales fired a warnin' shot over their heads."

"What about the others?" asked Foakes as though he were the boss of the operation and was demanding information from his employees.

"I think I winged one of `em," called Givus. "They scattered and headed back down the road."

"Well leave off that shootin'," ordered Foakes. "The idea is to scare `em off. Paskil don't want no killin'. But I think yuh better stay out here til tomorrow morning."

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The two road guards had now fully accepted Foakes as some important person in Paskil's scheme. They were anxious to please him and raised only one objection to his change in their orders.

"We ain't got any grub or blankets fer an all night," complained Hales.

"I'll see what I can do about that," promised Foakes as he again turned Bess toward the bridge.

Without a word Owen swung up and headed Cocoa in the same direction. Foakes, in the lead, sat in the saddle with all the assurance of a man with four aces in his hand and a fortune in the pot. To add to his attitude of complete disregard for the road guards, Foakes even stopped half way across and looked for a moment at the bridge planking and the water below.

Pulling up behind, Owen asked, "Mister Foakes, it there any good reason you have stopped here, other than to offer those two a chance to change their minds?"

"Evaluatin' Owen. Evaluatin' the weight of Mobilus and the strength of this here bridge. I think we'll do fine. A bit narrow, but we'll manage. Yep, Mobilus won't mind this bridge at all."

Then, as casually as a night hawk on a warm, cloudless summer evening, Foakes walked Bess to the end of the bridge. He turned the mare around and gave the road guards a high sweeping wave of his hand. Looking over his shoulder, Owen saw one of them wave back.

Well past the bridge and after a period during which neither spoke, Owen began chuckling. "Mister Foakes, I'll hand it to you. I was plumb out of arguments back there. I'm obliged to you for getting us through."

"Why, I wanted to have a look at that bridge, Owen. There didn't seem to be any other way," shrugged Foakes.

"Those two could have been trouble."

"Oh, there's loose spikes along every line," smiled Foakes. "Yuh can usually set `em right with a good tap on the head. Them two back there will get their tap sooner or later. If they ain't all bad, it might straighten `em up."

Owen had already explained the rancher's problems with the government commission and with Paskil to Foakes. Foakes had listened but hadn't asked any questions and Owen had decided Foakes was interested only in his engine. Now, however, Owen wondered if there wasn't more to Foakes than he had thought.

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"I didn't intend to get you involved in my troubles, Mister Foakes, and I certainly didn't expect to run into road guards and to put you out on the business end of a couple of rifles."

"Owen, I ain't started payin' yuh fer steppin' into my camp and dealin' with Klouse and Slide. Now enough of this bein' worried about my skin. Tell me what that buildin' is ahead. It looks to be a big as a roundhouse."

The building Foakes asked about sat alongside the road, almost close enough for a rider to reach out and touch as he passed by. Although it didn't have windows by which to judge, it seemed to be about three levels in height, with a fourth much smaller level perched on top. The lower level had been painted white, while the upper levels were barn red.

"It's a mystery to me," admitted Owen. "Remember, I've been out of these parts for almost two years, and it's been put up since I left."

Past the two color building, the regular buildings of Lewistown came into view. Not well organized, and parked alongside the creek and at the foot of the sheltering mountains, the town was home to some five hundred souls, depending upon what time of year the count was taken. The small huddle of wooden structures, unimpressive to eyes that had seen Omaha or St. Louis, or even Billings, was, to most of the residents, a dramatic development considering the unlikely beginnings of the town.

The first settlement along Spring Creek had been established many years earlier by fur traders who had worked the Big Snowys and the Little Snowys and had given those mountains their names. That business gave way to gold prospectors who had only minor success in the range of hills to the north. However, neither the trappers nor the prospectors had really created anything that could be called a town.

To the trappers it had merely been a place, a point of reference, an area in which to meet each other. They had lived in Indian tepees or in lean to's which stood only until the next windstorm. Their contribution had been to identify the place and to make it known to others who followed. They took only beaver, muskrat, and a few red foxes; they left nothing save a reputation consisting mostly of overblown stories in which they were the heroes.

Ambitious miners, or prospective miners, had been a bit less transient. In the hope they would find diggings worth working for a time, they had built a scatter of frail shacks. Some of those buildings still stood. One or two of them, in the mountains north of town, still provided shelter for a few miners who were either foolishly hopeful of finding of gold or had simply decided to stop looking for anything.

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On the heels of the prospectors the ranchers had come and found the rolling grasslands and known immediately they were home. The rich lowlands attracted a handful of farmers who brought scowls to the faces of the ranchers and brought forth grain from a few fields along the foot of the mountains.

Livestock and people meant storekeepers, cattle buyers, drummers and haulers. They also meant, in the case of Lewistown, two mercantiles, three saloons, a gunshop, a livery, a sawmill, and a lumberyard.

Of special note and a point of pride in town was the main hotel. It was a stone building. Two levels, a lobby and a cafe on the first floor and twelve rooms on the second, meant the settlement had become a town and was permanent.

When Owen had last been in the area there had even been talk of a second stone building, larger than the first. However, the planner had fallen in with a known horse thief, lost his money and reputation and disappeared from sight and mind. As Owen and Foakes rode past a group of houses and turned onto the main street everything looked unchanged and familiar to the tall rancher whose eyes drank in every detail.

At the end of the street, near the livery with its high board front and wide doors, Owen pulled his big chestnut to a halt. "Mister Foakes, my guess would be that the owner of this place would be the best place for you to start looking for some help with Mobilus."

Foakes settled back in the saddle and lifted his hands to his head. Pulling off his striped engineer's cap, he rubbed at his bald head and the surrounding fringes of hair. He looked at Owen for a moment and his round face fairly beamed.

"I expect so. There'll be a forge, lots of tongs, hammers and such. But yuh know somethin', Owen? The livery ain't goin' anywhere and neither is Mobilus. And I noticed the snow in places on that road was half a cow catcher high. Like yuh said, it's goin' to take some meltin' before it's wagon ready or ground runner ready. Puttin' a patch or two on Mobilus and headin' the old scoundrel up this way can wait a bit. If yuh ain't against the idea, I'd kinda like to tag along to this rancher's meetin'."

Owen's face widened into a smile. In the way of one spoofing a friend he asked, "Why, Mister Foakes, less than an hour ago, I heard you say some pretty mean things about ranchers. Are you sure you wouldn't be afraid of having something rub off on you?"

In mock seriousness, Foakes pulled his cap back on and gave it a pull. "Oh, I wouldn't worry none about that. Besides, I'm gettin' attached to Bess here."

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As Foakes spoke, a figure appeared in the doorway of the livery. Shorter and decidedly more round than Foakes, the man's head appeared to be a hump rising from his bulging shoulders. In point of fact, it would have been fair to say he had nothing which could reasonably have been called a neck. His legs, bowed from his great weight, ended in a pair of liveryman's oiled boots. At the other end of his body, a plentiful shock of hair sprouting in a hundred different directions gave him something of the look of one perpetually startled at the world he saw through his round eyes.

Seeing the two men, he paused. He stared. Then his face beamed into a smile as he walked the dozen steps to where they sat on their horses. "I'll be tied with a short halter rope if it ain't Owen Bannack."

"Howdy, Somp," nodded Owen, leaning over and reaching down to take the outstretched hand. "I'd like you to meet a friend, Mister Foakes."

Somp bobbed his head and gave Foakes his hand. "Pleased to meet yuh. If yuhr ridin' with Owen, I'll put up yuhr hoss and grain feed `er no charge." Looking at Cocoa, the liveryman shook his head in wonder. "Stronger'n ever and still the smartest hoss I ever laid eyes on." Grinning, Somp stroked Cocoa's nose which poked at his chest. "By ginger, he remembers me well enough. I guess he thinks I'm gonna put `im in his favorite stall and curry `im down."

"I had planned on that, Somp," said Owen. "But I wonder. Town looks pretty quiet. I understood there was a rancher's meeting today."

Somp quickly looked up and down the street. "Yah, I thought that's what yuh probably had in mind. Again looking around and speaking in a subdued voice, he continued, "There ain't goin to be a meetin' today, not ever."

"Give it a reason, Somp," encouraged Owen.

"Paskil has men keepin' the owners outa town. I'm surprised the two of you got in. He's got the sheriff goin' along with him and..."

"Hold on," interrupted Owen. "First, the sheriff. How long have you had a sheriff here?"

"I fergot yuh ain't been around, Owen. About six months ago the territorial governor approved this guy, Henley, to be sheriff of the area. He seems fair enough most of the time, but he's not doin' anything about the rancher's warhoop with Paskil."

"Alright tell me what you know about this Paskil," asked Owen.

Somp, again looking around as if making sure he wasn't being seen or heard, spoke quickly as if he hoped to end the conversation as soon as possible. "I don't know much, Owen. He's the one with this govermint

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commission. I suppose yuh heard about it if yuh knew there was a meetin' today."

"I've only heard he claims to have such a paper, and I've heard that he aims on takin' over the Ketchel rangeland for a little bit of nothing. This is the first I've heard the name Paskil though. Tell me what yuh know about him."

"Damn little, Owen. He rode in here five, maybe six months ago. Late Fall. He took a room at the hotel and began talkin' about puttin' all the ranch land in yuhr area under one owner. Talked about a government commission and even showed it around. I ain't seen it, but lots of others have. He said that come Spring, his men would begin surveyin' the land he was buyin'. Things was pretty quiet durin' the snow months. I guess the folks out yuhr way didn't hear much about him or only heard rumors. Then last month he sent some men out to notify the ranchers and things have been heatin' up since."

"What's happened besides the meeting the ranchers called?" frowned Owen.

"Two days ago, Lew Hanks rode into town and faced up to Paskil in the 'Pink Eye.'" Looking at Foakes, Somp explained, "That's a saloon down there next to the gunshop."

Now, almost whispering and continuing to speak rapidly, Somp finished his story. "Lew told Paskil, he wasn't sellin' his ranch and that if Paskil or any of his surveyors came onto the Lazy H they would be dead men. The next mornin' Lew was found face down, under the ice in the water trough in front of Rehners." Again looking at Foakes, the liveryman added explanations. "Rehners is the gun shop down the street from the Pink Eye."

Somp's story was interrupted by the appearance of a rider in the doorway of the livery. Immediately, Somp raised his voice and spoke in a loud, almost too loud, voice.

"Well, if yuh decide to leave yuhr hosses, boys, bring 'em around." With that he gave a sound pat to Cocoa's neck and stepped back. Before he turned away, he said in a near whisper to Owen, "The meetin's up at the flats above Bright's diggin's." Then again in the loud voice he said, "See yuh around, boys." With that he turned and walked back in the direction of the rider who stared hard at Somp and at Owen and Foakes.

Not wanting to bring trouble to the liveryman and not wanting to involve him in whatever was going on with the ranchers, Owen reined Cocoa down the street and away from the livery. As he and Foakes walked their horses down the street, a few of the townspeople on the

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boardwalk gave them curious sidelong glances, but most looked quickly away.

"I'd say there's some mighty skeered people in this town," muttered Foakes, "a body might think they was expectin' their boiler to blow."

"Yes, I'm afraid it looks that way," agreed Owen. "I guess, I'd better warn you once more, Mister Foakes that this isn't your trouble. This might be your last chance to do your business in peace. If you're seen with me, things might be difficult for you in this town."

Foakes pointedly ignored the warning. "I'd say we're headed for the Pink Eye. Right?"

"Seems like a good a place as any other," nodded Owen, accepting the fact that Foakes was sticking out whatever trouble might come their way.

"That's one thing I like about yuh, Owen. If the wheels are squeakin', yuh don't look in the wood box fer the trouble. Yuh go straight to the oilers."

The Pink Eye displayed its name by way of an illustration on the sign which was nailed over the door. An outline of a grotesque, head from a monster of olden times had been drawn on the signboard. The face, bearded and scowling as if caught up in some terrible rage, had its left eye enlarged and painted, not pink, but red. The leering eye seemed angry or injured, and it seemed to stare back at the observers. The artist had even added streaks of darker red to give the eye a fierce and maddened appearance. Perhaps humor had been intended, but only a grim, unnatural and repulsive creature had been created.

Dropping the reins of their riggings over the tie post, Owen and Foakes looked at the sign and then at one another. Foakes turned down the corners of his mouth in disgust and the two stepped across the scarred and worn boards into the Pink Eye. Pausing, they looked around the darkened interior. A half dozen square-topped tables, an assortment of chairs and an empty bar were crowded into the room. The sawdust on the floor gave up an acid and smoke odor, telling them the place was only periodically cleaned and that it hadn't seen or felt a broom in some time.

The bar top, stained, smeared and bearing dozens of rings from beer and whiskey glasses had been shaped and built to fit into a corner of the room. The L layout made the bar itself and the area behind it seem even smaller and more cramped than it really was. Perhaps three dozen bottles were standing on shelves behind the bar, arranged in random order, short ones next to tall ones, thin ones standing among fat ones, and

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clear ones showing the level of their contents sitting next to brown ones whose levels could not be seen at all.

Any light which ever found its way to the interior of the Pink Eye was always exhausted and weakened by the journey. Little ever came through the grime of a single pane of glass in the saloon door, because that portal was small indeed and the light it admitted was hardly worth mentioning. More came through the large square window which separated the saloon from the street. However, that separation had been reenforced by a coat of red paint which had been applied to the lower half of the window. For reasons unknown to common sense, a curtain had also been arranged to cover that lower half of the same window. The effect on the light was the same, namely, it was always turned completely away from that part of the window and was left to apply for admittance with the unpainted, uncurtained upper half of the glass. There it was forced to find its way around the thick black letters, Pink Eye, Asil Yester, Prop.

The only person present to greet Owen and Foakes was in fact the Prop. himself. Hunched over a table and staring at a smudged sheet of lined paper, Yester, at first, ignored them and was apparently unaware they had come into his establishment. Still, that was not likely since they, like all entrants, had been forced to deal the sticking door a firm kick along its bottom regions in order to encourage it to open.

Perhaps the fact the two did not take a seat or go to the bar and speak caught Yester's attention. Dabbing at his lips with a stubby lead pencil, Yester called to them without looking up.

"Be with yuh in a minute, gents. Have a seat."

Jabbing the pencil at the paper, Yester intoned, "seven and nine and five..."

"Twenty one," suggested Owen.

"Naw," argued Yester scratching at the paper, "I make it ...," he strained mightily at the calculation, "it's more'n twenty three."

Finally, in frustration he threw the little pencil to the table where it bounced, then, in retaliation, rolled off the edge into the sawdust. Yester kicked at it in disgust. As he stood up, he crammed the paper into a vest pocket. "I say its twenty three. Who the hell says different?"

As he asked, he looked up and his eyes found Owen's face and he had his answer. "Bannack? I'll be squashed if it ain't Owen Bannack. By damn, I thought yuh was dead...er outa the country fer good."

Astonishment visited Yester's grizzled face and sent his thick eyebrows up and pulled his eyes wide open. His thick, white barkeep

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hands froze, one over his pocket where the paper had been deposited, the other on the back of the chair he had been occupying. Yester stood as though his mind was still on the addition problem and his body had not yet received any commands to move.

"Who told you I was dead?" asked Owen quietly.

"Oh, I don't remember," shrugged Yester, "probably some jasper jest in fer a drink. I guess he was only repeatin' gossip he'd heard somewhere."

"If he said I was dead, and now I'm standing here alive, it doesn't add up that I was killed, does it?" asked Owen.

Yester's answer came as a total surprise to Foakes. To Owen, the barkeep's reaction was a sudden reminder of the man's strange behavior. Yester's face went blank, the awareness of where he was and what he was doing apparently deserted him completely.

"Add up. Add up," Yester intoned the words in a dull monotone. His hands went to his pockets, searching for something. The spell which had seized him continued and he fumbled under the counter until he found the chewed stub of a pencil and a sheet of cheap, pulp paper. "Add up," repeated Yester. "I'll add up..."

Then looking at Owen and seeming to see him for the first time, Yester asked, "What should I add up, Bannack?"

Speaking a bit more loudly than usual, Owen dismissed the subject, "Never mind that, Yester. I was just asking you who said I was dead. You said you couldn't remember, so forget the whole thing. I was told I could find Paskil here."

Some of Yester's surly attitude returned. "So what if he might be here. Have yuh got business with him?"

"Just tell me if he's around. There are a couple of things I need to settle with him."

"A couple," repeated Yester, seeming to be on the verge of again losing contact with immediate events.

Foakes expected the man's mind to depart again, but Owen, seeming to understand something of the man's habit, halted Yester with another question. "Have you seen Paskil today?"

Sliding immediately back from the edge of another trance, Yester said simply, "Want a drink to celebrate yuhr return to town?"

"I'm not sure that anybody's interested in celebrating Mister Bannack's return," interrupted a voice from a doorway next to the bar.

The speaker stepped into the bar room, and moving lightly and quickly on soft, polished leather boots, stepped to the same table used

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earlier by Yester. Keeping his eyes on Owen and Foakes, he sat behind the table and leaned back in his chair. Looking squarely at Owen his narrow eyes swept from the floor up to Owen's high peaked hat.

He looked cynically at Owen's work boots, scarred and worn, and at Owen's denims and at his high-collared trail stained sheepskin coat. Everything in his eyes and on the features of his face showed disdain and contempt for the clothes of the tall rancher.

In contrast, the man who had called Owen's name wore grey pants, striped in black, a fashionably-cut short black coat, white shirt and string tie. The man's city-bought clothing gave the appearance of neatness, of stiffness, and great expense.

Topping the soft white collar was a pale face, clean shaven and drawn so tightly that the underlying and supporting bones threatened to break through the skin. The thin lips, also tightly strung over uneven teeth which were too large for the mouth, gave him a grim and cruel aspect. Starkly framing and surrounding the face was long, paper white hair which coupled with the pale face to give the man an almost ghost-like appearance.

Yet, despite the careful attention to clothing and the scrubbed, carefully shaven cheeks, chin and upper lip, there was a disturbing note of disorder in the speaker's face. It grew from the eyes. Remarkably close together and set deep into the face, they created dark shadows on the smooth, pale skin. Planted in the framework of skin and hair, the hooded eyes were cruel, black and menacing.

"It looks like you're as tall as they say, cowman," drawled the speaker. "And I suppose you came here looking for me with the intention of delivering some kind of threatening message, or did yuh just come in to collect the hundred dollars I'm paying for yuhr ranch?"

"Paskil?" asked Owen.

"Just as I thought," smirked Paskil. "The big shankhorn has learned my name. So what's you're message, Bannack?"

"My message is this Paskil. I for one don't believe you have any kind of commission from the government, and my ranch isn't for sale. I don't believe any of my neighbors want to sell either. Therefore, you have a choice. Take your lying paper and get out of the territory or collect whatever group of bar rummies you have and come on over the mountains. If you do come over Red Hill Road, I promise this. You'll be the first man buried."

Paskil's face paled with anger. "I've heard about you, Bannack. The cattleman with the big spread, the best grass, the prime land, the water

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rights. I've also heard about Bannack the vigilante, the hangman. Well, know this, mister high hat, we got law in this area now. Law. Do you hear that, vigilante?"

Paskil's voice had been rising, and his body had been growing stiff with rage. Suddenly, to gain control of himself, he stopped speaking. His hands which had been clenched white were now in his coat pockets and he sat straight and stiff in his chair.

Owen took a step forward and his eyes locked onto Paskil's face. "One more thing, Paskil. I'm told you intend to take my place first. I'll say it one more time. My ranch isn't for sale. Don't send any of your hired hands near it. Stay off my range." Yet each word was delivered like a blow. "Your cheap land grab scheme is also over. If you push it any further, you'll answer for it."

Paskil's arm began to move, but it was too slow. Still it was a threat. In a blur of motion, Owen's booted foot swept up from the floor and the riding heel hooked into the edge of the tabletop. With a swiftness nearly impossible to follow, Owen continued his movement by shoving the table hard against Paskil's chest, sliding man and chair hard against the wall. Pinned between the edge of the table and the unyielding wall, Paskil could not immediately move his arms nor could he rise or fall.

With the table edge slicing at his chest from the pressure of Owen's foot, Paskil's eyes said he was in terror of being crushed. His mouth offered an oath, but the sound managed to come out only as a gasp of pain.

"Paskil, I suggest you drop that Derringer."

Struggling against the table edge, Paskil tried to raise his arms but managed only to get a hand up against the edge of the table. His efforts brought only increased pressure and rising pain. Paskil dropped the tiny pistol to the floor.

"Mister Foakes," suggested Owen, "I believe that gun would rest more easily in your pocket than in his."

Moving quickly, Foakes picked up the Derringer and dropped it in the side pocket of his jacket. As he did so he kept his eyes on Yester.

"Any chance he'll move on this track, or are his driving rods completely disconnected," asked Foakes.

"I think he'll keep his peace, besides, I believe we're finished with our business."

Again moving almost too fast for the eye to trace his motion, Owen released the table, grabbed it and slid it aside. With his free hand he

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caught the sagging Paskil by his elegant shirt and coat and raised him up. Out of breath and in pain, Paskil was limp in Owen's grasp.

"Somehow talking never seems to have an effect on the likes of you," said Owen, "but I'll say it anyhow. Paskil, let this thing end here. If you chase this idea of yours any longer, it'll end in blood. You can't win this kind of game. Quit now."

Owen's hand opened and Paskil sank to the floor. Then gasping and hugging his chest he stood, his rumpled clothes covered with clinging crumbs of sawdust. Gasping for breath and nearly choking on his anger, he seethed at Owen. "Bannack, you just bought a handful of coffin nails. The next time..." coughing and unable to continue, his face pained and twisted with hatred, he stumbled through the door into the darkened back room of the saloon.

Owen and Foakes turned to leave. Giving the stubborn door a strong, hard pull, Foakes turned back for an instant to see if Yester's mind might be off with his numbers again. The bar owner's face was frozen in surprise and he stood stock still. Foakes smiled at the strange man and called softly across the room, "Twenty one."

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With the saloon behind them and the pink eye of its sign staring sullenly down into the mud bog of a street, Owen and Foakes caught up the reins of their horse and turned toward the General Store across the street. That building sat pleasantly facing the long rays of the Spring sun. Its sparkling windows invited the sunlight and then sent a glistening look at the line of north facing stores which sat with their faces in their own shadows.

Designated "Hogan's General Store and Dry Goods," by neatly painted letters high on its false front, the establishment was in every way pleasant and inviting. Its green wooden bench was a summons on a warm Spring day; the front door was open and the outside was separated from the inside only by a screen door; and brightly painted boxes sitting under the windows promised flowers in the weeks to come.

Clomping up from the street, Owen and Foakes both kicked the mud from their boots before crossing the walkway and stepping into the store. As the outside had been inviting, the inside was neat, and arranged for the comfort and convenience of the store's customers.

Neatly aligned along the wall were large wooden barrels of flour, pickles, and smaller barrels of coffee and crackers. There was a plentiful supply of beans in bins, stacks of airtights on shelves, and jars of preserves on back counters. Filling in the spaces in other bins there were onions and potatoes; on other shelves there was a wondrous assortment of bottles of tonics and syrups and molasses. There were enough bars of soap to reduce a healthy boy to tears, but enough jars of peppermint candy to restore him.

The middle area of the store was occupied by buckets, brooms, bolts of cloth, a few suits of men's clothes, and a plentiful array of women's dresses. Joining the company were bib overalls, lots of them; denim pants for men and boys; shirts, mostly blue, a very few white, with collars in boxes; and boots and shoes, with socks and stockings short, long, thick and thin.

The rear of the store was given over to ropes, strings and sheets of leather, shovels, hay forks, nails, hammers, a few cans of paint, oilcloth, fly screens, chicken wire, and chicken waterers. Standing, sitting, propped, and hanging was a chorus of other indoor and outdoor aids to ranch and town living.

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It was generally recognized that Hogan's had everything from apple cider to Zug rat poison. The reputation of the store was for courteous service and fair pricing. Materials and goods alone would have combined to make up a proper and adequate general store. However, the added ingredient, the factor which made Hogan's different and remarkable was the owner and operator, Penelope Hogan. Known to strangers and casual customers as Mrs. Hogan, most people properly called her and spoke of her as Penelope. To a select few, including Owen, the owner of Hogan's General Store was simply "Pen."

Standing near a small counter where mail from the stage was laid out for the addressees to pick up, Penelope Hogan had her back to the door when Owen and Foakes stepped into the store. At the sound of the screen door closing she turned. Recognition came instantly.

"Owen, praise be."

She fairly flew across the room and threw her arms around him and with a gusty whoop, she gave him a powerful hug. "Whoeee," she cried as she stepped back and looked Owen up and down. "Dang it, Owen, yuhr a surprise. Nobody said a word about yuh bein' in these parts."

"I just rode in, Pen, and from the look of things it's a good idea my coming wasn't announced. There's at least one man in town who wasn't happy to see me."

"Owen," gasped Penelope, "yuh been across the street?"

"Not for very long. I had the feeling we weren't entirely welcome."

"Welcome," she cried, "yuh must be talkin' about Paskil. He's the worst one the good Lord ever made and why he was made at all I'll never know. If that buzzard had known yuh was comin', yuh wouldn't have come outa there alive. He's coulda done a dozen things to burn yuhr bacon. Owen, yuh took a real chance goin' in there. Did yuh hear what happened to Lew Hank?"

"Yes, we stopped by the livery for a few minutes and Somp filled me in. Somp didn't say so, but I got the idea that Lew didn't fall in any horse tank by accident. I'd guess that everyone thinks its Paskil's doing but there isn't any proof."

"Right as rain, Owen, and I'd bet it was one of Paskil's hired coyotes. He wouldn't dirty his hands on that kind of work." As she spoke, Penelope gave a sidelong look at Foakes.

Owen quickly apologized, "Excuse me, I need to make an introduction. Pen, this is Mister Foakes, a friend. Mister Foakes, this lady is Penelope Hogan, owner, manager, chief clerk, and handyman of Hogan's store."

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Penelope immediately offered her hand to Foakes. With it she gave him a long searching look. It was not a look of disapproval, but was more a look of curiosity. His grease and smoke stained, striped engineer's cap, his belted, square cut coat were a degree different from anything she had seen before.

Foakes, for his part, seemed embarrassed at his own appearance and even a bit awed at the strong, clean woman who offered her hand. Everything about her said she was in charge. Half a head taller than Foakes, she was heavy but not given to fat. She had her hair blond streaked through with silver, tied in a loose large knot low on the back of her head. Penelope's eyes were a vague shade of blue or grey depending upon the light, but they looked out upon the world directly and with an assurance that they could see into the minds and hearts of people. There were any number of drummers in the territory who had reversed course on inflated prices when Penelope Hogan had looked straight at them and asked in a surprised voice, "How much did yuh say?"

Foakes must have felt like one of those drummers when she asked, "What's yuhr business Mister Foakes?"

"Why, I'm an engineer, ma'am."

In an honestly curious voice she asked, "A what?"

"An engineer, or trainman if you prefer."

"Lordy, a trainman," smiled Penelope. "You must be lost, Mister Foakes. There ain't a train within a couple of hundred miles of this town."

Lifting his cap and rubbing his head, Foakes tried to be correct without arguing. "Perhaps, Mrs. Hogan. If yuh count a train as havin' a full string of boxcars, I'd agree. On the other track of the matter, if yuh count a train as an engine with wood wagons and a livin' wagon steamin' across the prairie, then perhaps yuhr readin' the wrong gauge, ma'am."

Her face showing that she was thoroughly puzzled, she looked for help, "What in the world is the man sayin', Owen? Is there a rail line comin' in here?" The idea sent her mind racing. "I've never heard of such a thing before. There ain't been no talk. Why, a railroad in Lewistown is the biggest...?"

"Hold on, Pen," interrupted Owen. "This will require some explaining. There isn't a railroad coming to town, at least none that I know about. Mister Foakes is talking about something a lot different. We can explain all that later, but just believe me, Mister Foakes wasn't saying he was bringing a railroad to town."

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"Oh far from it, Mrs. Hogan," said Foakes, anxious to avoid the misunderstanding he had started. "I was only sayin' a train can be somethin' other than an engine, cars and a line of track. There's more than one way of hookin' up yuhr drivers and more than one kind of wheel."

Realizing that an explanation of how railroad engines could be merely ground running engines without rails was going to take some time, and realizing further that Foakes and Penelope were not understanding one another, Owen offered a suggestion.

"Pen, Mister Foakes and I will need some trail fixin's. I know where everything is, unless you've changed things around. So let me pick up what I need and while I'm doing that, Mister Foakes can explain his engine and what he's doing in our part of the world."

"Help yuhrself, Owen. Everything's in the same place as always. If I changed anything, my customers would go away and never come back."

As Owen walked away, Penelope was already asking how a train could not be a train and how an engine could not be a train. Foakes' face and the bald head he was rubbing rather vigorously, were growing red and he looked like a man who had a strong desire to be in some other place, any other place.

In the cooler regions of the store, in an area shielded by fly screen drawn tightly over wooden dividers, Owen found a slab of bacon wrapped in muslin. He cut off a hand's width, replaced the cloth and then wrapped his purchase in brown paper.

Owen scooped dry beans into a small cloth sack, flour into another, and wrapped sugar into a small paper packet. To his growing stock, he added potatoes, onion, and a half dozen jars of apple sauce. He added a small sack of wheat and then turned his attention to securing a fresh box of shells for his Navy Colt.

As he picked out his shells, Owen noted a half dozen new Winchesters and saddle boots. He hesitated, looked in the direction of Foakes, then examined the new rifles. He selected one, fitted it into a leather saddle boot and picked up a half dozen boxes of cartridges.

Selecting two flour sacks which Penelope kept for toting purposes, Owen divided the food stuffs into two equal portions. As he stowed each item in one or other of the sacks, Owen recorded his purchases on a lined tablet. Finished, he knotted the sacks and cut two pieces of twine from an under the counter roll and looped a piece under the knot on each sack.

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As he completed his shopping chore, Foakes and Penelope made their way to where he was working. "Pen, I'd like to take one of your new Winchesters. Am I good for it?"

"Owen Bannack," she scolded, "yuh'r good fer the store if yuh want it."

"Ever handle one of these, Mister Foakes?" asked Owen, offering the rifle to the engineer.

"A time or two," said Foakes. "I always keep one in the cab. When a snoopin' wolf or coyote comes around, I send `em packin' to better huntin' grounds. And skunks, yuh know Missus Hogan, I believe skunks are drawn by engine smell. Without a rifle handy, I'd be plumb unwelcome in every house and store in the country. I've got one in Mobilus stashed in a kind of stowed away place. I had to hide when I seen Slide eyein' it."

"Owen, yuh jest got here. If I thought yuh'd listen, I'd make yuh hole up and rest, but I guess I know where yuhr goin'. Up to Bright's diggin's?"

"If Somp was telling it straight, that's where the meeting is being held. Since I still own a ranch here, that's where I belong."

"Then the both of yuh are goin'?" asked Penelope with a questioning look at Foakes.

Foakes, nodding his head, supplied the answer, "As I said, ma'am, my engine needs repair and the road needs thawin'. Owen has agreed to let me tag along fer the time bein'."

Concern showing on her face, Penelope made a last plea. "Owen, ain't there some way of settlin' this without men takin' up guns and gettin' their sweat up over words?"

"If there is, Pen, we'll try to find it."

Owen paused and a frown creased his broad face. "Pen," he asked, "what do you know about Paskil? Where is he from and how did he get a hand in this business? Any idea?"

"Not much. He's tight with that kind of talk. Besides, he never comes in here. If he buys anything, he goes over to Hydes."

Her reference to the town's second general store was made with a vague wave of her hand at some undefined location down the street. "One of his cheap owlhoots came in a couple of times, but he didn't say much. Is it important?"

"I don't know, but it couldn't hurt any to know more about what we're dealing with. Any chance you could ask around and see what you could pick up."

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"Some time back, I tried to get answers from a friend in Great Falls, but that didn't come to anything." Then an idea came to her, and a smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. "Old Bice comes in here every day or two."

For Foakes' information and as a reminder to Owen, she added, "He's what passes for a banker hereabouts. He's got a corner of the hotel that he rents and claims to be a bank. I wouldn't give him any of my money, but some folks do. He said once that Paskil does business with him. Yes, old Bice jest might be the one to tap fer some talk about Paskil."

"Pen, I don't need to tell you about Paskil and his crowd. Ask easy and don't tell Bice why your asking. I don't want to get you to be seen taking sides. That could be unhealthy."

"Don't you worry none about me, Owen. I've been standin' on my own in this town fer almost twenty years, and old Bice and Paskil ain't a goin' to put a scare on me."

Foakes echoed Owen's concern. "I've seen that Paskil in action, ma'am. If there's a wheel out of round in this town, it's him. Don't be puttin' yuhr hand on a hot fire box, Penelope."

Owen noted but did not remark on the familiar use of Penelope's name by Foakes. He took it to mean their conversation had, to use one of Foakes' expressions, "gotten on the same track."

"One last thing, Pen," said Owen. "Tell me about this Sheriff. Henley, is that his name?"

"If he's a lawman, I'm an..." she searched her mind for an appropriate and unthinkable comparison. Looking at Foakes, she found one. "No disrespect Mister Foakes, I'm an engineer."

"Any idea where he stands in this land grab of Paskil's" asked Owen.

"I haven't heard anything fer sure. He jest ain't said, or leastwise I ain't heard if he has," she said, holding her palms up as showing them to be empty of information.

"I suppose we better pay him a call on the way out of town," mused Owen. "It wouldn't hurt to take a look at him and get introduced."

"Yuh might look at his buildin' project. I've seen him standin' around there the last few days. I think he's tryin' to get his new office and jail built faster than the territorial builders want to build it. The two workers come in here almost every day. Both of `em are full of fun, not at all like Henley."

Penelope followed them outside and stood on the walkway while they rigged the provision sacks onto the saddles of the horses. Her last words were for Foakes. "As soon as yuh get ready to patch up that

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engine, yuh'll be needin' supplies, Mister Foakes. Come by. I'm lookin' forward to seein' a railroad without rails come to town."

Foakes started to correct her terminology, but thought better of the idea. He waved and called to her, "I'll be droppin' back in, Penelope. I may even make Hogan's my official depot."

Following the pointing hand of Penelope, Owen and Foakes found the Sheriff's office as she had described it, under construction. On a lot across from the Hotel two men in overalls were fitting a window in an opening in an unfinished wall of thick, brown bricks.

They placed the window frame in the crude opening, they examined the fit, they marked and scraped at the mortar in the planned window opening, and they then removed the frame. Leaning it against the wall, the workers ran their eyes along the edges, they rubbed the edges, and they ran a wood plane along its sides. The men muttered while they worked. It seemed they were in some disagreement about the fitting or the lack of fitting and how to correct it. One of the workers left the frame to his colleague and examined the window opening. He checked the sill, he traced its contour with his hand, and he scratched at the brown bricks with a large knife.

As Owen and Foakes approached, neither man spoke or even seemed to take note of the fact they were being watched. Owen was forced to break the silence. "Sheriff around?"

The man sliding the plane on the window frame, made a few more passes, blew at the shaving which had piled up in his instrument, brushed at the wood, then looked up. Smiling he replied, "If he is I don't see him."

The worker at the window opening, sniggered and tried to extend the remark. "Sheriff, oh sheriff," he called looking around the building site. "They's a couple of Sheriff scouts here lookin' fer yuh."

Foakes, in the same spirit, replied. "Yeah, Sheriff, we came to look at yuhr two fast workers. We hear they're layin' bricks and puttin' in windows so fast, yuh'll be in yuhr office before sundown."

For a minute Owen thought Foakes had bought them trouble with his bantering remark. Both workers looked as if they were going to take up tools at their critics. The man at the window squinted at the men in the street. He measured Owen with his eyes as though the tall man was a window to be installed in the wall.

"Yuh friends of Henley's?"

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"As far as I know, I've never laid eyes on the man," said Owen holding up his hand as though taking an oath. "And from what I've been told, he may not even like my reason for looking for him."

"Who yuh been talkin' to?" asked the man with the plane.

"The lady at the general store said Henley might be here," shrugged Owen, wanting to be as peaceful as possible and yet not wanting to use Penelope's name.

"Yuh mean Mrs. Hogan?"

"Yes, Penelope Hogan," agreed Owen.

The reference to Penelope had an immediate effect. Both men grinned broadly. "Yep," said the worker at the window opening, "Henley does hang around here. He's always cussin' and complainin' about the work. He was here this mornin' and we told him that all the jawin' only slows us down. That made him mad again and he stomped off. I don't know where."

"Well it looks like its going to be quite a jailhouse," Owen said surveying the work.

"Sure will," agreed the man with the plane, "but buildin' takes time if it's to be done right. Besides we don't even work fer Henley. We was hired by the territorial construction office in Great Falls and they pay us, not the Sheriff."

"That's right," agreed his companion with a sly grin, "good work takes time and we aim to do this job so the buildin' will be solid and escape proof."

"I can see that yuh are," agreed Foakes, who saw that the men were of a mind to work at their own speed and would only slow down if prodded.

Owen also guessed that, with the men's supervisors in a far away city, they would set their own pace. That meant they would work well, but probably very slowly. He tried once more to get information from them. "Any idea where this Henley hangs out when he not out here looking over your shoulders?"

The friendly tone of his voice and his agreeable words about the Sheriff looking over their shoulders had the desired effect. The man at the wall pointed at the two story stone hotel. "Try the cafe. He spends lots of time in there swillin' coffee."

Foakes, looking at their supply of materials, asked, "Where do yuh get the bricks?"

"Heavy freight wagon from Great Falls," replied the worker at the window.

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"Looks like yuhr about out."

"Yep," nodded the same man. "And when we run outa bricks, Henley is really gonna get hot."

"Course we have to tell him the truth," laughed the other workman, "the wagon is due any month now."

Both men laughed loudly at the last words, "any month," and the one who had first said it, repeated it for effect, "Yessir Mister Sheriff, any month that wagon'll come rollin' over the hill."

"I think we'd better move on," smiled Owen. "Sheriff Henley probably won't be to happy with us as it is. If he sees us talking to the two of you, he'll probably blame us for slowing you down."

"See yuh later," waved Foakes as he and Owen turned toward the hotel.

"Any month," hooted one of the workers to the whooping laughter of his companion.

Sheriff Henley was not difficult to find or identify. He was the sole customer in the hotel cafe. Sitting and brooding over a mug of coffee, his wide downturning moustache added a note of sadness to his face. His thick, dark hair hung down over his forehead and over his shirt collar. One elbow was propped on the table permitting the hand to provide support for his chin. His other hand guided a spoon aimlessly around and around in the coffee mug.

Henley only half-heartedly looked up when Owen and Foakes approached the table. He continued stirring and hardly moved his head from its prop.

"Sheriff Henley?" asked Owen.

"Yep."

"Got a minute or two?"

"Got nuthin' but time," shrugged Henley.

"The men over at the building site said we might find you here."

Owen's remark was mere talk, introductory and intended to be friendly. Henley found it otherwise. He came alive enough to remove his head from his hand and to shift to a more upright position in his chair.

"Them scalawags. If that jail was done they'd be in it. Brick by brick, they're tryin' to drive me to drink." His anger rising, he repeated his charge and his sentence of them. "Brick by damn brick they're jest seein' how long they can drag this job out. Thieves of the territorial treasury. By damn I'd love to see `em behind bars, and I may put `em there."

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"They was workin' right along when we left `em," said Foakes with a full serious look on his face. "They was remeasurin' the window from what I could make out."

Henley's face took on an even more pained look. His moustache twitched and drooped even more. "The window. They been measurin' and testin' and remeasurin' that window since mornin'." His voice taking on a note of despair, Henley added, "They don't want me to ever move into that place. What did I do to them? That's what I'd like to know."

Foakes, still speaking with a deadpan face, offered encouragement, "They told us they was expectin' some more bricks in by wagon."

"Bricks," moaned Henley, "somebody in the territorial construction offices sits and calculates the number of bricks we get every month. Can you believe that? Month by month! They say they're buildin' other jails and they want to keep them all on schedule. But the way this is goin' my jail won't be done fer another year."

"Let's talk about something besides new jails," suggested Owen.

"Alright," agreed Henley, taking a closer look at his two visitors, "what's yuhr problem?"

"Land stealing is my problem," answered Owen. "My name is Owen Bannack. I own a spread on the other side of the mountain. I've been out of the area for a time, and now that I'm back I hear lots of talk about a big land grab."

Henley looked at Owen with renewed interest. "Bannack huh? Well, I've heard of yuh and I've heard of yuhr vigilante crowd. Before we talk about ranch land, let me warn yuh. There ain't no room in this town or anywhere around it for vigilantes. Now I also heard about yuhr family bein' killed by raiders and I can't say I blame yuh fer trackin' `em down and hangin' `em. What I'm sayin' now is that law has come to this town, the mountains and the valley. Am I bein' heard?"

"Does all that apply to thieves who try to steal ranches wholesale?" asked Owen, speaking quietly and evenly.

"The law works fer everyone, Bannack. It works fer people yuh may not like or agree with."

"Are you saying that you're backing Paskil?"

"I'm backin' the law," snapped Henley. "Paskil's got a government paper that says he's filed on land which was not surveyed right. His paper says he can resurvey the land and claim it under the new survey. He's got to pay those who are livin' on the land a relocation fee. Now that's the law as I understand it from his paper. So don't yuh come to me preachin' the law."

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"What law is it that says the ranchers can't meet here in town?" asked Owen in the same controlled and quiet voice.

"None that I know of," replied Henley, seeming to be genuinely puzzled by the remark.

"Then how do you explain the two rifles guarding the Spring Creek bridge?"

Henley looked at Owen suspiciously. "Two rifles at the bridge? Do those rifles have names?"

"As I recall it was Givus and Hales. At least that was what they were calling one another."

"What'd they say?"

"They told us they were working for Paskil and that the orders for the day were to keep ranchers out of Lewistown."

"How did you get by?"

"Wasn't no trouble at all when they found out I was workin' fer Paskil," said Foakes.

Henley's eyes fastened on Foakes. "I ain't seen you before."

"Do yuh know all of Paskil's men?" asked Foakes quickly.

"Is that supposed to mean somethin'?" demanded Henley, his voice rising.

"Better give a pull on yuhr safety valve before yuh blow a gasket," suggested Foakes.

Thoroughly bewildered by Foakes' remark, Henley scowled at the engineer. "I don't savvy that, mister, but if I heard yuh right yuh were hintin' that I'm somehow in with Paskil because I've his men around town."

"I was checkin' on yuhr couplin's, Sheriff, because it seems to me that any engineer should know what he's pullin', but I'm not sure yuh do."

"Yuh got a strange way of speakin', mister," said Henley, "and I don't know what yuhr sayin' exactly, but when I figure it out, it better not come out that yuhr accusin' me of bein' hooked up with anything or anybody." Looking back at Owen, he continued, "Now I'll look into yuhr claim that somebody's guardin' the bridge. The law says that's a public road. It'll stay that way. About yuhr ranch, there ain't anything I can do. As fer yuhr neighbors, they can meet anytime anyplace as long as its peaceful. But all the meetin' in the world won't change a thing as long as Paskil's got a government order."

Rising, Henley pulled a nickel from his pocket and laid it on the table. At his full height he was nearly as tall as Owen. His arms were

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remarkably long, much too long for the sleeves his checkered shirt. Yet his revolver was not slung low nor was it tied to his leg. The oiled holster held a wooden handled Severt .45, an expensive handgun known for its accuracy and fine steel parts. It was the type of gun which would be chosen by a man who knew about weapons, who knew how to use them, and who depended on them for his livelihood. Yet Henley did not wear it in the threatening way of a gunhawk.

"Now if you gents will pardon me, I guess I've got to take a ride up the Creek."

"What do yuh make of that," asked Foakes, looking at the Sheriff who was stepping out the door.

"You ask a very good question, Mister Foakes. But as to Sheriff Henley, I guess I'd have to say the jury is still out. He's certainly not what I expected."

"I forgot to tell him to take blankets to them poor fellas at the bridge," smiled Foakes.

"Somehow, I have the feeling they won't be out there much longer," said Owen. "But we still have some riding of our own to do before sundown. Are you up to it?"

"Pressure's holding good, but I'll need fuel before long. How far is it to this place, Bright's Diggin's?"

"Eight, maybe ten miles."

"Well, if yuhr finished makin' social and business calls, I'm ready to give this town a whistle and put the steam to our wheels."

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The road out of Lewistown to the north quickly became two tracks which were occupied with the task of angling around sharply rising hillsides and curving to avoid outcroppings of rock. Although the ground was bare and rutted and despite the fact that there was even some thick, heavy gravel in a few scattered places, the road often was limited to one set of tracks. Where weather and mud had combined to create awesome bogs, wagon drivers had responded by creating detours which themselves seemed to be the main road. Those skirting tracks suggested many interesting stories of stuck wagons, straining teams, and swearing drivers.

After a few more miles, the road forked and the better set of wagon tracks turned toward a range of broad backed hills crowded against each other and rising above the broad valley to the west. The other fork, the one leading to Bright's Diggings, began climbing and reaching toward the sharper and higher country on the east face of the Judith Mountains.

After circling the lower slopes for a time as though looking for an opening or at least an easy route through the rocks and timber, the wagon tracks headed up a long crease in the face of the mountains. Quickly, the little valley narrowed, but the road found one last wide and clear area between the steep wedges of forest. There, in the clearing, the wagon road simply disappeared in a crosshatch of tracks and gouges in the grass. The aimless, crisscrossing tracks centered around a pile of dirt and rocks that had served as a loading and unloading platform for the wagons which had once traveled the road to this mountain, forest terminal.

Owen and Foakes rode into the clearing just as the sun balanced itself on the horizon and took its last long look at the countryside it was going to abandon to the waiting darkness. Shadows from the trees and hillsides were everywhere around the enclosure waiting to claim it in the same silent way they had already taken the surrounding forest. In that last moment of rapidly fading light, the clearing seemed to be the last spot on the mountain the sun cared to look upon before rolling on to other faraway business.

The riders paused as though reluctant to enter the shadowed world on the upper side of the clearing. Without a word, Owen and Foakes slid from the backs of the tired horses. The men tramped the stiffness out of their legs as the horses blew and bobbed their heads and necks.

"Much more of this track, Owen?" asked Foakes.

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"We're almost there," answered Owen. Then looking at the horses he added, "They've had a long day, and this has been a pretty long pull. We best let them get their breath before taking on the next half mile."

"It has been a long grade at that," agreed Foakes. "I jest hope them friends of yuhrs have got their fire up."

Still stamping against the chill which rose from the ground and which was now creeping out of the surrounding gloom, they picked up the hanging reins and stood ready to remount. In that moment before they swung up in the saddles where their bodies would be outlined against the last blue light in the sky, Cocoa stepped away and in doing so crowded Bess who also danced back a step.

Instead of pulling at the reins and hauling the animal up short, Owen stood quietly and spoke to Foakes in a low voice, "Hold up, Mister Foakes. Do you see anything up there?"

Their eyes sought out the outline of the upward tending trail at the edge of the clearing. As they peered ahead, Cocoa kicked at the ground and shifted his weight. Annoyed at the long ride or at some discomfort in his hackamore, he shook his head, but as he did so, he gave the tree line a sharp look. His body tensed and his ears jerked forward.

Owen read the signs and spoke quietly to Foakes. "There is something more than trees up ahead, Mister Foakes."

"Friends or shootin' at us type of people?" asked Foakes, giving no outward sign that Owen had spoken.

"I'm hoping for friends, but people I call friends ask before shooting, and I don't believe there's going to be any asking."

"More than one?" asked Foakes quietly.

"No idea, but being a target out here in the open for one or a dozen isn't my notion of good sense. See that pile of rocks?"

"Yep. The old loadin' dock?"

"I think we should step over there, sudden like, and make it home for the time being. Ready?"

Foakes nodded, but he also reached up and slipped the new Winchester from its boot. Then, as one, they quickly dropped the reins of the horses and darted across the short space to the shelter of the rocks. Bess and Cocoa, startled at being so quickly released by their riders, shied back a few steps and stared at the two men.

As Owen and Foakes skidded to their knees behind the embankment, a rifle cracked in the trees. Before the sound died, the wavering scream of a bullet ricocheting off a rock and split the air near the top of their shelter. In the space of a second, another shot followed the first. It

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splintered into the log which had been laid as the final joining edge of the loading platform.

"I'd say the first one was pure surprise at seein' us runnin' and the second was mad and cussin'" said Foakes.

"Did you see where it was coming from," asked Owen.

"Yeah, like a spark in a cloud of coal smoke," answered Foakes, rubbing his knee. "Ahead and to the right a tad. About where the trail heads into the trees."

"Agreed," said Owen. "But I'm not sure one man could shoot, pump a rifle, aim and shoot again and be that close with the second one. I'm guessing two and I think they're pretty close together."

"I hope yuh got an idea about how to tighten up the ties on this grade. I ain't been on it before and I was hopin' fer a more friendly station keeper than we seem to have found."

"First thing is to try and find out who they are," said Owen. Then in a loud voice he called out, "Hold on out there. Do you know who you're shooting at?"

There was no answer. The silence seemed closer in the deepening twilight which was quickly dissolving into darkness. "Any chance they lit out?" wondered Foakes.

"I wouldn't bet on it. Even a poor bushwhacker hangs around for a second shot." Again he called out. "My name's Bannack, Owen Bannack. Who's out there?"

The reply was a rifle shot. Too high, it whined away into the empty sky and down the length of the ravine behind them.

"Owen, I'd say somebody up there ain't a friend of yours, but whoever it is, they got us on the low end of the right of way. What do yuh figure we should do? Sit `em out till it gets full dark?"

"That's what they'll expect," mused Owen. "I don't like waiting and I especially don't like being bushwhacked." Looking at the new Winchester Foakes had pulled from the rifle boot and carried with him, Owen observed, "Good thinking, Mister Foakes. Are you up to throwing a couple of greetings to those unfriendly geezers up there while I take a run for another hole? Maybe those shooters won't like the idea of a crossfire."

Crawling and sliding to a shooting position behind the sloping side of their little fortress, Foakes got himself ready to supply the covering fire. "Whistle when yuhr ready and I'll clear the track."

"Okay, Mister Foakes," called Owen quietly.

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Instantly, Foakes' rifle spat out its message. The first shot brought a surprised and frightened cry from the trees. The following shot must have been closer. It brought an echoed, "Damn," as it sliced at the cover of whoever was taking refuge in the shadows. The third shot splintered a dead branch somewhere near the position of the would be assailants, and it sent a sharp chashing sound into the trees. The fourth shot brought another oath from a frightened throat.

Using the surprise and the second which Foakes' rifle had bought for him, Owen leaped to his feet and rushed to a pile of deadfall on the near edge of the clearing. Skidding to a protected position, he quickly leveled his rifle and waited.

Angry flashes replied to Foakes and the rocks of the loading dock rang from bullet ricochets. The flurry of answering shots was a mistake. They gave Owen a target and his rifle took a sudden and grim toll. His first shot, driven directly at the muzzle spark, brought a death scream from one of the attackers.

Silence then fell over the clearing. Time took a long breath, then unwound a bit, enough for the second attacker to find his horse, enough for him to mount and spur frantically off into the darkness. The sound of the retreat died away and left only the clinging darkness and silence.

A new rush of horses hooves began as a murmur against the ground. Then it quickly grew into a loud beating thunder. Back in the forest the pounding of riders coming fast stopped. Voices rose and fell. The scuffling sounds of men and horses quieted and then almost as whispers the sound of men running and the sound of soft calling back and forth suggested that the men had dismounted and then taken positions among the trees.

"Hold your fire, Mister Foakes," called Owen. "This crowd may be friendly."

"Hallo the clearin'," came a booming voice.

"Hello yourself," called Owen. "Heekal, it's good to hear something besides a Winchester."

The booming voice called back, "By damn. I don't believe my own ears. Owen?"

"None other," answered Owen.

In a moment the clearing was filled with a dozen men all talking at once. Their relief at finding Owen showed in their good humored remarks, in their faces, and in the warmth with which they greeted him.

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One of the men, a thick bodied man, fully bearded, and carrying a long shotgun, stood at Owen's side while the others shook Owen's hand and greeted him with jokes and good humored remarks.

"We shoulda knowed who it was. I thought I recognized ole Cocoa standin' back there."

"Hell of a way to say hello to yuhr neighbors, all that shootin'."

"Good thing Heekal halloed yuh, before we shot yuhr ears off."

"Who was tryin' to pot yuh, Owen?"

"Did yuh get a look at `em?"

"By Gott, ve vas vorried about yuh, Ohen."

The man who spoke with the thick German accent, thumped Owen on the back and pumped his hand vigorously. "Yep, ve hert yuh vas in Colorada. Sid says dat yuh vas liffin down der."

Sid Andrews, the man behind the beard, chimed in. "I had no idea yuh was comin' this early in the year. The last letter yuh sent was around Christmas, and I wrote to yuh jest a month or so ago."

Owen passed over the facts of his trip, and the reasons for his return. There was no need and no way in these circumstances of explaining his own unsettled feelings about returning after tracking down only two of the three killers he had been pursuing. Of course, the story of his friends in Colorado and his desire to either sell the ranch or have Amos and Jane Carpenter join him was a tale for another time.

Standing among the ranchers who had been his friends and neighbors for more than a dozen years gave him a feeling of comfort that defied explanation. The difficulties facing his neighbors made him glad he had come back when he did, and their warm words made his bond to them stronger and more secure than it had ever been. Their fight was his fight, and he was in it to the end.

With the mock seriousness of a friend, he used a spoof to avoid talking about his reasons for coming back, "Sid, I just got worried, worried sick about you running my spread and getting away with all the money you're making on it."

"Well, I was goin' to write yuh about all that, Owen," replied Andrews in the same serious tone, "after buyin' a bank or two." Then he added, "Banks in Californnee."

Everyone joined in the laughter, and Owen used the opportunity to introduce Foakes, "Boys, I'd like to introduce Mister Foakes. I found him with a broken down piece of machinery down on Ketchel Creek. Since then he's talked me past the Spring Creek bridge guards, and just now

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pulled my bacon out of the firing line of the two tickers who aimed to bushwhack us."

Owen's endorsement made Foakes an instant member of the group.

"Howdy, Mister Foakes. Yuhr welcome here."

"Glad to see yuh, Mister Foakes."

"Any friend of Owen's is a friend in this camp."

One or two joked their greeting. "By gum, I wonder about yuhr choice of friends, Mister Foakes. This Bannack fella is a real hardcase."

"Stick around Owen too long and somone'll ventilate yuh, Mister Foakes."

"Anybody see a wounded or dead gunner up in trees," asked Owen. "I'm pretty sure I hit one of them."

"Yup," drawled a tall, thin man with checkered coat. "Heekal and I found him. He was hit alright. Owen, yuh still hit what yuh aim at. He was holed right through the heart. He musta been standin' to be hit thataway."

"Recognize him, Bish?" asked Owen.

"Couldn't see much in the dark except that it was a body."

"Maybe everyone ought to take a look," Owen suggested.

There was general agreement and the group walked up the slope to the edge of the forest. It was the work of a short minute for Heekal and Bish to find the body. Someone scratched a sulphur and held it above the lifeless face.

Surprisingly, the face was well shaven and clean. Even in the yellow light of the flickering match, it was evident that it was not the face of a man accustomed to the out of doors. The soft brown hat, found nearby, was expensive, but it gave no clue as to its owner's identity. The man was wearing two coats. The outer coat was a sheepskin, new and clean. The inner coat was a match for the hat, soft, brown and obviously costly. Another match showed a pair of neat boots, for dress and not for work.

Alongside the dead man they found a .30 caliber Pulveen rifle. The Pulveen was clean and well oiled. Its smooth lever action clicked sharply as one of the ranchers checked the chamber and confirmed that the weapon had been recently fired. The Pulveen was not a popular rifle because of its unusual length and excessive weight. It was, however, respected for its deadly accuracy.

There were comments on the man's expensive clothes, and a few remarks on his face and soft hands.

"Townee."

"Nobody I ever saw, but a real skeeter for boots and hat."

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"Could be a gambler with them hands. More like a woman than a man's."

Of all the remarks about the dead man and his clothes, Heekal's was the most thoughtful. "Damn strange lookin' bushwacker. He looks more like a businessman than a killer."

"Unless his business was killing," mused Owen, as much to himself as to the others.

"If that's so," asked Heekal, "what's he doin' up here? Who did he plan on cashin' in?"

As the tiny light from the match flickered across the circling faces, each man there wondered if he had been the target of a hired gun. Then the flame on the tiny burning stick, overpowered by the cold night air, wavered, grew smaller, smoked out as a tiny spark, then died altogether.

It was Sid Andrews' suggestion that the body be hauled up closer to the camp for burial. "The bobcats would get at him for sure and even a bushwacker don't deserve that."

The place known as Bright's Diggings was less than a mile from the clearing, at the end of a sharply rising trail. The little mining settlement was located at the top of the ravine in an area the size of a very large ranchyard. Bright's Diggings consisted of two rectangular log cabins, a holding pen for horses, and a couple of stout log sheds. Trees had been cleared for the gold mining work and had been dragged by miners, presumably Bright and perhaps others, to locations where they served as protective breastworks guarding the approaches on both sides of the camp.

Perched atop the ridge, with the sides of the mountain falling away in all directions, the logwork and the location made Bright's Diggings a fortress. It was generally accepted that a few, well armed, and determined men could hold off a small army for as long as food and ammunition held out.

The place had taken its name from the first miner to arrive and claim it. Some said the "Diggings" had been added to the name because of the determined efforts of miner Bright to find gold. Others claimed that the word had been added to the place because everyone who ever came there either dug a bit or had an urge to dig, either for their own gold or to try and find the legendary cache of miner Bright.

Bright had, at least for a time, been an ambitious and hard working miner. He had sunk glory holes up and down the ravine. He had sifted, he had used a small spring for a narrow little sluice box, he had screened,

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he had panned, but miner Bright probably never found any gold. At least he never found gold that he was willing to talk about.

Among the many stories told about Bright, one seemed to prevail. That was the tale that the legendary old man was not really interested in gold at all but simply wanted to live in peace away from other men. Part of the story was that Bright worked harder on improving the log cabins than on improving his gold claim. Those who held to that theory were fond of saying that Bright really loved the gold in the tiny petals of the Dessus flowers more than the gold embedded in the granite of the mountains.

Whether any or all of the story was true, the facts were that Bright had staked out a small claim on the mountain. He had worked to improve it, and his contribution to those who came later included only the little buildings and his name.

Then, as it does for all creatures, the large, the small, the easy and the difficult, age claimed old Bright and he left his gold claim for the gold and glory promised to the good and the believing. After his departure, others came. They did little to improve the mountain and did even less to improve the cabins.

Those few individuals of lesser determination who came later had also dug, sifted, sluiced, screened, and panned. They found more work than reward and abandoned the project for rumors of other fields in Idaho or Canada. Rumors, as rumors will, became legend and it became standard belief that old Bright had found a fortune, if not a mother lode and had buried his stash somewhere in the area which carried his name. Some had looked for it, but disappointment, as disappointments will, became hard fact and nothing had ever been found.

Thus, Bright's Diggings became the property of whoever happened to be in possession of it at any given time. For the time being, it therefore belonged to the ranchers from the Ketchel range.

The returning group of ranchers answered the challenge of the guards they had left behind and were permitted to reenter the compound. The guards were sons of two of the men Owen had already greeted, and he renewed his hellos to them, remarking on how they had grown in the time he had been away. A strong fire was blazing between the two cabins and the meal which had been interrupted by the rifle fire was reheated as the ranchers reclaimed their plates and coffee cups.

The young men were assigned the task of burying the dead man. Joking about doing some digging at the Diggings they went off with a

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lantern, rusty shovels and a pick to consign the would be killer to a criminal's shallow grave.

As Owen contributed his stores to those of the others, he told Sid Andrews of his visit to Sid's ranch. Owen also recited for all the men the events of his trip to Lewistown. The men laughed at the story about the bridge guards, and in turn, told how they had simply turned back a few miles and crossed the last mountain obstacle by taking high, treacherous road known only to people who had lived in the area for a while. Clearly it was a route not known or suspected by the guards nor by the man who had stationed them at the bridge.

Soon the talk turned to Paskil, the land survey, and the government commission. Anger and frustration were in every word which was spoken about the land grab. Underlying all the talk and the debate about how to proceed was a determination that no man yield to Paskil and that no family move from its ranch.

Sid Andrews explained their decision to hold the meeting out of town. "We could have gone in and probably met in the church or maybe even the hotel, but when we ran into them jaspers at the bridge, we passed the word that the town, or most of it, belonged to Paskil. He's the one we wanted to meet with, but rifles and warnin' shots made it pretty clear he didn't want to meet with us. So we changed the meetin' place to here."

"Then we heard about Lew gettin' kilt," said an old man with large round eyes. "There didn't seem to be any reason to throw water on the grease by makin' a show in town."

"I'm fer ridin' in and measurin' Paskil fer a rope," called another.

"Yeah, Owen," called another man, "his outfit ain't no better'n the one that was robbin' killin' around these parts a few years ago. Ropes and trees or the ridgepole of a barn was the answer then. Why wouldn't it work again?"

Owen realized that they were divided in what course of action to take. Some of the men, hot tempered and with dry powder flash points, would be for immediate and decisive action. Too often, those men failed to consider the consequences of what they started.

Others were deliberate and slow to anger. They would talk and consider every possible angle before acting. Too often such men would lose the best moment for action, bound up by their own deliberations.

Nearly every man present had sat on the vigilance committee with Owen. Joining together to make and to enforce their own laws had been a last choice. It had been that or let plundering predators rule the entire

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area. And because Owen had been a leader and had made no attempt to hide his role, the outlaws, in a last act of desperate vengeance, had raided his ranch and killed his wife and children. The pursuit of those killers and the hanging of two of the three had taken Owen away for two years. But now he was back, there was new trouble, and again his neighbors were looking to him for leadership.

Looking at them, Owen thought how these men had ridden across the mountains with the best of intentions. They had been met with guns and had been shot at by road guards. Their anger was natural and certainly understandable.

Like his friends, Owen, too, felt anger at the man who seemed to be at the center of their troubles. Also, like Sid and the others, he had almost been provoked to deadly action when rifles had been used to try and turn him back down the road. Only quick works by Foakes had prevented gunplay. Owen felt that words were again needed instead of smoke and lead.

Despite their rough talk about hangings and shooting, Owen knew every man in the camp to be a family man and not given easily to violence. At the same time, threats to their ranches and their families would make them an ugly crowd to deal with. Owen sensed that it was important that they not act without more information and that they not put themselves on the wrong side of the law, especially if the law was in the right and was determined.

"What does anybody know about Henley?" Owen asked, looking around the fire.

The reaction was a mixture of shrugs and looks by every man at the others. Some of the men admitted to having seen him on trips to town for supplies, but none of the ranchers had anything specific to say about the new Sheriff.

"Somp told me he keeps a good horse at the livery, but never seems to use it," offered Bish over his coffee cup.

"Penelope Hogan told me he's been in once or twice, and that all he did was moan about the slow work on his new jailhouse," added another.

"I heerd he was hooked up with Paskil," grumbled Bish, as he dabbed hardtack into his plate of beans.

"Has anyone got more that just talk to back that up," asked Owen?

"He shore makes himself clear that he won't do anything to stop Paskil," growled Sid. "I talked to him myself and he says that as long as Paskil's got that government commission then Paskil's got the law behind

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him. I would say that Henley didn't sound like he was warm to the commission."

"Have any of you actually seen that commission," asked Owen, "Everything I hear about it is second hand."

After much head shaking and low, negative grumbling, no man could say he had actually seen the document. Heekal, looming large and burly in the firelight, was strong in his belief that the Sheriff knew something about it.

"Henley told me he had read the whole thing," insisted Heekal, "and, by ginger in Wester Tea, that's what makes me think he's in with Paskil all the way."

"Hell, I bet there ain't a commission," called out Bish, seeming to come to a conclusion which would solve all their problems. "If there ain't no commission, then Paskil and the Sheriff are lying through their rotten teeth."

The idea was quickly taken up by others. The old rancher with the round, surprised eyes, joined in. "Yep. yep. That's it. They ain't got a paper. Nobody's seen it so they ain't got it."

Sid Andrews, a bit more cautions, held up his hand, "Wait up fer a minute. Jest because we ain't seen it, doesn't mean there ain't a commission. There's no call to get off the fence and run if the wild hoss is on the other side of the corral. The fact still is that Paskil says he's got one, Henley says he's read it, and there are others in town who say they've seen it."

The old rancher looked to Owen for confirmation, "Owen, did you see the paper when yuh faced Paskil in the Pink Eye?"

"No, Wat, I didn't. But as Sid says, that doesn't mean anything one way or the other. I think we need to trace this thing down ourselves."

"Now I can agree with that," called Heekal. "We can ride in there tomorrow and have a show down."

Trying to hold the line on their instinct for action and still give them something to go on, Owen shook his head. "We could do that, Heekal, and we might even see a paper. That wouldn't settle anything. Suppose they laid some kind of official looking paper in front of us. What would that mean? Would it mean we have to get off our ranches and take the few dollars Paskil is offering us? Speaking for myself, I want better backup than some paper Paskil might have, before I give up my spread."

"Yep. Yep," cried out Wat, "Owen's right. I think we need to see the brand before we hang any rustlers."

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There was general agreement with Owen's point. However, as they considered where that thinking led them, the difficulties became greater.

Sid Andrews finally asked the question that was growing larger in everyone's mind. "I guess I agree with what yuhr sayin' Owen. Seein' a paper wouldn't be a final thing fer me. Paskil could have written the thing hisself. But where does that leave us? How will we ever know if there's a real commission?"

Foakes, who had remained silent during the discussion, interrupted with a question. "I don't want to get off my siding before yuhr main string is past the switch, but if yuh think the ticket's bad why not ask the gent that sold it?"

As the fire cracked and danced, sending its yellow and orange flames into the black night sky, the camp became as silent at the surrounding forest. In the distance the thud of the rusty pick, punctuated by the voices of the husky young funeral attendants, could be heard as it beat against the thin crust of mountain soil.

Foakes, because he was new to the group, had been given careful attention. Out of respect for Owen who had introduced Foakes, and because they did not want to be impolite, not one of the ranchers asked what was on every man's mind. The question would have simply been, "What in the Hell, are yuh talkin' about?" They were totally at a loss as to how to react to Foakes. In fact, they had no real idea what Foakes had said.

Owen, keeping the smile which lurked in his mind off his face, came to the rescue of Foakes. "When I introduced Mister Foakes I didn't tell any of you that he is by trade a railroad man."

"Railroad." The word came to the lips of three or four of the men at the same instant.

"Railroat," intoned the German accent, "Mein Gott. A railroat man. Vot does dis mean? Ver is der railroat, Ohen?"

"Hold up, Herman," cautioned Owen. "Mister Foakes is indeed a railroad man, but he isn't here to bring us rails. Mister Foakes, I think you might explain Mobilus to these men."

"Mopilis?" asked Herman.

"Mobilus," corrected Foakes.

Then with the most full and careful attention possible, the men listened while Foakes gave them a description of the steam locomotive with the great wide iron wheels designed for land running. He finished his explanation with an account of how he had first met Owen and how Owen had done the "sendin'" of Slide and Klouse.

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Before anyone else could speak, Herman excitedly ask, "Vy don'tcha use coal instead of all that vood yuh said yuh hat in dem vagens?"

"Coal?" asked Foakes, his voice rising with great energy and interest. "Are yuh tellin' me there's coal in these parts?"

"Almost unter yuhr nose. Ve bringin it from da Musselshell bi da vagenful. It vud be just da ting fer da steamer alright."

Foakes, his interest thoroughly aroused, asked, "Yuh sound like a man that's seen an iron wheel or two."

"Ya. In da olt land I vas a cogger. Dem railroads wit a cog line in da mittle."

While the others watched, speechless, Foakes and Herman drew off together and began conversing with smiles and wild gestures. Shaking their heads, the ranchers dismissed the two with shrugs which admitted their lack of understanding of steam and road running locomotives.

Sid Andrews, showing himself to be dogged man, brought attention back to the puzzle of the commission. "As I was sayin' Owen, I don't know where all this leaves us."

"Well, I believe Mister Foakes was making a good point, and it may be our answer," replied Owen looking at the faces around the fire.

"Yuh mean there was sense in all that talk about switches and tickets," asked Wat, his round eyes wide with the question.

"Perhaps there was, Wat," nodded Owen, "by the ticket Mister Foakes meant the commission. By the gent that sold it, Mister Foakes must have been talking about the government official who issued the commission."

Even Wat saw the point. "Yep. Yep. That jest what I thought. Yep. The only thing to do is go fer the govamint. Find the sidewinder that gave the paper to Paskil and hang `em from a barn ridgepole by his signin' hand."

"Something like that," agreed Owen. "The land office is in Great Falls, and I think that's where we should be looking to find out about this commission."

The idea met with instant agreement. There was a ripple of talk about the trip to Great Falls and how long it would take to get there and back. There was no question raised about who should go. It was taken for a fact without discussion that Owen should act for them and make the trip.

It was also agreed that a small group should be left at Bright's Diggings to keep it available for meetings and for whatever other purpose might be found. Given the general agreement that the trip could be accomplished in a week, and allowing a few more days for

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unexpected difficulties, it was agreed that the ranchers would return to their homes and wait for word from Owen.

Although the difficult condition of the Red Hill Road made it unlikely that Paskil could immediately move on the ranches, arrangements were made for riders to keep moving from one place to another to keep everyone informed and in touch with one another. They all firmly agreed that a move on any one ranch would be considered a general attack on everyone.

The talk, although somewhat general in nature, also covered the action to be taken in the event of such an attack or move by Paskil. Everyone agreed that Herman's large house, which had a spring inside the house itself, and which had thick heavy walls, would become the center for gathering the families and making a stand against the invaders.

As the men began to talk to one another in small groups, they took up details of keeping in touch while they waited for word from Owen and another meeting to decide what action to take. They also talked of the trip, with each man giving his opinion on the prospects for success.

As they began cleaning the camp for the night and washing their plates and eating utensils, their attention was suddenly seized by the two returning grave diggers. At first there was only the call, "Hey, Pop. Lookee here."

Heads turned toward the sound. Then from around the end of one of the cabins the bouncing yellow light of the lantern appeared. The father of the voice called back, "Yeah, whatcha got?"

Carrying the pick, the rusting shovel, and their coats, the young men stepped into the firelight. The taller of the two, his sleeves still rolled and his face showing the effort of digging into the surface of the hard mountain earth, handed his father a thin soft cotton band.

"What's this," asked the father holding the object up in the firelight.

"A money belt," replied the young man. "Haulin' him up from the clearin' pulled his shirt and coat up, and when we turned him over there it was."

"That's why we didn't find any pocket money on him," put in Heekal, "It seemed kind of strange fer a slicker like that not to have some money on him somewhere."

While everyone watched, the money belt was folded open and the contents revealed. A sheaf of bills pealed out into the rancher's hand. Smooth, new and crisp, the bills looked out of place in the calloused hands.

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Slowly and carefully, the bills were counted. First the hundreds; there were four. Next the twenties; there were four. Finally, the ones; there were three. "Four huneret..." the rancher paused, counting again.

"Four hunnert, forty three," called out Bish excitedly.

"Yep, yep, four hunnert and forty three," confirmed Wat, who was more often an echo than an original. Now, however, his sharp eyes gave him a chance to be first.

"Looke there," he called excitedly, pointing at the ground.

A small piece of paper had fallen from the money belt. A sharp white spot on the dark ground, it immediately caught every eye.

Quickly picking it up, Wat offered it first to the father who still held the money and the money belt. With a shrug, the man said simply, "Readin' ain't my long suit. Give it to Owen."

Taking the paper, Owen unfolded it and turned his back to the fire and held the paper up where the fire could light its face. The lighted white square, no larger than his hand, had two parts. The upper part was a printed inscription. In the even march of print it read, "EASTERN AND CENTRAL EXPRESS." In smaller print, centered below the heading were the words, "Boston - Chicago and St. Louis."

Below the printed words a message was inscribed in neat, firm handwriting. The black ink was given life by Owen who read aloud.

Craver,

The draft for five hundred dollars is enclosed. The bank in Great Falls will cash it for you. The balance will be paid when your part is finished. Remember that the others will fold and run when the big shot is put down. Your job is to keep him from getting back where he can join the others.

TP

There was nothing further on the note. Among all the scowls and shrugs, there was not one explanation or even suggestion as to what the words might mean. The ranchers stood in the circle of the dancing firelight wondering at the meaning of the note.

"At least that shooter's got a name," observed Sid. "But I sure ain't heard of no Craver. Has anybody?"

"There was a Cleaver that lived on Lesser Creek," volunteered Heekal.

"He was nuthin'," argued Wat. "Didn't know a good steer from a goat. Besides I think he died."

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"Five hundred dollars is a lot of money," marveled Bish, "a helluva a lot of money, even to kill a man."

"He musta followed yuh from town, Owen," suggested Sid. "Accordin' to that writin', he was supposed to plug yuh before yuh joined up with us. There ain't no doubt that it's Paskil's work."

"Yeah," agreed one of the young men, "but what first steps is he talkin' about?"

"I'd be more interested in knowing who's in this thing with him," said Owen as he continued looking at the paper.

"If we knew who's behind this East or Central outfit, we might have an answer," suggested a short, heavy rancher who had thus far remained silent.

"East, hell," spat Wat. "It's a place, not a who."

Everyone was pretty sure Wat was dead wrong, but nobody took the trouble to disagree with him. In years of shared work, in numerous roundups, the men had come to know one another well enough that the failings and strength of each was known to the others. Wat's strength was not his thinking power, but no one would have thought of denying him the right to have his say.

"Seems to me to be somethin' Owen should look into when he goes up to Great Falls," said Sid, looking around the group for agreement.

"Sure, That's the only thing that makes sense," said Heekel immediately. "The sooner the better. And remember, that's where the late Mister Craver cashed his check. Owen can look into that by talkin' directly to the banker."

"Yep, Owen's got to wade into that bank and find the fritter that cashed Paskil's check," insisted Wat, "Owen'll be able to make `em say where Paskil's `east' is."

"And take the money, Owen," insisted the father who still held the dead man's bills in his hand.

"I'm open to ideas on what to do with it," said Owen taking the handful of bills.

"Put it back in the bank," suggested Heekal, sniggering at his own suggestion, "maybe, ole Craver will come back from the grave and claim it."

"Hold off on that talk," snapped Wat. "Yuh shouldn't be talkin' like that in the dark. Bodies can sometimes hear what yuh say at night, specially fresh dead bodies. My pap never allowed talk around graves, and said talk around `em at night always meant big trouble."

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"I probably should give it to the Sheriff," said Owen, "but I think I'll wait til we know more about him. For now, putting it in the bank is probably the best idea."

As the men spread out around the fire in order to drive the chill from their arms and legs, the talk returned to Owen's trip to Great Falls. Foakes and Herman who were still talking about steam, boilers, and rails, rejoined the group, apparently the very best of friends.

"Owen, if yuh have no objection, I think Dutchy here can help me with Mobilus," said Foakes, "Since the plan is for most everyone to go back over the mountains, I can ride along with them and see if we can't start patchin' the ole rascal's boiler." "Sounds fine to me, Mister Foakes," agreed Owen, "There's no reason for you to make a long ride just to keep me company."

"Now, I'm gonna step in here," interrupted Heekal, "after jest gettin yuhrself shot at, and seein' that Paskil has hired a gunslinger to get yuh, I think someone's goin' to ride along with yuh. Two's always better'n one, and we don't know but what Paskil may have some friends up there."

Strong agreement was immediate and unanimous. The men would not take no for an answer, and it was decided that Owen would be accompanied on his ride north.

The young man who had been on the burying team and who had found and presented the money belt spoke up. "Most of yuh have chores to tend to and yuh need to be gettin' back. If Dad can go it alone fer a time, I wouldn't mind makin' the ride."

He looked at his father and left the question hanging in the air. The father, hiding the pride in his son behind a gruff attitude, mumbled something nobody heard. Then, kicking his boot at the ground he replied, "Well, if that don't beat everything. Jumpin' at a chance to go ridin' off to the big town. It's jest like a kid to try gettin' out of chores." Looking at Owen the rancher continued, "He ain't much, Owen. He's pretty green fer a trail ride, but..."

Not to be counted down too far, the young man interrupted, "But Dad, yuh say yuhrself, I'm better with a rifle than anyone yuh know, and I can handle the cookin' good enough."

"Well, seein' that yuhr so good at buryin' and since Owen may be needin' that kind of help..."

The laughter of the men rippled around the fire. Everyone knew permission had been given.

Owen smiled and gave his agreement to the assignment. "Anse, you'll do just fine. Glad to have you ride along."

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"Pi golly," sang out Herman, "I tink everyting sounds gut."

"Yep, yep," agreed Wat, catching the uplifted feelings of the group, "I'm bettin' we'll have ole Paskil decoratin' a tree afore yuh know it."

"When yuh got coal and a good man on the shovel, yuh can stoke up a mighty hot fire," added Foakes.

Owen, who may have been the only one who understood the full meaning of the remark, made no comment about just how hot their fire might get. The others nodded polite agreement at the strange comment.

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Only the main street had gravel, but it was gravel nonetheless. Hauled in from a pit along the Missouri River where the fine sand had been screened out, the popcorn sized gravel had been dumped and spread almost the entire length of Larch, the central business street of Great Falls. The original purpose had been to cover the mud and reduce the size of the ruts, but a secondary effect had also been noticed. The gravel did much to dilute the horse deposits by grinding them back almost into fine grass. That also reduced somewhat the necessity of tending the road with the town's scraping and dragging rig.

There was little doubt about the need for maintenance on the busy street. On most days the traffic included wagons with freight, wagons with ranch and farm supplies, wagons going to the stores and wagons coming from the stores. There were buggies, light and heavy, with front seats only and buggies with front and back seats. Stages came down the street from the east. Stages went up the street from the west. From the number of wagons standing, from the number of buggy trips taken, from the wild dashes of stages, one would have to suppose that every wheeled creation in the town rolled over and gouged at Larch Street nearly every day of the week.

Every set of wheels had its motive power. Light, quick and proud horses pulled the buggies and the gigs. Strong, heavy and deliberate horses pulled the wagons. Tall eared mules with straight backs and intelligent, thoughtful eyes filled some of the traces and appeared to wonder about all the going to and fro and the wagon and animal traffic on this busy street.

The horse population of Larch Street was made up in no small part by saddle horses. They trotted, they walked, and, as they came to or left the end of the street, they loped a bit. And on occasion, they galloped, but only at great risk to the horse, the rider, and angry pedestrians.

Owen and his appointed sidekick, Anse, the young rancher, were among the more cautious travelers, as they walked their horses down the busy street. Unnoticed by shopkeepers, by shoppers, businessmen, and by business helpers, the two riders took their bearings as they made their way down the street. After a number of saloons, boarding houses, stores, gunshops, and offices, they saw their destination sitting and waiting for them.

The place was an organized arrangement of bricks. Red bricks. Red bricks in neat, even tiers. The result was an almost perfectly square front. Naturally it was the host of square windows in fresh, white window

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frames. A new wooden door, unpainted but varnished had been planted an even distance from each window and given command of the front of the square building.

The handsome door was entirely official and obviously important. Both qualities were proven by its sign which announced to the entire outside world that inside was to be found the "United States Commissioner for Lands and Settlements." As if not satisfied that would-be visitors would know exactly where they were, the sign gave that information. "Territory of Montana."

The office of the Commissioner for Lands and Settlements sat squarely in the middle of the last block of Larch Street that had been treated to Missouri River gravel. The new bricks of the land office building seemed to shun the neighboring buildings and the builders had, perhaps by direction, left a considerable space between it and the older brick buildings on either side. Of course, it could just as easily have been the case that the adjoining buildings were not anxious or willing to touch or be associated with the land office.

Hanging in one of the square windows was a small neatly lettered square sign which stated in the most simple way possible the current status of the office. "Open."

Owen and Anse tried the door and found that the little sign had declared the true state of business. Yet, the door was strangely different from most of its neighbors up and down the street and from most other doors all over the territory. It opened not by swinging out and not by swinging in. Instead, as if unable to decide which was correct, the door opened by sliding into a neat pocket built into the brick wall.

With a careful shove of the official door to the right, they were able to step into the office. There they were immediately confronted by a large wooden desk, which was bare on top and unoccupied from behind. To the left of the large central desk they saw a small, tall wooden table. It was piled high with papers and was very much occupied.

Sitting on a high stool, bending over one of the papers, and wielding a wooden handled ink pen was a frowning young woman. Her dark hair was coiled, piled on her head, and held in place by two brown bone combs. A white blouse, ink stained on the sleeves, rose up around her neck and framed her delicate white chin.

The opening and closing of the door had interrupted her writing and widened two very intense brown eyes. Wiping the point of the ink pen on a small cloth, she blotted her paper and greeted her visitors.

"Yes, may I help you?"

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It was just as well that Owen was expected to give the answer because young Anse was speechless. She seemed to know that, and after giving Anse a cool appraising look, she turned her attention to Owen.

"Yes, Miss," said Owen, lifting his hat, "I'd like to speak with the land commissioner."

"Oh, I'm afraid that won't be possible. Mister Fraser is not in today. He's out with a surveying party."

"And when do you expect him back, Miss?"

"He planned on being back tomorrow, but that isn't for sure. It's possible he won't be in until the day after tomorrow." Sensing his disappointment, she asked, "If you have a question about land open for settlement, maybe I can help?"

Owen hesitated. He was on new ground and didn't know exactly how to proceed. The thought of biding his time waiting for Fraser to return helped him decide to at least see what the girl would say to a question or two.

"It might be that you can, Miss," began Owen. "Does this office deal with land everywhere in the Territory?"

She brightened as the amazingly easy question. "It certainly does. All government owned land that is."

"I see," nodded Owen. "But does it have anything to do with land no longer owned by the government?"

"Hum?" she mused, pursing her lips, "Do you mean land that has been settled or purchased...?"

Owen interrupted and supplied an answer to her question. "Let's say land that was settled on."

"Well, once land has been settled and the deeds signed and given to the settlers, then this office hasn't any more to do with it."

With her last answer the girl had begun to frown at what must have been the somewhat unusual questions. "Are you speaking about any particular land or are you asking about the procedures in general?"

Owen decided to plunge ahead. "A particular area of land, ma'am."

"And it is?" The girl's brows arched as if giving support to the question in her voice.

"The range land on the south face of the Snowy Mountains."

The response was not positive nor was it negative. Instead, it was a puzzled wrinkle in her forehead and a pursing of her finely shaped mouth. Owen read her reaction as being an innocent lack of information. There certainly was no guilty masking of knowledge, nor was there a sign that she even recognized the area he mentioned.

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Encouraged, Owen tried to carry the matter a bit further. "Ma'am, if you have maps of the Snowys, I could show you the exact area I'd like to ask about."

Owen's broad open face, and his easy smile, brought an offer of assistance. "Maps? I'd say we have maps. Hundreds and hundreds of them. The stage brings in boxes of them every week or so. The surveyors keep sending in their notes and the people in Denver keep making maps. But Mister Fraser is busy with the crews, I'm busy with the deeds and the applications, so the maps just haven't been signed in properly and they just keep piling up."

Indicating other papers heaped near the back of the office, she shrugged an apology. "As the applications are approved, I have to sort through that mess, find the map I need and then prepare the deed. I know it looks awfully disorganized but its the best we can do. Mister Fraser says there isn't money for more office help and that his boss keeps ordering him to survey more land. So all the papers just keep piling up. The worst part of it is that there could be some terrible mistakes about who owns what and even about the surveys."

"You mean there may be a map of the Snowy range in there," said Owen looking at the stack of rolled papers, "but the only way to find it is to sort through all of that?"

"I'm afraid that's the way it is," she sighed looking at him with a helpless shrug.

"Maybe I could help," offered Anse. "At school the teacher always said I was quick with my reading and tracing work. And..." turning red in the face and stammering a bit, he added, "I wouldn't mind workin' here...I mean I wouldn't mind helpin' sort through them rolls."

"Well, I could tend to other business for a spell," said Owen. "If it's alright with you Miss, Anse here couldn't do any harm by looking, at least until I come back."

"Okay by me," she smiled. Closing her inkwell, she stepped down from her stool and headed for the pile of maps. Owen caught Anse by the sleeve and spoke to him softly. "No mention just yet of any names, Anse, especially Paskil. If she asks questions, tell her as little as possible. Understand?"

Anse, his eyes on the girl, nodded. "Sure, Owen. No names and jest look fer a map of the Snowy Mountains."

As he stepped through the door, Owen looked back and, recognizing the eternal work of nature in action, shook his head. The two young

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people were already unrolling papers and carrying them to the large unoccupied wooden desk.

Back on the boardwalk, Owen turned down the street in the direction of the bank they had passed on the way in. It had been years since he had been in the town, and he was surprised at how it had grown. Two story brick buildings and older wooden buildings formed almost solid walls on both sides of the street. A number of the buildings had overhangs which protected against snow, rain and sun. The walkway was even, solid and well maintained.

The gravel street made Owen think of Denver where he had last seen such an improvement. He recalled how the street in front of the Miners Emporium, a beehive of activity in Denver, had been paved for a distance with bricks. All that seemed like it was more than a year ago and more than a few hundred miles away.

He paused for a few moments to look in the display window of a store which sold dry goods, clothing and boasted by way of a hand lettered sign that "Alterations" were free. Part of the window display was a table, sewing materials, and, on the end of the table, a merry red hat with a wide, floppy brim. It fairly blazed in the bright sun. Owen promised himself that he would return to the store and buy the hat for Jane. In his mind's eye he could see her laughing face, and he could imagine how she would look, peeking out from under the dashing hat brim. He also told himself that a tin of good pipe tobacco would be just the ticket for Amos.

Owen knew that such small gifts would be paltry pay for the debt he owed to Jane and Amos. Jane had nursed him back to health from a near fatal gunshot wound and then hauled him to safety when a group of killers tried to seek him out. Amos, always steady and strong, had supported his pursuit of the weasel-like killer, Serril, through the Colorado high country. Yet, both Jane and Amos would be pleased with the gifts and would accept them in the spirit in which they were given.

The memory glimpses of his friends were pleasant, and Owen hoped that the promises of getting together again would not simply fade away as mere words, the way such things often do. The determination to write to Jane and Amos reminded him that before he could think about reunions, he had to clear up present troubles. His immediate duty was to his neighbors.

A short walk on past the dry goods store brought Owen to the Territorial Bank. A solid looking building, it seemed designed to overpower its neighbors. The building looked out upon the street with a

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high, solid, dark red brick exterior. Its wide door was recessed back from the front wall and elevated above street level by three steps made from broad slabs of stone. Adding a bold note of stability and strength were two round, grey columns of granite, one guarding each side of the entryway.

Inside, the lobby was surrounded by a horseshoe shaped counter. Atop the counter a stout wooden picket partition rose to the high ceiling and served to separate the lobby from the remainder of the bank. Three customer service windows were located in the middle of the horseshoe, facing the customers as they entered the lobby. Appropriately placed in the heart of the institution, the windows were the places where money was received and money was paid. The transactions took place over long green blotters which were carefully placed so that half extended into the bank's area and half extended into the lobby area. Each window was equipped with an inkwell, an ink pen and a small hand blotter.

At the end of the counter on one leg of the horseshoe, there were ink and blotter equipped stations where customers could, either before or after a transaction, stand, calculate, and ponder the wisdom of what they had done or were about to do. On the opposing leg of the horseshoe a wooden door provided access to the innards of the bank, the clerks, the recording secretaries, officers, and a great black steel safe which had the place of honor in the middle of the back wall in close view of the president of the institution.

Owen approached an unoccupied clerk who was presiding over the center customer window. To the brisk, professional, "Yes sir?" Owen replied, "I'd like to speak to someone who would remember recently cashing a draft for five hundred dollars."

"Um," the request elevated the clerk's attention beyond that which he could have given to routine business. "That's a sizeable draft, sir."

Sizing up the tall, broad shouldered man with the broad face, high cheekbones, and intense grey eyes, the paying and receiving clerk considered the request again, adjusted his black cuff protectors, and decided higher level authority was required. "Just a moment, sir."

In a moment he reappeared at the elbow of a grey haired, grey suited, string tied man, who spoke with the quiet assurance of one who was accustomed to giving orders and having them followed. Owen was again appraised, from his tall McKibbon to his boots.

From under a pencil thin moustache, the words came through the window, "You had a question about a draft, I believe?"

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"Yes, a draft for five hundred dollars which I believe was cashed here."

"And what is your interest in that transaction, may I ask?"

"The man who cashed it tried to kill me."

The directness of the response shattered most of the rigid official attitude. The bank officer involuntarily took a short step backward, brushing into the clerk whose eyes were wide and whose cuff protectors were suddenly receiving some very nervous adjustments.

"Tried to...Well, I must say.." the bank officer struggled to collect himself. Searching for words, he repeated the fact as a question. "He tried to kill you? Did you...I mean, what did you do?"

"I shot him."

"You...is he...?"

"Dead?" said Owen with a level stare. "Yes, he's quite dead and buried in the mountains south of here."

"Well.." again the flat, matter of fact reply jarred the men behind the counter. Eyeing Owen's big Navy colt, the bank officer hesitated. "What did you want to know about the transaction?"

"I'd like to know any names that were on the draft."

Recovering and beginning to realize that the tall man in front of him was in truth merely seeking information, the bank officer, began to find official words again. "I see. Well, that information would have been on the draft itself. That is, the name of the bank and the name of the person or company drawing the money would have been on the form itself. But I'm afraid it's no longer here. We would have sent it to the corresponding bank so they would pay us the money we paid for them."

"What you're saying is that this bank is really just cashing the draft to get back the money it paid out?" asked Owen.

"Why yes, that's basically correct," nodded the bank officer.

"Then you can help me," smiled Owen, "because you can tell me where you sent the draft for payment."

"That's bank business, and I'm afraid we have a rule against giving out that kind of information," said the thin moustache.

Placing his hands on the counter and leaning toward the window, Owen persisted. "I suppose that's understandable, in normal cases." His voice became one slight degree more insistent, "But this isn't a normal case. I'm sure you would agree with that. Now I would very much like to have the name and address of that bank. As I've already explained, the man who drew five hundred dollars from you on that draft won't care a

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whit if I track down the name of the people who ordered you to pay him money."

Before the bank official or the paying and receiving clerk could respond or march another step backward, there was another intervention. This was in the person of an elderly man in a rumpled black suit. If the bank official and the paying and receiving clerk had been startled by Owen and his demands, they were respectfully scared out of their wits by the intervening person.

"What the blazes is going on here," he snapped.

"This man," began the official from under the thin line of hair on his upper lip, "is asking about a draft which was cashed here recently."

"What draft, man, what draft,?" demanded the intervenor sharply."

"I believe you saw it last week, Mister Tiswell. It was for five hundred dollars."

Tiswell looked at Owen. "I suppose you've got another one. Well I ain't got my money back from the first one, and..."

Owen interrupted, "No. I am not here to cash a draft. As I just explained, the man who was here and who cashed the draft for five hundred dollars is dead and buried. I'm trying to find out who he is and why he tried to kill me."

Tiswell's birdlike little eyes fired immediately with interest. "You say dead. Who did the killing?"

"I did," replied Owen, returning the banker's curious stare.

Tiswell, showing no fear or apprehension whatever, looked Owen up and down and looked again into the level grey eyes. "Yes. I can believe that. That's one customer that was looking to be killed and I judged it would take some doing to put him under. You look like the man for the job. Yes, he was a bad one alright, and not from these parts either."

Looking at his two nervous employee, Tiswell scolded them, "Oh, get out of the way. Get back to work both of you." Then looking at Owen and changing his tone he asked, "Got a few minutes to come in tell me what it is you're after."

A few moments later, Owen was seated in a chair facing Abner Tiswell, the president of the Territorial Bank. Owen gave the banker his name and explained in general terms how the man had tried to bushwhack him and how he had received a bullet in the heart for his effort.

Tiswell listened closely. He nodded with approval when he heard the account to the shooting. "I can spot a paid gun a mile away, and he was a

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good one," said Tiswell in his old cracking voice. "But he was from back east, somewhere. I spotted that right off."

Then looking hard at Owen, the banker, who was clearly not one to beat around the bush, asked, "Why in blazes would he be out after you?" Before Owen could answer that question, Tiswell asked another. "Where did you say your ranch was, Bannack?"

"I hadn't said that, but there's no reason to dance around it," replied Owen, "My place is down on the south side of the Little Snowys, on what most people call the Ketchel range."

Tiswell's interest in Owen jumped a notch. The banker leaned forward in his chair and not in the manner of asking a question, he spoke almost to himself. "Yes. That's the country over the mountains from Lewistown, ain't that so?"

"That's so," agreed Owen. He found himself drawn to the feisty old banker. Tiswell was a tough bird of the old school, but after watching him while the story of the shooting was being told and after listening to his questions, Owen instinctively felt the man was open, honest and trustworthy.

Tiswell, ruffling his snow white hair with a red knobby hand, asked, "You didn't ride all the way up here to the big town to ask after a bushwhacker did you?"

"No," agreed Owen, smiling at the old man's cunning, "not entirely. I had a couple of other reasons. One of them involves your bank."

Frowning, Tiswell showed by his expression, that the answer was not one he had expected. "What's that?"

Owen pulled the four hundred forty three dollars from his jacket pocket and tossed them on Tiswell's desk. "My neighbors decided that this money ought to go back to where it started. That's the shooter's roll. We found it in his money belt."

"Knowing how you ranchers think, I'll bet you're making a deposit into escrow," cackled Tiswell, a toothless grin splitting his face.

"I don't know about escrow," admitted Owen, "that's your term, but will you take it as some kind of deposit until this thing is run to ground?"

"Sure," said Tiswell, shaking his head at the simple, direct honesty with which he was so familiar. Looking out at the working area of the bank he called out, "DeHugh, come over here."

The clerk who had first greeted Owen almost leaped to the desk. "Here," said Tiswell, "open an account in the name of," Tiswell paused for an instant, cackled a dry cackle, then went on, "the Snowy Mountain Rangers. Make a signature card for Mister Owen Bannack."

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Tiswell waved the clerk away and turned back to Owen, "Now, that you're a customer, Bannack, tell me what really brought you to town."

Laughing gently at the old man's casual handling of the deposit and the naming of his neighbors, Owen nodded, "Fair enough. I do want to try and run down the name of that shooter who tried to pot me."

Tiswell gave his new customer a direct look, "I'll make inquiries. Fair enough?"

"Couldn't ask for more," agreed Owen. "This may help." With that he pulled the note from his pocket and laid it in front of Tiswell. "That fell out of the money belt. I guess we'd also like to put a name to those initials since it seems pretty clear he's the one who bought the bushwhacker."

"Eastern and Central," muttered Tiswell, "the name doesn't ring a bell, but I'll add that to my looking into list."

Accepting an offer of coffee, and finding more and more that he was drawn to old Tiswell, Owen laid out the story of the land grab and the trouble it had stirred up. He passed over the details of his part and his recent return to the area.

Owen was taken by surprise when Tiswell leaned back in his tilt chair and ask bluntly, "How many of those coyotes did you catch up with on your sashay down to Colorado?"

Pleased with himself for having been able to take Owen by surprise, the old banker grinned another of his toothless grins. "Don't look so surprised. We get news up here, and we've heard about the raiders and about how you were sent out to introduce `em to an honest rope."

"That was a couple of years ago," said Owen sipping at his coffee. "I'm surprised anyone here would remember any of that."

"A man in my business hears more than you might expect, especially when we make loans and the payback depends on whether a rancher stays or goes and lives or dies. Yes, it pays to have information. Besides, I keep in touch with one of your town's leading citizens."

"Who is?" asked Owen?

"Pen. Penelope Hogan. She's a fine woman," said Tiswell solemnly, "and a fine businessman." He added, "and she's high on you, Bannack. The last time she was up here she sat where you're sitting now and put some pretty hard words on me about helping out with some information. She also went on about how she hoped you would be returning soon. That was shortly after all that business started about the land and the commission and all."

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"Since you've known about the problem down there, have you talked to Fraser?" asked Owen.

"Oh sure, I talked to him, for all the good it did. He's in and out and busy with his surveying. He promised to look into the whole thing and get back to me, but I think he forgot. I hounded him so I could get some information for Pen, but I haven't had any luck even catching up with him, let alone getting him to lite long enough to talk. I had no idea that things had gone as far as they have or I'd have sent out a war party and had him brought in, tied if necessary."

Tiswell was apologetic over his failure to get information from the Commissioner. However, his sharp tongue was not long at rest. "It sounds to me like there's a war brewing down in your country, Bannack. When that kind of thing happens, good people can get killed. We need to get busy and put a halter on this thing."

Seeing DeHugh hovering nearby, Tiswell called him over and took the small white card the man handed him. "Sign here," he ordered.

Owen did as he was told. Tiswell took the card, handed it back to the clerk. He then called to the bank officer who had been called to the window by DeHugh. To both of the men he said, "I want a search made of our accounts ledger and our correspondence file to determine if we have anything where the name Eastern and Central appears. It sounds to me like a company of some kind."

"That'll take some time, Mister Tiswell," the officer reminded him.

"I know, I know," snapped the old banker, "but you'll have to find the time. Does the name strike a bell with either of you?"

The grey suited officer wrinkled his lip and looked thoughtfully up at the ceiling as he repeated the name. "Eastern and Central. Do we know the nature of their business?"

"Not yet, but I aim to find out," snapped Tiswell. "I want this done pronto. Understood?"

Almost in chorus their "yes sir," came back to their employer. Marching off they busied themselves in conversation over a large wooden file cabinet.

Swiveling back to face Owen directly, Tiswell held up the Eastern and Central note and asked, "Mind if I keep this for the time being?"

"I have the feeling it'll get more attention in your hands than in mine," said Owen.

"We'll see," replied Tiswell, opening his desk drawer and dropping the note inside. "Now, Bannack," he continued in his take charge, snappish way, "I think it's important that you get them long legs going

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and find Commissioner Fraser wherever he is. The fact that this snake, what's his name?"

"Paskil."

"Yes, Paskil. The fact that he has been making his move by giving some kind of notice and has been talking about survey people is alarming." Showing his impatience, the old banker asked, "You got a good horse?"

"The best."

"Then get cracking. Talk to Maudee, the girl in his office, and find out where Fraser's supposed to be. Go after him and get your answers. The man hops from one place to another like a flea on a hot day, so have Maudee give you the entire list of places he might have got himself off to."

Rising, Owen took his leave of the crusty old banker. "Thanks for everything. I'll stop back here as soon as I've talked to Fraser."

"Nail him down, Bannack. Nail his nervous, flea hopping hide to a tree and make him give you some answers. He isn't on the wrong side of anything, he's just a government runaround."

Feeling the urgency of Tiswell's words, Owen quickly made his way back to the Land Office. There he found Anse and Maudee busily unrolling maps, reading legends on maps, then rerolling maps. Owen explained that he needed to talk to Fraser immediately.

Maudee listened and without hesitation took a pad of paper and began writing. Owen suspected that her smiling cooperation was not so much the result of his reference to Tiswell as it was to the presence of Anse.

"I'm pretty sure he'll be at one of these three places, Mister Bannack," she said, handing him the note. Seeing that he hadn't expected her to know his name, she explained. "Oh, Anse, told me your name. He said you were the leader of a rancher's association. I think it's wonderful how the fathers are planning on parceling some of their range land off to their sons."

Owen, understanding that Anse had given her that as a cover story, threw a quick look at the young man whose eyes were riveted on Maudee. Then, returning his attention to the girl, he thanked her for the list of names and directions. "If the Commissioner should come back before we see him, would you ask him to drop by the bank and see Mister Tiswell?"

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She agreed to his request, and moments later Owen was back in the saddle headed out of town. Anse was with him, in body, but the young man's mind was still back in the office of the Land Commissioner.

"I didn't know your dad was dividing up his spread," said Owen.

"Dividing up...? Oh, shucks, Owen," stammered a red faced Anse, "that was just a shady story. Yuh told me not to..."

"Give out names?" asked Owen, as a smile began spreading across his face.

"Names?...Oh, I..."

Breaking into a laugh, Owen excused the young man, "Anse, from what I saw of Maudee, I'd have to say I understand. By golly, she's enough to make a man want to take up the land office business."

In a more serious tone, Owen asked, "Any luck finding the maps of our area?"

"None. There were maps of the land around Lewistown, and Spring Creek, but none for the south slopes range land at all. As a matter of fact, Owen, I didn't see any maps of the Musselshell river bottoms either. I kinda kept my eyes open fer them because my brother and I have been talkin' about lookin' fer somethin' to settle on down that way."

"You know the river meanders all over down there. Could you tell if the maps were missing for the river valley itself or for land along the river?"

"Well, I really couldn't tell that much. But it did seem that there was a whole strip that I didn't see maps for."

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Owen and Anse, following Maudee's directions, took what she had called the "River Road." It took them through a series of low even hills which rose and fell before them like so many ripples on a pond.

After a time, the roadway and the surrounding countryside became a long, even, upward incline. Stands of scrub pine thickened and began crowding closer and ever closer until the road ahead of them seemed to draw to a sharp point and disappear in the trees. Then, after the road had taken a last upward run, it abruptly seemed to fall off the edge of the horizon. The riders pulled to a stop at the crest of the hill they had been climbing and looked down at the prospect which lay before them.

At their feet they saw the wide valley of the Missouri River. A half dozen miles across and reaching as far as they could see in both directions, lay the deep, rough cut, furrow which the river had carved through the plains. The sides of the great, long basin were a series of deep, tree covered ravines, cut out of the rocks and soil by the never yielding power of the flowing water of the Missouri. From the faraway blue tinted horizon, from the closer, jagged edges of the ravines, from the road which descended the hillside, their eyes were irresistibly drawn down, down to the great river itself.

To their distant eyes, the river appeared motionless, a wide silver ribbon laid in broad, sweeping arcs along the valley floor. Yet, even from their station high above the water's edge, they could sense the power and the strength of the river's current as it cut its way into the plains and swept ever and endlessly toward an even mightier river and the faraway ocean.

"Wow," was all Anse could manage to say.

"A tad bit bigger than Spring Creek," observed Owen.

"It must take a lot of Ketchel Creeks and Spring Creeks to make that," said Anse, shaking his head in wonder. "I'd heard of the river, but there ain't nuthin' like seein' it."

"I've seen it a couple of time," agreed Owen, "but each time it's a surprise. It always seems wider and bigger than I remember. It's quite a sight."

Then looking down the switchbacks in the road to the river's edge, Anse asked, "Is that the ferry, Maudee told us we'd find?"

"I think so, but I guess the only way to find out is to get ourselves down there," suggested Owen, as he headed Cocoa down the road toward the river.

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After working their way down the dozen or so left elbow and as many right elbow joints in the road, they found themselves on a wide gently sloping beach of mud and powder fine sand. Before them rested the ferry.

The Ribbley Ferry was unlike any other river crossing system anywhere on the Missouri. Taking its name from its builder, owner, and operator, the ferry had been making its watery journeys for as long as anyone could remember, and during that time, both the ferry and the owner had acquired a lively reputation.

Known to everyone who lived in the area and to everyone who had ever crossed the river on his platform as "Hi Shot Ribbley," the proprietor of the ferry was as old as the river. He was also known to be strongly independent. He ran the ferry when it suited him, and he could not be forced, paid or otherwise persuaded to cross when he chose not to be open for business.

As cantankerous as he was, Hi Shot Ribbley had a strong sense of what was good for business and what was not. Therefore his growling and snappish attitude seldom was a refusal to transport men, horses and wagons across the river. He also had set fees for his service. Ten cents for man, woman, child or horse, and fifty cents for a wagon, buggy or stage. No exceptions. Fees were paid to Ribbley himself before any person, beast or rig went on board.

Proclaiming himself to be a "Barge Captain," Hi Shot Ribbley always wore a black cap with a short, narrow shiny bill, and, in cool weather, he usually wore a square rigged black coat. At all times, Ribbley walked about in a giant size pair of oil slickered, canvas boots.

At no time had any person seen, Hi Shot Ribbley without his gunbelt, filled with unbelievably large and very menacing .50 caliber cartridges. In the holster was a monster of a revolver. In fact, it was the oversized revolver which had led to the name "Hi Shot."

Holding the huge revolver over his head, Ribbley always fired one shot upon leaving for the far shore. He repeated the process each time he embarked for the return trip. The shot served a number of purposes. It warned the passengers, many of whom were already white with fear, to brace themselves and hold on. The shot made the beginning of a crossing official, and for some unknown reason that was important to Ribbley. The remaining, and critical, purpose of the firing of the revolver was to set the ferry platform in motion.

The ferry system consisted of an arrangement of ropes and the floating platform. The "Barge," as Ribbley called it, was made of two

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layers of rough hewn timbers bolted and bound together by thick twisted wires. The barge was long enough to accommodate the largest freight wagon and wide enough to carry the wagon's unhitched team alongside. Teams were always unhitched, even from small buggies or spring wagons. According to one story, the unhitching rule came about because an entire stage with passengers had once gone into the river when the team bolted at the sound of Ribbley's .50 caliber signal.

The barge was moved from one river bank to the other by its tow rope. Almost the size of a man's arm, the rope was made from a half dozen smaller ropes twisted together into a cable, tied and spliced together in an ingenious way Ribbley had learned in some faraway place an untold number of years before he came to the river. The rope reached across the river and back again in complete loop. However, the loop was not unbroken. It had been severed and the cut ends tied, one to each end of the barge. The result was a continuous, long tow rope with the barge tied into the circuit.

A pulley, larger than a wagon wheel, had been fastened to a wagonbox size granite stone on the far side of the river. The rope passed around that pulley on that side and around the Ribbley hub on the other.

The Ribbley hub was the heart and key of the ferry system. It consisted of an enormous douglas fir planted and firmly embedded in the ground. Above the ground, higher than the head of a tall mule, a platform had been constructed around the heavy pole. The platform encircled a giant hub which was made to turn around the pole which was its axle.

The ferry rope had been wrapped more than a dozen times around the hub such that when the hub turned one way the rope would unwind from the bottom and wind onto the top. Conversely, when the hub turned the other way the rope would wind up from the bottom and unwind from the top. The number of coils on the hub never changed, and the wraps around the hub kept the rope from slipping. Thus, as the hub turned one way, the ferry barge would be drawn across the river, when the turn of the hub was reversed, the ferry would be drawn back across the river.

The power for the turning of the hub was provided by two mules. Hitched to the underside of the big hub, they pulled it round and round in one direction until the ferry had completed its passage. For the return trip, the mules simply reversed their direction.

It was Ribbley's hi shot which started the mules on their circular journey. A second shot by Ribbley when the barge arrived at the far shore would stop them. Another shot would start them again and a fourth shot would stop them again, signaling the end of a round trip. A mule

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tender would reverse the hitching each time while Ribbley tended the barge and the loading and unloading of horses and wagons.

It was generally understood among frequent users of the ferry that the mules and Ribbley were engaged in a never ending disagreement. The difficulty was with the exact moment of starting and stopping. The mules simply had their own notion of when to start and when to stop. More often than not, they either anticipated the pistol shot and started early, or they waited a mule's second or two before they would start. The result was an unexpected jolt at the beginning of the trip and either a hard landing or a landing too far from the shore on the return.

Ribbley had tried everything to adjust for the difficulty, but everything failed. The trouble was he could not guess when the mules would obey the pistol shot and when they would add or subtract a few seconds. He cursed, he threatened, he talked to them, he tried silence. Nothing worked. The mules were and had always been the one rough spot in the Ribbley ferry.

As Owen and Anse rode down to the edge of water and stopped at the barrier strung across the entryway to the barge, Ribbley was at the mules again. Walking around the platform and dabbing axle grease to the hub he called down to them as they stood below, "Two times, yuh stopped short. That means river water in my boots. River on them folks that had to wade knee deep to shore. Short. That's what it is today. Short. Yuh're cheatin' me outa a full trip. I won't have no more of it. Yuh hear? No more of yuhr short trips."

The mules heard. They had heard it a thousand times. The tall black mule with a lop ear, looked up at the platform above his head and wrinkled his muzzle. His companion, fat for a mule but amazingly strong, leaned forward a bit in the harness. His weight caused the hub to move a few inches and the movement brought a howl from Ribbley.

"Ha. I knowed yuh might try that. I was waitin' fer it. Tryin' to throw me while I'm holdin' this grease paddle. Well, it didn't work, yuh old rip. I hope we have a thousand more crossin's today. A thousand. Then we'll see about short trips."

The mules, who seldom pulled for more than a dozen crossings a day, listened or didn't listen. And it is certain, that if they could have spoken, they would have given Ribbley a good piece of their minds. As it was, they would have their say, in their way, on the next trip.

Ribbley saw the two men, but continued working on his greasing chore until he was satisfied with it. Then he climbed down the ladder, stowed the grease bucket in a small shed, and walked down to the barge.

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"Lookin' to cross the river, I suppose," he growled at them as he growled at all his customers.

"If you're making a trip, yes," replied Owen.

"Of course, I'm makin' a trip," grumbled Ribbley. "Yuhr here, yuh want to cross the river, and I run the ferry, so I'm makin' a trip."

Reaching for the barrier latch, Ribbley held out his hand. "Forty cents," he demanded.

After the fare was paid, the matter of getting the horses boarded became the task at hand. Ordinarily, the animals, and the men too, could have simply walked onto the barge across the ramp which was provided. However, on this day, the independence of the mules had resulted in an awkward placement of the floating platform. It was a full six feet from the shore.

When wagons were faced with that kind of difficulty, Ribbley's mule tender would lead the mules a few steps on their circular path, and the problem would be corrected. When Ribbley was on the far shore, he would wave a command for more work by the mules and the little pull would be accomplished in short order. With horses only it was different. Ribbley took the position that if men and horses could not splash their way aboard, they didn't need to make the trip. After the crossing, the passengers would have no other course open except to splash ashore, and with no sympathy from Ribbley.

Accordingly, Owen urged Cocoa to wade out and make the awkward hop onto the platform. Anse followed suit, with a great deal more splashing, and the boarding was completed.

Ribbley soon joined them. After fastening the barrier, Ribbley clumped the length of the barge to a small elevated station which he occupied as the barge captain. After looking the craft over from one end to the other and after giving the mules an especially hard look, Ribbley raised the signal revolver over his skipper's cap and let fire.

The crashing roar of the .50 caliber was deafening. Even Cocoa, who was disciplined to expect almost anything and to remain steady in all circumstances, almost reared. Owen calmed him with a quiet word and the horse contented himself with staring with large round eyes at the surrounding water. Anse's horse did manage a small leap, but it too was quickly subdued.

The barge did not move. It remained steady in the water. Ribbley threw a fiery look at the mules. After a moment, the black mule twitched his lop ear, and if that were the true signal, they both leaned into their collars and with an abrupt but firm jolt the crossing began.

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Almost immediately, the Missouri applied the force of its current to the barge. The circular rope yielded and the barge swung downstream. As the barge steadily moved farther and farther from the shore, the water of the great river pressed with greater strength on the platform which now seemed small indeed. The rope continued to yield and stretch, but it held firm and steady as the curving voyage continued.

As ingenious as the Ribbley system was, it was slow. The trips across the river could have been speeded up by a larger hub, perhaps by faster mules. The only fact of importance was that Hi Shot Ribbley was not concerned about such things. In his mind the crossing was properly done in just the way he was doing it. Those who objected could ride two days upriver to Canyon Ferry and pay more money for the crossing, or they could swim for all Ribbley cared.

Owen, after satisfying himself that the horses were settled down, handed Cocoa's reins to Anse and walked forward to where Ribbley stood. The Captain was peering up and down the river and at the far shore.

"It looks like the river may be up a bit," Owen suggested.

Ribbley gave him a quick sharp look. Seldom did the farmers, the ranchers, or the wagon drivers he ferried ever do anything more than complain or worry about the strength of the rope or the floating ability of the barge. As a river man, Ribbley spent his life watching the water, studying the current, minding his barge and his ropes. Owen's casual observation brought something less than the usual growl.

"A bit," Ribbley admitted about the river.

"You'll be getting trees and such with the first good rain," said Owen, looking at a clump of branches which bobbed down the river and passed downstream ahead of the barge.

Ribbley looked again at his passenger. "Yep. In a month or so, I'll need a scout up there." He nodded at the high ridgeline which curved outward toward the river. Located upstream, it made an obvious lookout point for large objects coming down the river. "A man with sharp eyes and a good glass can see some of the big stuff, but some is bound to get by. Crossin' then ain't worth hardly any amount of money."

Ribbley was quiet for a moment, but then he continued with short grunting comments about the river and the ferry. "Mud's gettin' thicker every day. Much thicker and yuh'll be able to walk across the damn river. Them mules is gettin' slower every day. It may be the grain, yuh can't buy good grain this time of year." Then Ribbley directed a question at his

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passenger, the man who seemed to have a sense for the ways of the river. "Yuh ever been a river man?"

When Owen shook his head no, Ribbley tried another guess. "Sea then?"

"No, I'm afraid not. But I've always had a hankering to see the ocean. It must be quite a sight."

"That's a little drippity of a word for water that covers most of the world." Then in a more reflective way he added, "It's a whole world heap different from this damn muddy little mountain seep."

Owen was surprised to hear the Missouri referred to as a "muddy little mountain seep," but he let the remark pass. As Ribbley talked, Owen noticed the old man was wearing a seaman's wide striped pullover shirt and that the blazingly clean, polished brass buttons on the square cut coat had anchor engravings. Owen couldn't help but wonder where the man came from and why he had stopped on the Missouri River to build and operate a ferry. But looking at the bright blue eyes under the bill of the cap, Owen realized they had seen sights he would never see and that the old sailor's reasons would probably always remain his own.

"I've got a friend who owns some wagons and teams and works at the freighting business," began Owen easily, "but times are pretty tough in the Colorado gold fields. He's thinking of moving his operaion up this way. Is there a lot of hauling in these parts?"

"Funny yuh should ask," grunted Ribbley, "there's been a need fer haulers around here. On some days, there's a string of wagons on both sides of the river. Sometimes the wagons is needed so bad, they offload and let goods sit on the bank until we can get to movin' `em across the river. A good freight man could arrange to pick `em up and carry `em into town. Then too, people talk to me about puttin' on another barge. If it was done right, every time one barge went to one side another would go the other direction. Yep, there's some things in the way of haulin' and totin' that could be done around here. There's been calls fer timber haulin' with all the buildin' in Great Falls, there's been farmer's complainin' about gettin' crops to town. I'd say there was a need fer some good freight men hereabouts. Yuhr friend got any mules he wants to get shut of?"

Owen noticed that Ribbley was looking back at the riverbank they had left. Even though Ribbley was a riverman and probably a former sailor, Owen recognized the bluff in the man's voice. Owen would have bet his hat that Ribbley wouldn't have parted with either of the mules for a dozen substitutes.

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Changing the subject, Owen asked, "I'm looking to talk to a man named Fraser. He's the land Commissioner from Great Falls. I was told he headed this way yesterday or the day before."

It was clearly a question, yet old Ribbley, still looking at the river seemed not to have heard or not to have understood it as a question. After a very long moment, Ribbley looked full, and square at Owen.

"Yep, I seen yuhr man. Yesterday I hauled him to the port bank. I know it was yuhr man because he had a small crew of men with him. One was fiddlin' with a transit that he had taken out of its box. A damn fool thing to do. A fine instrument like that could have gotten wet or been dropped. Yes sir, an instrument like that needs carin' for. It kinda put me in mind of my old sextant. I always kept it locked tight and in paddin'. Sightin' and takin' positions with that was the ticket to a straightaway passage."

Owen concluded that the approaching shore was the "port bank." The comment about the surveying crew nailed it down that Fraser was not far ahead. Given the additional fact that Maudee's note said surveying work was scheduled in the area just across the river gave Owen some hope that he would be able to locate the land commissioner soon.

Ribbley spat with contempt into the water. "One of the birds with yuhr surveyor said they were fixin' to open up territory up and down the river to settlement. Pretty soon the place'll be crawlin' with people."

"That'd make for more ferrying business," mused Owen, "but then ferrying isn't everything I suppose."

"Ain't no concern of mine," shrugged Ribbley. "I'm only good fer a few more years. Mobs of people mean bridges." As if he expected Owen to disagree, Ribbley spoke more insistently, "Yes sir. You'll see the day there'll be a bridge across this river. A bridge, I say. Times's is changin' on all the rivers. Yep," he spat again, "the bilge is gettin' thicker everywhere. Ain't no place a man can set a course without havin' to tack fer the traffic."

Owen didn't understand everything that Ribbley was saying, but he understood the sense of the old man's feelings. If "tacking" meant changing direction, Owen felt that he had been doing more of that than he really wanted to do. Thinking of "tacking" because of Paskil, made Owen suddenly anxious to get across the river and made him want to press matters forward to a solution.

As the "port bank" approached, and the barge floated its way out of the current into easier water, Ribbley gave a nod to Owen and suggested,

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"Have that freighter man yuh know come by. Could be I might set him onto some business."

With that almost friendly invitation, Ribbley turned back to business. Watching the shore approach, Ribbley pulled the giant .50 caliber pistol from his holster and made ready to fire off the halt signal.

Owen, being more than willing to get out of the immediate blast area, retreated back to where Anse waited with the horses. Owen guessed that Ribbley would try and outguess the mules by holding off on the shot for a few extra seconds, but whatever happened, he thought it best to be ready for the unexpected.

The pistol went up. The barge stopped, then the shot roared out across the river valley. But the barge had stopped an instant before the shot had been fired. The mules had outguessed Ribbley and the barge bobbed in the water a short wading distance from the "port bank."

Ribbley, throwing dark glances across the river, removed the barrier. Owen and Anse led two very relieved horses off the barge and onto welcome, solid, dry earth. There, on the sandy beach where the ferry was supposed to dock, a wagon waited to make the return trip. The driver, who had raised a red flag to the top of wooden pole to signal his desire for transport, stood alongside his wagon, making ready to unhitch the team once the wagon had been backed onto the barge. The driver watched as Ribbley waved signals to the mule tender to bring the barge closer to shore, Owen and Anse swung up into their saddles waved to the waiting wagon driver and began their ride up out of the river valley. Moments later they heard the loud roar of Ribbley's pistol echo against the walls of the river breaks.

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The line rider who had given directions had been close in his estimate of where the survey party was working. It was less than an hour after they had broken camp that Owen and Anse rode up to a group of four men who were themselves closing their camp.

Three of the men were working at a deliberate pace. They were rolling their blankets, cleaning tin plates, and sacking up provisions. The fourth man was trying to do everything all at one time.

He scurried from tying a sack to the pack horse, to the fire where he pulled at the end irons which had supported the hanging rod. Finding them still warm, he abandoned the irons on the ground and fell to sanding out a tin coffee cup. His companions, apparently accustomed to his rushing about, totally ignored him and proceeded to break the camp in a routine orderly way.

As Owen and Anse rode up, the men suspended their work and watched until the visitors pulled to a halt a respectful distance away. Every man understood that it was not only bad manners but simply dangerous to ride into a strange camp uninvited. Coming only close enough to be heard in a strong talking voice, Owen called to them.

"Is this the government survey camp?"

"It is," answered the man who had been bustling about, "what can we do for you?" Before Owen could answer the man continued, "Speak up, man, we haven't got all day to be here answering questions."

Speaking to him directly, Owen observed, "You must be Mister Fraser, the government land Commissioner."

"Yes. Yes, I am. Ride up a bit so we can talk and get on with your business." Then to avoid the chance of beginning a long conversation, he added, "The coffee's been finished and we've already packed all the eats."

"Thanks," replied Owen, riding closer. "Mind if I step down?"

Raising his hands, then dropping them to his side, Fraser gave a sigh and accepted the fact he was going to be interrupted. "I suppose it might even move things along. Yes. To be sure, step down...Mister ...?"

"Bannack."

"What can we do for you, Mister Bannack?" asked Fraser, as he began looking around the campsite, as though looking for chores which needed doing.

"I have some questions about some land and there seems to be a serious disagreement about the government's position on it."

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Nothing Owen had said seemed to have captured Fraser's attention. Tugging at the drawstring on his hat, the land commissioner still seemed distracted by the need to close out the camp. Looking at the others, who stood listening and watching, Fraser waved impatiently at them.

"There's no call for any of you to be standing around. Time's wasting. We're already behind schedule, and the government isn't paying you to stand around gaping. Let's pack it up men. Quickly now."

With shrugs and with shaking heads, the men turned back to their work. Anse, who had been not been raised to stand around while others were busy, stepped over to help the men tie their gear onto the pack animals.

"Now, Mister....? I'm sorry. Mister..."

"Bannack."

"Yes, Mister Bannack. As you can see, I have a crew of men here to supervise. We're trying to meet some deadlines. So if you could state your business, we could get about ours."

The crown of the surveyor's hat, indented on four sides, moved from side to side as the wearer looked about the camp. The eyes under the flat brim, darted around even while the man spoke. The drawstring which was pulled tight under the square chin, was tight against Fraser's ruddy cheeks.

The land commissioner's blue cloth coat was open, and the owner's hands periodically swept the flaps back as the hands settled firmly on the man's hips. Owen could see that under the coat Fraser wore a tan colored shirt with two large pockets, one on either side. The shirt pocket flaps were bent out of place by folded papers and round yellow pencils.

Everything about the commissioner suggested he was a man in a great rush. He constantly looked around. His legs were planted squarely and stiffly under him like rigid props. If his hands were not on his hips, they were fussing with the pencils in his shirt pockets or with unseen objects in the bulging coat pockets.

Owen realized that he was going to have to get Fraser's attention. Mere questions were not going to have that effect. Owen knew he was dealing with a man who had spent a lifetime deflecting questions while his mind raced around dealing with other subjects.

"Mister Fraser," Owen began, "I don't know why you are in such a hurry to break camp. There isn't any point in rushing. Especially since there won't be any surveying done today."

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"Yes. I know," Fraser began as he watched two of the men lift a wooden box up to be tied on one of the pack horses. "Easy with that transit, there," he called.

Turning back to Owen, he scowled. "Now...," he began. Then his eyes narrowed and he looked sharply at Owen. "What did you say about surveying, Bannack?"

Owen's grey eyes didn't waver, "I said there won't be any surveying today."

Fraser took a full step back and looked Owen up and down. The commissioner's hand tugged at the drawstring and loosened it ever so slightly. "Just what are you saying? Why will there be no surveying?"

"Mister Fraser," answered Owen, "There can't be any surveying today, at least if you intend to be a part of it. Perhaps your crew could go ahead without you, but you won't be a part of the work."

"What are you saying?" sputtered Fraser. His temper was clearly rising and his entire face began reddening to match his cheeks. "Who are you to come into my camp and began spouting such nonsense?"

"I'm a rancher whose ranch is threatened. And until you give me your complete attention and give me some straight answers, you aren't going anywhere."

"Why, I never heard of such a thing. You have no right whatever to threaten me this way. I won't have it."

Owen squatted down by the fire. He began poking at it and piling up the scattered ends of burnt wood. With a stick he raked hot coals together. His actions were those of a man who was building a new fire from an old one. Owen worked at his task slowly and carefully. It was as though he had forgotten the Fraser was standing only a few steps away.

"Think about it, Mister Fraser," Owen finally said. "You've already wasted a fair amount of time and we still haven't gotten to the subject. At the rate we're going, we might as well build up the fire and have some fresh coffee. I'll use my own makings," he added, as he stood and began to turn to where Cocoa stood nosing at the ground.

"Now just hold on," commanded Fraser. "You come riding into my camp and begin telling me I won't be doing any surveying today. Then you start talking about building a fire and brewing coffee. As casual as anything. What's going on, Bannack?"

"Simple, Mister Fraser," said Owen. "I have some questions. I've been told you are the only one with the answers. You and I are going to stay exactly where we are until you listen to me and stop fussing with a hundred other things, all of which can wait."

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"You and everyone," snapped Fraser, "have questions. I believe you said they were about a survey. Well, I don't have my maps here." Waving an impatient hand at the open land around the little hillside, Fraser asked, "How in blazes would I answer questions about your land without having the map and a full legal description? Even you must see how that would be impossible. Now be a good man and take your turn. If you will come to my office in Great Falls the day after tomorrow, I'll be glad to answer any of your questions."

Owen shrugged. "If you need your maps, we can ride back to town now. Either here or there, I mean to have some answers today."

"What gives you the right to make demands like this?" asked Fraser, again planting his hands on his hips.

"My right, Mister Fraser, comes from the fact that you, or your office, has made a very serious mistake. Because of something you have done, a lot of lives are at risk. Two men have already been killed and that may be just the beginning. Does that give me some kind of right to your attention?"

"Men killed?" Fraser was taken aback. His eyes widened and he tugged the drawstring on his surveyor's hat down until it sagged and hung loose. "Over a survey?" Fraser began to feel the full impact of what Owen had told him. The hurry up attitude dropped away and concern came in its place.

"Maybe we should have that coffee," Fraser said simply. "And we'll use my makings."

By the time the dented little pot had begun spurting coffee into the glass knob in the middle of its lid, Owen had described where the disputed land was located. He also told Fraser how he had been away and what the circumstances were when he arrived back on his range.

"You say this man, Paskil, claims to have in his possession, a commission from the government giving him title to the land?" asked Fraser as he poured steaming coffee for himself and for Owen.

"That's the story he's told everyone. But it's not a commission giving him outright ownership. As I hear it, he claims it gives him the right to survey the land and then pay the ranchers a handful of dollars for the title."

"Someone's standing on the wrong side of the transit," said Fraser. "I'm afraid this is bad news. Awfully bad news."

"Are you saying there is such a commission?" asked Owen.

"Yes and no."

"Yes and no," echoed Owen, obviously puzzled.

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"Sorry," smiled Fraser, "I guess that sounds pretty confusing. Let me explain. To begin with, you need to know that when the first survey was done in the central part of the territory, the men began working from the wrong point. I won't go off about township lines and such, but just imagine that there are twenty or thirty lines drawn east and west across the prairie. Then imagine that every sixth line is a major line and that every sixth one of them is a very major line. Well, the survey group from the Dakotas mistook a major line for a very major line. They were eighteen miles off on every map they made."

"You mean that because they took off on the wrong line, everything they did was off that much?"

"Something like that," nodded Fraser. "They couldn't correct it just by renumbering the lines on those maps. The clean paper surveyors back East, said it had to be redone."

"I guess I understand how a mistake like that needs to be corrected, but why does it affect the people who settled on the land?"

"It doesn't," replied Fraser. "As long as they come into the land office and file new, perfected claims before the new survey is done. If the survey is done first, then anyone can claim the property that has just been resurveyed."

"Then the ranchers who live there now, the folks who settled the land, only have to come to Great Falls and file their claims with your office?"

"Right, but remember they must do that before the new survey is done. That's critical. Once the resurvey is done and there are no claims filed, the first ones to file must be given the land, and the swampy part of the law is that the ones who have done the resurvey, have the right to file first."

Fraser was emphatic about the need for filing and he jambed his finger against his knee as he spoke. "File now, Bannack and there isn't a problem. Wait and you may lose your place."

"Do the ranchers all need to come to Great Falls to file, or can they sign a paper?" asked Owen.

"They can sign an affidavit. It has to describe the property according to the old survey and has to claim the land they live on in general terms so that their claim is automatically renewed after the resurvey. The affidavit also has to be signed before a Notary Public."

"I'm not sure there is such a person in Lewistown," mused Owen.

"I would guess you're headed back there now?" asked Fraser.

"As soon as we leave here."

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The others had completed their chores of packing and loading and had joined Owen and Fraser around the campfire. One of the men was a close match for Fraser. His hat, his string tied boots, and pockets filled with papers and pencils made it clear he was an official surveyor, probably the same as Fraser himself.

Of the two men with him, one was young, almost the age of Anse. His boyish, clean shaven face carried an almost continuous easy smile. He and Anse had found something of common interest and they talked in low tones between themselves, occasionally chuckling and grinning.

The third man was moody and silent. He stood to one side, keeping his thoughts to himself. His unkempt beard which grew up high on his face gave him a shaggy look and made his dark eyes seem moody, solitary and unfriendly. Though he stared almost continuously at the ground, he listened to Fraser and Owen, and absorbed their every word.

The Land Commissioner's embarrassment was obvious. "This whole thing is most unfortunate," he said, shaking his head. "And it is the fault of the government. At least part of it is. The commission this Paskil has gives him the right to do the resurvey. The way it's written it's easy for him to lie. I believe the paper uses the words 'unclaimed and resurveyed land.' That, along with some other government lingo, would confuse everyone and make his story seem straight enough."

Fraser's quick step habit and his manner of being busy took hold of him again, and he began pacing the ground around the rebuilt fire. He pulled one of the papers from his shirt pocket and scribbled on it as he walked. He mumbled to himself and at intervals began pulling again at the drawstring on his hat.

"Bannack, this is a sure enough problem. I aim to see that no damn maverick like Paskil uses the government or a government paper to grab the land others have settled on. Of course, we have to act according to the law or you and your neighbors stand to lose in the long run. If you'll trust me, I may be able to help."

"I talked to Tiswell, the banker. He said you'd do fine, if I could hold you down long enough to get your attention. Sure, I trust you."

Fraser smiled at the reference to Tiswell, "Yeah, I guess I do move around a bit. Kinda like a marker wheel man out-jumping a rattler. Like Mise there," he looked at the bearded man squatting by the fire. "And now that you mention Tiswell, I recollect that he asked me something about Lewistown, but I put the question out of my mind and I plumb forgot about it. That won't happen on this business again."

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Owen instinctively trusted the man. He did fidget, he was difficult to pin down, and he seemed to have a hundred things on his mind, but he was completely honest. Hearing him agree to help work things out was a great relief, but Owen also knew from the worried look he had seen on Fraser's face that it wouldn't be easy.

"What do you want me to do?" Owen asked.

"You and that young man hightail it back to Great Falls. I'll give you a note to my office assistant."

"Maudee?" asked Owen.

Anse and his companion stopped their side conversation and looked at Owen and Fraser. "We talked to her," Anse said quickly.

"Oh, you've met her?" asked Fraser. He then answered his own question. "Of course you did. She's the one who put you on my trail and gave you directions on how to track me down. Smart girl, but I'm surprised she was so cooperative."

Owen inclined his head toward Anse who found the need to hitch his gunbelt and kick at the ground, "I think he had something to do with making it a bit easier for her."

Fraser gave Anse a look and laughed, "I see what you mean. Okay, I'll give you a note and instruct her to ride with you to Lewistown. She is a Notary Public and has papers which can be filled out by you and the others. The three of you head straight out, get those affidavits signed and get them back here before Paskil starts his survey. I'll have everything ready so they can be filed immediately. Remember, time is important. If he even starts setting stakes and running lines ahead of you, it could be too late."

Fraser busied himself writing the promised note as Owen and Anse readied themselves for their return trip. Handing the note to Owen, Fraser offered a reminder. "Remember, Maudee must take her notary stamp. Make sure every settler puts down the date he first moved onto the land. And, Bannack...sorry about the rather poor beginning we had here today. I'll make up for it, and one last thing, get those affidavits here before Paskil starts setting survey stakes. Now ride, quickly!"

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Cocoa set a hard and fast pace. Although Anse's horse had a difficult time keeping up the pace, it gallantly held on. By taking the most direct line possible, they were back at Ribbley's well before noon.

Again they were fortunate to catch the barge just before it left the "port shore." After the pistol shot beginning and during the passage across the river, Ribbley engaged Owen in conversation and even asked his advice about some of the rigging on the barge. He had apparently decided that Owen was a natural river man, one to be trusted.

"I see that you and that young man washed out a river rat," grunted Ribbley.

"How's that?" asked Owen.

"Why, the last trip over that scurvy lookin' surveyor was waitin' fer a ride. He's only a hour ahead of yuh. But he'll be easy to catch. He had damn near kilt his horse beatin' yuh to the river. I suppose yuh're after him ain't yuh?"

Owen was surprised, but he didn't want to disappoint Ribbley. "I sure enough want to talk to him, but are we talking about the same one?"

"Has to be," said Ribbley shaking his head in agreement, "he was with that fussy Land Commissioner. I would have guessed he was the one yuh was looking fer. I had a notion to give him a shove overboard. If that fuzzy beard ever got full of river water and dirt, he'd sink like an eight pound cannon ball."

Owen was both relieved and puzzled. While he was glad to learn it wasn't Fraser or the young helper who had rushed to beat them to the ferry, he wondered why the man called Mise had done so. He also worried about Fraser and the others, but he couldn't ride back now. He somehow had the feeling he was in a race and that any delay could cost him and the others everything.

He and Anse were off the barge almost at the sound of Ribbley's arrival shot. The barge had jolted hard against the shore, and as they crossed the mud beach and started up the river road, they could hear the first words of another lecture to the mules.

When they came to the edge of Great Falls, Owen pulled Cocoa to a halt. "Anse, you go ahead to Fraser's office. Give Maudee the note and help her get ready to ride. Remember, it's important to move fast. I'll be along shortly."

After Anse had hurried away, Owen walked Cocoa a short distance up the street to the a building which wore the sign, "Jensen's Livery." Below that it said more. "Horses and Buggies For Rent -A Day or a

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Week" The two level building commanded a view of the road coming into town and was in an ideal location for incoming and outgoing traffic.

As Owen pulled to a halt and dismounted a youngster popped out the half open door. "Stall `em fer yuh mister?"

"Not right now," answered Owen, "but I will give him a short drink if that's okay."

"Sure, waterin's free," said the boy as he admired the big animal. "Mighty fine lookin' hoss."

"Thanks," smiled Owen as he led Cocoa to the trough and let him drink a bit. He then led the horse away from the water and began untying the grain sack from the saddle. "Would you sell me a bag of rolled oats?"

"Sure thing," agreed the boy who took the sack and disappeared into the building. In a moment he was back with the sack bulging and neatly tied with twine. "That's two bits, mister.""

Owen handed him a quarter and then tossed him a dime. "Looks to me like you filled that bag pretty good."

The boy's face broke into a wide grin. "Looks to me like he's big enough to need it."

"Say, I wonder if you might have had a customer in here an hour or so ago. He was traveling fast and his horse was probably lathered and winded."

"Sure did," replied the boy quickly. "A guy with a real heavy beard. He almost kilt that horse. I got him inside now, tryin' to cool him down easy like. Would yuh like to see `em?"

"No, but I'm sure you're doing the right thing, cooling him down that way. What happened to the man with the beard?"

"He stomped off down the street when Mister Jensen told him he wouldn't rent or even sell him another horse. I think he headed for Poole's place."

"Thanks," said Owen as he swung back into the saddle, "take good care of that horse."

Poole's was another livery. Smaller and a block closer to the main business street, it was a low building with a single wide door, high enough for riders to enter without dismounting. Owen stepped down, tossed Cocoa's reins over the tie rail, and walked toward the open door. A few steps away, he halted.

The voice, whining and nasal, was familiar, but Owen couldn't immediately put it with a face. "I say we go. We may never see that kind of easy money anywhere else. He said there'd be others and what's wrong

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with scarin' the pants off'n a bunch of cow chasers fer two or three days. Besides, we're busted."

The reply was a thin and sharp, "Hell, we got what he gave us. Why even show up. I fer one ain't hepped up about goin' back down into that country. We jest came from there. If we hang around town fer a while, we can pick off somethin'."

With the second voice, Owen suddenly knew where he'd heard the sing song, nasal voice and the shrill companion. Stepping quickly into the building and immediately to one side, out of the doorway, he confronted a surprised Slide and Klouse.

"What in blazes?" cried a surprised Slide. His narrow, dark form almost blended completely into the background. Still wearing his black coat, he could have been a post planted in the walkway behind the stalls.

Klouse, whose back had been to the door, wheeled around. His dirty face peeled back into a dark scowl. "Who," he began. Then as his eyes found Owen, recognition came to him. His hand fell to the butt of his six gun, but it seemed to freeze there as Owen's calm grey eyes waited for him to finish his move. Instead of drawing the gun, he sputtered a protest. "What's the game, yuh tall stink? Why yuh sneakin' up on us again?"

"Yeah," chimed in Slide, "Why are yuh leapin' in here like a damn cat?"

Owen had heard enough before stepping into the building to convince him the two had been hired by Mise. He needed to know more, and he decided to go straight to the heart of the matter. "Before either of you say another word, I want to know how much Mise gave you."

Slide's blinking stammer confirmed Owen's suspicion. "What's that to you. He said..."

"Aw shut yuhr yap," growled Klouse. Then to Owen, "Now lookee here, we ain't answerin' any of yuhr questions. Yuh can't make us. We ain't done nuthin' to pinch yuhr hide, so jest cut on outa here."

"For a couple of hardcases, you both fail," said Owen. "What you two hired on to do is my business. I believe you called it scaring cow chasers. Where is this scaring going to take place?"

Slide, who was obviously marginal in his understanding of things, again spoke first. "It ain't really scarin', it's more jest some stallin' `em around."

Klouse exploded at his partner. "Will you keep that slit yuh call a mouth closed." Then again to Owen, he offered defiance. "Where we go

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is fer us to know. So, Mister Long Stem, take yuhr high hat and leave us be."

With two quick, long strides, Owen was within arms length of the two. His advance on them had been unexpected, and it came too quickly for them to do more than stumble a half step backward.

With a steel edge in his voice, Owen asked, "Where?"

Slide's narrow figure seemed to grow thinner, and it was a wonder how a living person could be contained within such a choked and small radius. Slide's narrowness hovered against the dark background of the horse stalls. One might have almost expected him to shrink into a pencil line then disappear altogether. Owen gave him an especially close look and Slide spoke in a voice as thin as his body.

"Ain't no call fer that," he quavered, seeming to expect Owen to grab him. "The man said we was to go to Lewistown and meet some others. He said we would ride over Red Road, er somethin' like that, and jest keep a bunch of cowmen busy fer a few days. He said the man he was workin' fer was hirin' at least a half dozen other to the same. He promised the whole thing would be over in less than a week."

Klouse was livid. "Slide, yuh're a two bit jabberwalk. I ain't gonna have any more to do with yuh. Mister Stem ain't a gonna do nuthin' to us. He ain't got no right, and to the likes of him right is important. Now keep yuhr yap shut or I'll pot yuh myself the first chance I get."

Ignoring Klouse and his loud threats, Owen looked at Slide and said, "One last question. Where is Mise headed from here?"

Klouse, seeming to be glad to be able to give an answer and to be able to give one that Owen wouldn't like, answered, "He didn't say. But he's ahead of you, Mister Stem, and I'll bet a candle yuh never catch up."

Owen stepped back and sized the pair up again. "It's like I already said. As hardcases, you both fail. Now unbuckle those gunbelts."

Being disarmed again, was too much for Klouse. The hand which had been frozen to his six gun, unfroze. He clawed to bring the gun out of its leather holster. In less than the quick wink of an eye, Owen's big navy colt was in his hand and the black dot of its muzzle in Klouse's face. He didn't need to speak. Klouse's gun tumbled to the floor of the stable. Klouse, suddenly pale white, under the dirt and the whisker stubble on his face, stumbled back against a stall partition and hung there motionless.

Klouse read into Owen's action his own malicious thoughts. Thus he could only think that Owen intended to shoot him on the spot. Because his life had been one of anger, of stealing and cutting all men and all

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things short, Klouse could not understand that Owen's actions were cool and deliberate, and that thoughts or intent to kill were far from his mind. Thus Klouse was the victim of his own imagination.

"Unbuckle the gunbelts," Owen said again.

Both men obeyed, instantly. Without being told they stepped back. Holstering his own gun, Owen picked up the belts and the weapons. Balancing them in his big hands he looked thoughtfully at the two.

"This is the second time, I've had to deal with you two. Both times have been unpleasant. Both times you made threats. I believe that's enough."

Looking at the livery walls, Owen saw the tool he needed. Taking a set of heavy hoof nippers from the nail where they hung along with other tools, Owen, took each sixgun in turn and used the nippers to twist the firing pins off the gun hammers. He then tossed the guns far back into the darkness of the livery.

"One word of advice," Owen said quietly, "don't show your faces in Lewistown. I'll be there and I'll be looking for you."

With that, he turned and walked out of the livery. Quickly, he was mounted and, in the smooth motion of horse and rider who know each other well, they were away from the livery and onto the main street of the town.

Instead of heading straight for the Office of the Land Commissioner, Owen stopped at the Territorial Bank. The clerk remembered him, and he was immediately admitted to see Tiswell. He gave the banker a short account of the trip and explained how he was on his way back to get the necessary affidavits for filing with Fraser's office. Owen emphasized the necessity of speed and told the banker, he would be on the trail in a matter of moments.

Tiswell was pleased at the news and his old eyes twinkled as he asked, "Would you do an old man a favor and tell me how in thunderation you got that fuss budget to sit still long enough to listen to your story?"

Owen dismissed the matter with a smile. "I suggested that he give up surveying until he heard me out."

Tiswell cackled at his own mental picture of how that had been handled. Then he became more serious. "I've been doing some hunting and tracking of my own. I haven't found much, but I can tell you that the Eastern and Central is a railroad. Headquarters are in Boston. I sent a wire to a banker back there who made some inquiries for me. He wired back that the company seems to be having some kind of war over

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control. One group seems to be trying to take over from another group. But as far as he could determine there isn't any thought of building a rail line out here."

Owen's wrinkled brow brought little more from Tiswell. The old banker was as much at a loss as the rancher who sat before him. "That banker in Boston promised to keep looking around to find out why a big eastern railroad would want you killed. But today, it's still a puzzle to me."

Unwilling to spend more time on the matter, Owen took his leave of Tiswell. He promised to give the banker's regards to Penelope Hogan, and quickly made his way to the Office of the Land Commissioner.

There he found Anse and Maudee placing papers in the inner compartment of a flat, brown traveling case. On the broad desk top, another tube shaped case sat waiting to be picked up.

"I think we're ready, Owen," announced Anse, proud that he had carried out his orders and had done so on time.

As a question Owen said, "You remembered the affidavit papers?"

Maudee nodded and answered, "Yes."

Owen continued, "Your stamp?"

Her answer to that was to hold up the small wooden instrument and then to drop it into the brown case with the papers. "I also managed to find the book entries with the old property descriptions, just in case your friends can't find their government filing papers."

"Good," smiled Owen. "Has Anse told you that it's going to be a hard ride?"

"I haven't worked in this office my whole life, Mister Bannack. I'll keep up."

"Your horse?"

"He's fresh, rested and ready to burn off some of the grain he's been eating all winter." Looking at Anse, she added, "Mister Bannack, if it would help, Mister Jensen, is a good friend of mine, and he would be glad to loan both of you fresh horses."

"Cocoa's fine, he's been on the trail a long time, but he's still in good shape. Anse, I noticed that buckskin of yours was starting to drag. It might not be a bad idea to take Maudee up on her offer. You can pick up your own horse when we come back."

Anse agreed and in short order, they were mounted and on the road back to the Lewistown. The sun was already on its downward slide toward the horizon, but the riders had hours of daylight and miles to travel before they would think about food or about rest.

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"I rode the bottom outa two horses gettin' here," spat out Mise. "Then they told me yuh weren't even here. Where the hell yuh been?"

Paskil, running his hands over his white hair, looked with contempt at the tired and irritable Mise. "I've been out scouting around. Doing what I hired some of your men to do."

"My men," laughed Mise, "yuh may give me the money to pay `em but they're yuhr men, Paskil. I jest hired `em and sent `em down here from Great Falls."

Brushing at real and imagined spots of dirt on his shirt and pants, Paskil began to feel that his appearance was somewhat back in order. He took up the business at hand. "So yuh rode hard to get here. It better be good if yuh walked out on yuhr job with Fraser."

"I was gettin' tired of walkin' behind that damn measurin' wheel anyway," grumbled Mise. "But yuhr plan has been workin'. I've kept my eye on Fraser and I made enough mistakes that we've done about half of the work twice. That and messin' up his mail from his headquarters has kept him out of the office fer almost a month now. There ain't no way he's gonna pick up on the way yuh forged that Commission `til its too late. After them damn ranchers have been run out of the country, the range will be ours fer the takin'"

"If it was workin' what made yuh leave all the sudden? We need another two weeks before we can get over the mountains and start settin' stakes. Them damn ranchers have been meetin' and goin' up and down the road day and night. And that skunk bladder, Bannack, got Henley to roust our road guards so its hard to keep track of what they're up to. I think they've got guards on their end of the road though. In a few more days I'll have enough men to ride through `em and start the surveyin'."

"The word is out. That tall stump named Bannack and a sidekick rode into camp three days ago and before I could say or do anything to stop it, that busy bug Fraser explained the whole thing to him."

"Bannack." The word exploded out of Paskil's mouth. Immediately he was on his feet and pacing the length of the Pink Eye's back room. He paused long enough to stop at the door, jerk it open and call to the bartender. "Bring us another bottle. Pronto."

Mise helped himself to the fresh bottle of whiskey by pouring a full glass, taking a large sip, and then filling the glass again. He then filled a glass for Paskil and settled himself back in his chair to watch Paskil pace the floor. "Bannack," intoned Paskil. "He could ruin everything. Hearin' that he's been talkin' to Fraser is the worst news we could get. We

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need time, Mise. If Bannack gets back here and gets affidavits signed and then gets them to Great Falls, everything we've set up is gone."

"Agreed," said the bearded man tilting back in his chair. "Now you know why I left Fraser and his damn surveyin' job to hightail it back here."

"How much of a lead do you have on him?" asked Paskil suddenly.

"Hard to tell. I heard Fraser tell `em to bring his office girl along to stamp the papers. She'll slow `em down some, but I don't know how much. I'd guess I'm a half a day ahead of `em. I'd say they could be here anytime tomorrow. Yuh want me to take a man up the road and try to plug `em?"

"Not a man, Mise. Take two. Yuh said there was another gunhand with Bannack besides the girl. That makes three. I don't want yuh to take any chances, get `em. Don't let `em get past yuh and make sure none of `em get away. We can't have any loose strings. They gotta jest disappear, and I want it done before they even get close to town. No need gettin' Henley stirred up. We don't want him stickin' his nose into this. I've tried everything to bring him around, but I ain't had any luck. He jest puffs around and talks about the law, but he could be a problem."

"I agree. We gotta stop `em before they get back here and spill what they know to them other cow pushers."

"True enough," nodded Paskil who had slowed his walking long enough to sip nervously at his whiskey glass. "I got men around town, but the best way is to stop `em out on the road somewhere. Do yuh think he might take a cutoff somewhere? He knows I've got men here, and he may know I've got more comin'."

"Naw, I'm bettin' they'll try to go straight to the Red Hill Road," said Mert. "Bannack knows they got to get them affidavits signed. His best bet is to get over the mountains and get all them ranchers together fer a big signin' party. Where else could he round `em up and get `em to sign papers?"

"He might try fer Bright's," guessed Paskil.

"Yuh mean that minin' layout up north of town?"

"That's the one. That's where I was this mornin'. I scouted the place out a bit. Them ranchers have taken the place over and they've got a bunch up there holdin' it."

Mise scratched at his beard. "I was up there once, and if I remember, it's a damned fort. If Bannack and the other two get in there, we'll never get to `em."

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"Right, Mise. For once yuh're right. But the same thing is true if yuh stand it on its head."

The heavy beard hid a puzzled scowl. "So what does that mean, Paskil. Spell it out."

"We can't get in. But if we put a few men with rifles in the right places, Bannack or whoever is in there can't get out. Yuh see, Mise, that's why I do the plannin' and you do the doin'. If Bannack his sidekick and that girl somehow did get by yuh and hole up in the Diggin's we could still get our surveyin' done before they could get any affidavits signed and filed in Great Falls. After that, I don't care if Bannack writes up the whole law on surveyin' and nails it to the front door of the general store. Once we set stakes, we jest need to file our claim in Great Falls, then I can deal with Bannack in my own good time."

"Bottle `em up," grinned Mise.

"No. Kill `em on the road. But if by some way or other they get by, then we bottle `em up," said Paskil, "but whatever happens, sooner or later, I want that big chimney brought down."

The hate and the menace in Paskil's voice gave Mise a chill. Looking at the twisted face framed by white hair, the bearded man decided he didn't like Paskil and he didn't want to be around the man any longer than necessary. The burst of hatred also made Mise wonder if there wasn't more to Paskil's reaction to Owen Bannack than Paskil let on.

"What if they get by and head fer the Red Hill Road?" asked Mise after some of Paskil's rage has passed away.

"That won't happen, Mise, because they won't get by." The threat in Paskil's words was unmistakable. "When you drop `em on the road, I want yuh to head shoot `em to make sure. Is that clear?"

"Yep," said Mise as he swirled his glass and watched as the whiskey spun into a little whirlpool, "that's clear enough fer anybody." After a time, he looked at Paskil and asked, "Why don't we jest drag our surveyor out of the hotel, ride over the Red Hill Road tonight and set stakes tomorrow? Night might be a good time to visit Bannack's spread."

"I said we'd have to wait," snapped Paskil.

"Aw, Paskil, yuh're sometimes too careful. We could go and join the men yuh already got sittin' there and when Bannack shows up we could swing him from a tree in the moonlight." Mise was feeling the effects of the whiskey and only intended his remark to be a joke, but his random remark hit something in Paskil.

Paskil, who had hired the brooding man with the beard, was himself a violent man and one given to dark moods. Since Owen had faced him

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in the saloon and shoved him against the wall, Paskil had grown more and more ill tempered. He seemed to be a man with one goal in life. Although he did not share his thoughts with anyone, Paskil seemed unnaturally driven to become the owner of Owen's sprawling ranch, and to see the big rancher's life ended.

As he had plotted and lied to get within reach of his goal, Paskil had become less concerned about those who had helped him along the way. When they questioned his orders or did anything which Paskil saw as a threat to his plan, he became powerfully angry.

Mise's idea was the kind of spur of the moment notion which Paskil hated. Since it had not been thought out and since there were many unknown sides to it, such an idea could endanger the plan. Thus, Paskil's reaction would not have been unexpected by anyone who knew him well. Unfortunately, Mise did not know his fellow conspirator at all well, nor did he know any details about Paskil's background.

Paskil spun around. Even before the glass he had been holding hit the floor, a small handgun sprang into Paskil's fist. "Yuh're a fool, Mise. Doin' somethin' like that could spoil everything. I told yuh them ranchers are guardin' the Road. We need at least a dozen men to be able to ride through `em. As soon as that many men get here, we ride. Not before."

Leaning over the little wooden table which separated them, Paskil thrust the gun squarely into Mise's face. The muzzle nestled hard against the beard. The muscles of Paskil's face pulled and strained under the taut skin. Beads of sweat formed a line on the forehead which stretched like a tight band under the stark white hair.

Mise knew that if he moved or if he even breathed too heavily, he might die. Slowly Paskil pulled the gun away. The struggle going on within his mind was everywhere evident on his face and in the tenseness of his body.

Then Paskil began to regain control of himself. With a cold sneer, he turned the little gun to one side and pulled the trigger. The noise seemed greater than it really was. The small room held the sound close. To Mise it must have been the roar of thunder and the little flash must have been the splintering crash of lightning.

The bullet cut a swath through Mise's hair and ripped away the peak of his ear. The terrified Mise crashed out of his chair and as he lay on the floor, silence reclaimed the room. The smoke from the shot swirled around the kerosene lamp and the two men's eyes locked.

"Mise yuh've had too much to drink and yuh got a big mouth. I don't want no talk of hangin'. Now get outa here and get up on that trail. Like I

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told yuh, take two men. The minute the job's done, send word. If somethin' goes bad, send word and I'll send more men. If any of `em get away, track `em down. I don't want mistakes."

Spacing his words carefully, Paskil repeated himself. "I don't want any mistakes. Do yuh understand?"

Clambering to his knees, Mise swiped at his bleeding ear with a dirty sleeve. He, like Paskil, had a streak in him which often led to sudden and rash, physical action. The difference was that he had better control of his temper. He knew that this was not the time or place to strike back.

Looking at the blood on his coat, Mise glared at Paskil. "As soon as this is over, Paskil, we got some settlin' up to take care of. Fer now, I'll let it go by tellin' yuh that yuh're a fool."

With a shove of his arm, Mise brushed past the cold eyed Paskil. Blood from his sleeve smeared the white shirt front with a ragged patch that looked like a great red tear in Paskil's clean clothes armor. With a vicious and hateful look, Mise slammed out of the room and left the ever neat Paskil staring down at his stained shirt.

No one had moved from the bar room of the Pink Eye. The patrons knew both Mise and Paskil, and to a man they knew better than to interfere even at the sound of a pistol shot unless called. Still dabbing at his bleeding ear, Mise called to two men sitting and playing cards at a corner table. The men tossed down their drinks and their cards and followed him out of the saloon.

Later, as Mise and his companions walked their horses along the Great Falls road, the gloom began closing in around them. One of the men finally asked, "Do yuh mind my askin' what happened in that back room?"

The question was in part unnecessary. The bandanna tied awkwardly round Mise's head told part of the story. Mise who had cooled to the point of being able to speak, replied. "That Paskil is plumb loco. I made some fool joke about hangin' Bannack in the moonlight, and Paskil goes tiddley on me. He yelled somethin' about no talk of hangin' and blabbed on about how we'd have to wait before goin' over the pass."

In an attempt to be agreeable, the man nodded and added, "Paskil's been gettin' under everyone's skin the last week or so. The story is that Bannack strolled into the saloon and slammed Paskil up against the wall with a table. Ole Paskil ain't been the same since."

"I hadn't heard about that," said Mise thoughtfully. "It might explain some of what's gallin' Paskil. Then again, there might be more to it than we know."

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"Could be," agreed another man, "but jest so's yuh know, Mise, I didn't sign on to work fer a loon. Crazy folks spook me real quick, and I didn't take yuhr money to do any killin' either. My recollection of the deal was that yuh needed some men to spook some ranchers fer a while. Most of the other boys feel the same way."

"Jest do as yuh told, Skeetel. Things'll work out and yuh'll get yuhr pay. They may not work the way Paskil thinks they will, but they'll work out."

With that the riders fell silent. The only sound that invaded the darkness was the soft shuffle of the horses' hooves against the unseen earth below.

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Every moment was important. Yet the horses and their riders had limits to their endurance. The first day's ride had been extended as long as possible. Camp had been set in the darkness and broken in predawn darkness.

The next day seemed long almost before it began. Owen enforced the cavalry rule of fifteen minutes off the horses every hour. But even then it was walk and lead the animals. A short break in the middle of the morning, another at midday, and a final rest somewhere in mid or late afternoon.

As they made their way along the road, they met a whiskey drummer bouncing along in a light buggy. He stopped for a moment to exchange greetings, then snapping his little leather whip he rolled away toward Great Falls. They caught up with and passed a wagon, heavily loaded with bricks. The six horse team plodded steadily along the road, heads down, and powerful shoulders hard into their collars. Soon the wagon with its great load fell behind, and the three riders pressed on down the empty road.

Alone, Owen would have ridden longer and forced himself even further down the road. However, he knew Maudee was bone tired and Anse, young and strong, was himself showing the strain. Not knowing what was ahead, it was better to conserve what strength they could. As darkness fell, Owen called a halt to the long day.

Everyone welcomed the camp and a small fire. The riders were almost too tired to sleep. They did the chores of tending the weary horses, and feeding themselves. Then they talked for a time about where they were and what the next day would bring.

"Looks to me like we'll make town by tomorrow afternoon," yawned Anse.

"I've never been this far from Great Falls before," put in Maudee, "so I hope the two of you know where we are and where we're going."

"I know generally where we are," replied Owen, "but I'm still thinking about where we're going."

"You mean we may not go to Lewistown," asked Maudee.

"Tonight, I don't think so, but tomorrow things may change." Owen didn't want to alarm the girl, but Lewistown was very much in his mind. He knew that Paskil's shadow hung over much of the town and that Paskil's gunhands were gathering there.

Owen also knew that Paskil would send a scout to watch for him. He was pretty sure they hadn't been seen just yet, but Paskil's trail watcher

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would pick them up sometime tomorrow. Owen realized that they were in danger of being ambushed along the way, and that thought made him wish he had some better choices.

Considering their situation, Owen wondered if there wasn't a way of keeping Paskil guessing and keeping the girl out of danger. Any way they went, there was the risk of gunplay, and as he sat looking at the fire, he didn't know if there was a way of avoiding it. Rising, Owen stretched and walked to the perimeter of the clearing. Since the campfire talk, Maudee had fallen fast asleep and Anse was pulling his blanket up over his shoulders.

"Anse," Owen called softly, "step over here a moment."

Anse, seeing that Owen was taking care not to awaken the sleeping Maudee, eased his way over to where Owen was pulling on his coat.

"Keep your eyes on things here," Owen directed. "I'm going to take a short ride. I'll be back in an hour or so."

"Where yuh goin'," whispered Anse.

"Right now, I'm just exploring," Owen explained. "I may know more when I get back."

With that, Owen slipped away from the little campfire into the darkness of the surrounding trees. Speaking softly, he roused Cocoa.

"Go ahead and hang your head, you old scoundrel. We're both tired, but we need to take a short jaunt. There's going to be time for resting later."

Irritated at being saddled again so soon after a long ride, the big chestnut heaved under the saddle and burbled out a gushing protest through his nostrils. Night riding was nothing new to the tall horse, but he never failed to register some form of protest to the risk it brought.

Owen carefully walked the horse through the brush and scraggly larch back to the road. The half moon above threw a pitifully dim light down upon the hill country, barely enough for the man and the horse to make safe progress on their trek along the road.

While the moon watched with half an eye of interest, Owen proceeded back in the direction from which they had ridden earlier. He soon saw a little glimmer of light in the darkness and headed directly toward it.

With the moon still giving the matter its lazy interest, Owen did a piece of business and was soon back on the road to his camp. Cocoa, fully aware that it was a return trip and that rest lay ahead, made better time than he had on the outward bound leg of the short journey.

Anse, concerned and alert, called out to him. "Owen?"

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Owen acknowledged the call and immediately joined the young man who stood on the edge of the camp clearing. "Anse, we've got to do some night riding. Are you up to it?"

"Sure," replied the young rancher.

"How about Maudee? Is she still sleeping?"

"How could any body sleep with the two of you out here whispering and thrashing around in the dark?" demanded the girl as she walked up to them.

Owen answered her with an easy laugh. "It's just as well we woke you up. I'm afraid none of us will get much sleep this night. I believe it's better for us to move tonight than to risk getting back shot tomorrow."

The camp they had made had been little more than a fire and some light brush to soften the ground. In a matter of moments, they left the little clearing and were on their way. When they reached the road, Owen sketched out what each of them should do. He questioned Anse to make sure the young man and the girl understood each step in the plan. Then satisfied that each had his role clearly in mind, he sent them on their way.

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Paskil tramped the boards of the little room. He slammed his hand on the long suffering little table. "Say it again. Jest tell me once more what a complete fool yuh are, Mise."

"I already explained the best I could, Paskil. They got away. They jest plumb disappeared. We was perched out on a hill where we could see the road fer five miles. We was there at sunup and we sat waitin' until jest a couple of hours ago. I thought yuh'd wanna know. Somehow they slipped by. They probably made a night ride, and they jest made better time than they should have."

"Yuh're the one that said they was a half day behind. Now we've lost `em." Paskil kicked at a board which had been laid across two small kegs as a bench. The board, a bit heavier than it looked, teetered but then rattled back into place. In a fury at the news he had heard, at the glum Mise, and perhaps even at the reluctant board, Paskil shoved the board to the floor, grabbed one of the small kegs and slammed it against the wall.

"Did yuh find anything, a trail, tracks suggestin' which way they went?" seethed the furious Paskil. "Or did yuh even look?"

"We looked," retorted Mise, "we found a camp which might have been theirs. It looked like three people had started to bed down, but had then pulled out. Other than that, nuthin."

"Well, so much fer plannin'," raged Paskil. "They got by yuh and now we don't even know where they are or where they're headed."

"Maybe we could cut `em off," suggested Mise.

"Where?" shot back Paskil. Not giving his partner a chance to reply, Paskil answered his own question. "It wouldn't hurt none to keep a man on the junction north of town, but I think yuh better get out to the Diggin's and set up a watch. Whether they're in or tryin' to get in, we need to watch their damn fort."

"Yeah, but what if they're headin' fer the Red Hill Road? That makes more sense. After all, what they need is to get affidavits from all them ranchers."

"That's why I'm headin' up the Mountain Road myself. We'll have to leave three or four of the boys here in town to keep an eye on things and I'll take the rest with me. That means we're splittin' up our men, but we ain't got a choice about it."

"Some of the men was complainin' about this thing gettin' nasty, Paskil," warned Mise. "They aren't fer killin' and say they agreed to jest roust the ranchers fer a while."

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"Give `em some more money. Everything is on the line now, and we can afford to lose any of `em."

Frowning, Mise studied the rough hewn boards of the floor for a time. Ignoring the stained little glass sitting on the table, he took a long gulping drink from the nearly empty bottle of whiskey. Coughing, he hung his head low between his shoulders. Finally, between hacks of his breath, he said, "Ain't no more money, Paskil. We're plumb busted."

Paskil's immediate thought was to bully the man, to yell at him and berate him for spending money stupidly. However, looking at the bearded man and at his dingy clothes, at his battered hat and boots, and seeing him tired and dejected, Paskil knew that yelling would serve no purpose.

"I thought yuh still had some, a hundred or so."

"I gave twenty apiece to a couple of men in Great Falls. They wasn't much to look at, but I saw `em in the livery up there and I knowed things was comin' to head down here so I paid `em to come on down. I had to buy another hoss up there and then down here since I rode `em both to ground. Then what with a few bucks here and there, its gone."

"Well we need more," retorted Paskil angrily.

"Got any ideas?" asked Mise, "Yuh told me not to take it off'n anyone here in town."

"That made sense and it still does. As long as we're spendin' money, nobody around here cares where it comes from. Yuh get in bad only when yuh start takin' their money. But we're close enough to the end of this shindig that it wouldn't hurt to tap one of the locals. When we're finished with `em, we can pay a couple of men off and send `em down the road. Folks'll blame them and we can stay clean."

"It'd be better to plug `em, dump `em in the mountains, and keep the money," suggested Mise. "That way we could spread the word they had done the robbin' and we wouldn't have to worry about `em ever comin' back."

Paskil shrugged, "I'll leave it to you to decide." He thought for a moment then asked, "Who'd be the best one to hit fer the money?"

"How about that Hogan woman?" asked Mise. "She does a lot of business and I think she keeps her money stashed somewhere in her damn store. Besides she's kinda uppity. I wouldn't mind bringin' her down some."

"She's alone there ain't she?"

"Yep."

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"Okay, it should be any easy touch. Don't ask any of them hounds yuh've hired to do it. We'll do it ourselves. Jest as soon as we figure out where Bannack is. The men won't need any money while there sittin' and watchin' the trails. We can tell `em that money's comin'. There ain't nuthin like the thought of some double eagles to put gumption back into them reluctant chicken pickin's yuh hired."

"Where yuh gonna stake out and wait fer Bannack?" asked Mise.

"The Spring Creek Bridge. That's a natural bottleneck. He'll have to ride through there if he's headin' up the Red Hill Road."

"True," agreed Mise, "unless he's already got past somehow. Or unless we got him locked at the Diggin's."

"Could be," mused Paskil. "With this thing still hangin' loose, we gotta be careful not to set anything off. So until I give the order, make sure everything stays normal. We don't want any of this town's slats gettin' riled and we don't want Henley gettin' his nose in things either."

"Business as usual," nodded Mise, taking another pull at the bottle. "Yuh gonna close the road or jest watch fer Bannack?"

"I jest told yuh, we'll leave things be fer now. No shootin' and no killin' til we find that big rotten stack and bring him down."

"We can't wait long," grumbled Mise, "the word about filing them affidavits is bound to get out."

"It won't matter if it does," insisted Paskil, "as long as we set stakes and get to Great Falls first. Now haul yuhrself outa here and get that watch set up at the Diggin's. And stop swillin' that mash until this job's done. Yuh ain't all that good a shot as it is."

Grabbing the bottle, Mise took a long last pull. He continued drinking until the bottle was empty. Tossing it into the corner of the room where it broke into sharp, ugly pieces, Mise gave Paskil a hateful stare. "Jest make sure yuhr own eyes are open and don't be worryin' about mine," sneered Mise as he pulled the door open and stomped into the bar room of the Pink Eye.

The Pink Eye's proprietor, Asil Yester, was engaged with his sums. Squinting at a wrinkled paper and a column of figures, Yester's lips moved in silent calculation. The customers of the Pink Eye had various ideas about why Yester was so taken by numbers and why he spent nearly every free moment working on them. The more casual customers, those who dropped in only once in a while, guessed simply that Yester was engaged in minding his business and tallying up the money he had taken in or spent. Others who came to the saloon more

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frequently realized that few businesses, especially Yester's, had enough transactions to keep the owner busy full time just adding figures.

In response to the occasional question about his paper work, Yester would say simply that he was "summin'." Of course none of the patrons of the Pink Eye had mathematical interest or skill and none had ever offered to assist Yester. The mere sight of paper, pencil and columns of figures was enough to reduce onlookers to silence. Some even considered Asil Yester to be something of a learned man because only someone who had been "school taught" would engage in such constant and intense "summin'."

Yester was apparently stuck, as usual, and unable to bring the numbers to an accurate total. The slamming entrance of Mise did nothing to distract Yester who continued at his summin'. He muttered and scowled over the number which apparently gave him the most trouble. "Seben...seben," he intoned. Then "nine." The troubled mathematical head hung heavily over the paper and all appearances were that Asil was lost, as he usually was.

Mise joined two men who were hunched over the bar nursing mugs of stale looking beer. "Gimme a bottle," ordered Mise.

Yester, absorbed in his summin', sat as though he hadn't heard. His temper rising even higher, Mise called out again. "Hey, I ordered a bottle of whiskey. Wake up."

Reluctantly, Yester laid down his pencil, and reached under the bar and pulled out an unopened, high necked, clear glass bottle of whiskey. Its label declared that it was "POWER JIM'S PURE MASH." Setting the bottle on the top of the bar, Yester kept his hand firmly around Power Jim's neck.

"I'll be needin' some money on yuhr account, Mise," said Yester.

"Yuh'll get it," growled Mise.

Still holding Power Jim by the neck, Yester asked, "When and how much?"

"In two or three days, I'll have enough money to buy yuhr whole damn saloon," seethed Mise, "now gimme that bottle and git back to yuhr summin'"

"Three days, then," agreed Yester releasing Power Jim's neck. As he said the word, "three" the thought of summin' apparently took possession of his mind. "Three," he repeated vaguely. Then he muttered the words "seben and nine and three?"

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Mise scowled at the meaningless talk and with a curt command ordered the two men to finish their drinks. "We're ridin' again. Same job but closer to town."

As they paused and pulled at the sticking door, one of the men asked, "Yuh mean we're gonna sit on that road again watchin' fer that tall lobo, Bannack?"

"Nope. We're gonna watch for him up in the Judith's. A place called the Diggin's. Him, some sidewinder with him and a woman." Stepping into the street, Mise added grimly, "the orders are to keep `em from gettin' into the Diggin's or out of it."

"How?" asked one of the men.

Mise, his temper still burning, gave the man a sour look. Then Mise pulled his six gun from its holster and shoved the muzzle toward the man's face. "Yuh want me to spell it out?"

As Mise clomped out of the saloon with the two hard looking men, Paskil came out of the back room buckling a gunbelt over his always neat striped pants. Then patting at his white hair and pulling his hat down tight into place, he called to a man leaning against the bar. "Okay, Leeds, roust up some of the men. Have one of `em pick up some blankets, some eats fer campin' and meet me at the livery. And tell `em to make it quick. That damn fool Mise let Bannack slip by. We gotta stop that high hat before he gets to his rancher friends."

Throwing down a deck of greasy, stained cards he had been toying with, Leeds started for the door immediately. Then he paused a long step away from Paskil. "When things simmer down some, we gotta get rid of Mise. He's got a big mouth and he uses it fer drinkin' and fer sayin' things he shouldn't be sayin'"

"My thoughts, exactly, Leeds," nodded Paskil. "But first things, first. We have to stop Bannack from gettin' through to the Red Hill Road."

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"Somethin's wrong, I tell yuh," grumbled Leeds, "fer two days we been sittin' here. Two days and three damn cold nights and nuthin'."

Across the fire, Paskil sat staring into the tin cup of coffee he held with both hands. His town clothes were wrinkled from sleeping on the ground in blankets and they were stained from campfire meals served and eaten with jackknives and fingers. Even the long, snow white hair was matted and uncombed. Dark whisker stubble covered his face and chin, and his brooding dark eyes seemed haunted, perhaps by something they had seen in another time and at another place.

"I say we should'a stopped the ranchers we been seein'. There's been too many of `em goin' up and down that road. They must be up to somethin'."

"But what?" muttered Paskil. "We ain't seen nuthin' but some of them cowmen and their women and kids goin' fer supplies. We know they ain't goin' nowhere because after a few hours the same ones come rattlin' back the way they came. Naw, I think they're doin' the same thing we're doin'. Waitin' fer Bannack to show." Then in a musing voice he offered another thought, "I wonder if somethin' happened to `em. Maybe he ran crosswise of them two new men Mise says he hired in Great Falls."

Paskil toyed with the thought of his enemy being gunned down in some far off shoot out. "Wouldn't that beat all?" he chuckled, "if we've been sittin' here waitin' fer a dead man?"

"I haven't seen this big lobo," replied Leeds as he spun the cylinder on his revolver, aimed at the fire and snapped the hammer on an empty chamber, "but from what I've heard, he'll take some tall killin'. My guess is that this Bannack is still out there somewhere, playin' his own game."

"Which is?" asked Paskil.

"I can't say, but is it possible he rode around the end of these mountains?"

"It's possible," conceded Paskil. "But that's a hundred miles at least. Fifty miles east, then fifty miles back. It'd be hard ridin' and would take two maybe three days. I don't think he'd want to take that much time."

"How about another road?"

"There ain't any that I know of. A man on foot could skirt around, but he'd have to walk and that ain't likely."

"Yuh don't suppose Mise got `em up north of town at that place...the Diggin's?" asked Leeds.

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"Damn small chance of that," sneered Paskil, "besides, if that had happened, Mise would be up here crowin' and thumpin his chest like a dandy grandy top hand."

"Well have yuh decided how much longer we wait here?" asked Leeds as he snapped cartridges into the chambers of his revolver. "I fer one think we've been perched up here on this hill too long. This waitin' has stretched as far as my patience can reach."

After a long moment, Paskil rose, looked around the disarray of the little camp, and with a flick of his wrist emptied the contents of his tin cup onto the little fire. Thin wisps of white steam sizzled and leaped into the air. Watching the little disturbance in the fire die quickly away, Paskil seemed to reluctant to make a decision.

Before Leeds got an answer to his question, a third man walked up the rocky slope to the campfire. He spoke as he walked toward Paskil. "There's another wagon down on the road, headin' fer town. Yuh wanna take a look?"

"Can yuh tell who it is?"

"Naw, I don't know any of them ranchers, but there's a man, a woman and some kids."

"There's sure been a lot of goin' in and comin' out in the last two days," grumbled Paskil. "maybe we oughta do some askin'."

Quickly the three men made their way down the hillside from the camp to their lookout post. A fourth man holding a rifle lay on a blanket looking down on the road from between two jagged, granite rocks. The Spring Creek bridge was close by and below them, and a buckboard wagon with battered low slung wooden sides was rolling and bouncing toward the bridge.

Paskil, who was squatting behind a slab of grey rock which jutted up from the mountainside, leaned toward the man with the rifle. "Drop a shot in front of that team."

Without commenting or looking around, the rifleman brought the wooden stock up against his cheek, aimed and squeezed the trigger. The Winchester cracked sharp and hard against the rocks which protected Paskil and the others.

The slug from the rifle screamed down onto the road and into a dry rut at the feet of the two horse team. The slap of the bullet, the instant spurt of dust, and the whine which the bullet left in the air all combined to throw instant fear into the horses.

If the frightened animals had reacted together the wagon would have been pulled off the road into the icy, foaming water and the rocks of

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Spring Creek. Instead the horses shied in opposite directions. Then they ran together and finally sliced off toward the ditch away from the creek.

The driver managed to keep the reins in hand at the first lunge of the team. He then hauled back hard as he yelled a startled, "Whoa...whoa, there."

It was over in the space of a few seconds. The wagon came to a halt with a rear wheel off the road, the horses stood with large staring eyes trying to look in all directions at once. A small boy and a somewhat older girl in the back of the wagon were trying to decide whether to laugh or cry. The driver, still holding the reins tight gave one look at the horses, then at his wife. Looking over his shoulder he called, "You kids okay?"

"What happened, dad?" replied the girl.

Before he could answer, Paskil's voice came down at them from the rocks. "Where do yuh think yuh're goin' with that wagon?"

Now that the immediate emergency seemed to be over, the driver's anger spoke first, "What in tarnation do yuh think yuh're doin'? Who's up there?"

"I'll do the askin'," called Paskil. "Now what's yuhr name?"

"What kind of snake are yuh? Sittin' up in them rocks and shootin' at a man's team," cried the driver.

"If yuh don't answer what I ask, I'll shoot again," threatened Paskil. "Now fer the last time, what's yur name?"

"Whittle," called the driver. "Name's Tom Whittle."

"Where yuh goin', Whittle?"

"To town. The boy back there's got some kind of pox, maybe measles. We're goin' in to get somethin fer it, probably some Tatalus Oil. We'll probably pick up some supplies while we're at it. Now what's all this shootin' about?"

"Hey, kid," called Paskil, "you sick?"

The boy, knowing all eyes were on him, leaned back into his sister's arms and cried out, "Lord is that you callin'. I can't see yuh, but I heerd yuh. Lord won't yuh come down and tetch me. I'm pus all over, but my daddy says pus can't hurt the Lord."

There was silence from the rocks. Tom Whittle and his family heard a few snatches of angry conversation, a few loud words. "Go down yuhrself... Pox... My sister died from it...If there's pox in the country, yuh ain't got enough money to keep me around...ain't yuh ever seen them sores..."

"Yuh got a ranch on the other side of the mountain?" asked Paskil with loud words from the rock lookout.

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"Mister, I'm jest tryin' to pick a livin' off the land," answered Whittle in something of a non-answer to the question.

Paskil tried again, "Yuh know a jasper called Bannack?"

"I've heard of `im. Ain't he the runty fella that runs the stage station out near Grassy Range?"

An experated, "To Hell with `em," floated out of the rocks. That was followed by a command, "Go on, get yuhr wagon outa here and yuh better not take that kid into Lewistown if he's got the pox."

With a holler and a flurry of rein snapping, the team leaned into the harness and in a moment the wagon was drumming its way across the planks of Spring Creek bridge. In another few moments it disappeared around the bend of the road and the road watchers were left alone in their rock guardpost, unable to see a giggling boy and girl reenacting the drama of sickness and calling out "Tetch me Lord, tetch me," and "I'm pus all over."

"Get the horses," ordered Paskil, "We're ridin' fer town." As an afterthought, he called to Leeds, "We'll leave one man here as a lookout, jest to keep an eye on things."

The man with the rifle, perhaps thinking of disease, instantly volunteered. Even the gunman, Leeds, seemed hesitant about carrying out Paskil's order to return to town.

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The moody, shallow faced Leeds sat with his thumbs hooked in his cartridge belt watching as Paskil paced the boards of the little room. "What's takin' him so damn long?" growled Paskil, "Yuh'd think I sent him to the next territory instead of across the street."

Almost as an answer to the question, the back door swung open and Mize stepped quickly out of the darkness of the alley into the room. As one attempting to avoid being seen or heard, Mize pressed the door back into place being careful not to make a noise or a disturbance.

Even before he turned around, Paskil demanded in a low, insistent voice, "Well, what did yuh see?"

"She finally went to bed. At least she put out her light. I couldn't see her stash anything. There's shades and curtains on every damn window in the livin' part of the store."

"Well, I don't like robbin' in the same town where I'm livin', but we ain't got time to go on a sashay around the country," muttered Paskil. Pulling his hat down low and checking his revolver, he reminded his companions, "Now I don't want any shootin' or killin' unless the old dame gets the drop on us or shoots first. With three of us lookin' we should be able to find the stash and get outa there in no time."

Only the weak, yellow light in the window of the hotel a half a block away interrupted the darkness as the three figures rounded the corner of the saloon and crossed the street. Seeming to fear detection by the night sky, the three quickly lost themselves in the deeper blackness alongside Hogan's General Store. The uninvited night customers grouped around the front door and applied for admittance. With surprising ease the door gave way. Only the softest shuffle of boots on wood announced their entry.

In the darkness of the store, the figures separated. They began feeling their separate ways to the hidden recesses behind the counter, under the counter, on high shelves, on low shelves. They felt. They reached. They patted and they gently pried in every secret place. The opened jars with lids, they lifted tops from tins, their hands explored bins and sacks.

The work of the thieves proved their skill. Even amid the clutter of the darkened store, they made hardly a sound. One or two clinks, a minor squeak, a grating perhaps, and a sliding, but on the whole, the search was complete and silent.

As the hiding places were found and searched and nothing was found, the list of such nooks and holes grew shorter. The frustration of the would-be thieves grew and took hold of them. They grew careless.

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The bail of an empty bucket was dropped against the bucket's tin side. The metal snap gloried in the darkness and took strength from it. The heavy night air gave the snap the strength of a thousand daylight snaps.

And the snap was given the name, "Damn," by a shadow figure. A dissenting whisper from another figure suggested a second name. "Quiet."

The signal for the end of the search was the end of places to look. The figures huddled together near the front door of the store. In breathless whispers they consulted one another.

"Nuthin'," reported Leeds.

"Not a stinkin' dime," rasped Mise.

"She must have it in her room," guessed Paskil. The anger at the fruitless search tightened his whisper and turned it into cruel short gasps. "We're gonna get the biddie's money if we have to drag it outa her."

Returning to the central isle of the store, the three eased their way toward the rear area, toward the living quarters. At the closed door which separated the business section of the building from the home of Penelope Hogan, Paskil paused and whispered a question. "Do yuh suppose she might have a gun?"

"She's got a whole damn store full of `em," hissed back Mise. "So what if she does. She's bound to be asleep. We'll take her by surprise."

Paskil first tried stealth. He twisted the knob. He gently leaned against the door. The knob replied to his hand that it would not turn the full measure necessary to pull back the latch. The door spoke a wooden refusal to yield.

Anger seized the thief. Rage gave him the command for violence. Stepping back a half pace, he gave the door a hard, vicious kick. He followed that with a crashing lunge of his shoulder. The door jamb splintered and with a crash swung open.

With a clomping rush the three men charged into the room beyond. Sitting on a round table in the middle of a neat living room was a glaring yellow lamp. The lamp was turned with its dinner plate size reflecting pan facing the intruders. With its wick turned high and its clean chimney glistening, the light was strong and bright. The intruders blinked at the sudden light. As they raised their hands as shields to look beyond the lamp, they were ordered to raise their hands on up to surrender level.

The cool, command of Penelope Hogan came like a shot in the room. "Git them hands high or I'll blast yuh where yuh stand."

The voice came from a darkened doorway behind the lamp. The round shadow on the back side of the brass reflecting pan encircled the

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doorway and provided a shield from the rays of the lamp. The trap for them had obviously been carefully planned by her.

Perhaps the quiet search of her store had not been so quiet after all. However she had been warned, Penelope Hogan was waiting for the three thieves.

As the hands went up, Penelope, remaining in the darkness, identified her captives. "Paskil, huh? Well, I always figured yuh fer a sneak thief, and I see yuh didn't have the stuffin's to come alone. I don't recognize the bush, but I've seen Mister weed around town."

Without thinking, Leeds corrected her. "Leeds."

"Oh, Leeds is it, mocked Penelope. Well, I'm truly sorry I misspoke yuhr name Mister Leeds Weeds Thief. Be sure and tell Sheriff Henley yuhr proper name when I march yuh over to him."

In a desperate attempt to stall for time and find a way out of the situation, Paskil tried to argue. "Now Missus Hogan, there ain't no call to make more outa this than there is. If yuh jest let us go, we'll fergit the whole thing."

"Well, Paskil, that'd sure be a kindness of yuh. Yuh come in here in the dark of night, break into my store, then break down the door to my house, and offer to forgit the whole thing. Humbug! Yuh dirty night snake, yuh better hope I don't change my mind and empty this greener into yuhr belly."

"Yuh're makin' trouble fer yuhrself woman," threatened Leeds, "ain't no tellin' how long the jail's gonna keep us from comin' back fer another visit."

"Well, yuh don't leave me much choice, Mister Leeds Weeds. I've only got two barrels of double zero buckshot, and I guess yuh jest talked yuhrself into one of `em. Got any last words yuh want to say to try and frighten an old woman with?"

From the darkness behind Penelope came another voice. "Oh, Missus Hogan you can't just shoot him."

"Shoot him, why child..."

Penelope didn't have time to finish her sentence. As she half turned to speak to the person behind her, the muzzle of the shotgun dipped. It was the mistake the thieves needed. Leeds and Mise ducked while Paskil drew his six gun with one hand and with the other swept the lamp off the table onto the floor. In the darkness, he fired at the doorway and Penelope Hogan. As he fired again, the muzzle blast, like sparks of angry and wild lightning, lighted his face. As a living nightmare of madness,

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his skin, damp with the sweat of fear, glistened. The oval of his face was framed by his stark white hair.

Paskil triggered a third shot at the doorway. In the next seconds, the wick from the broken lamp found the pool of kerosene from the shattered lamp base and quickly began growing. Almost instantly it was a flame. There was suddenly more light in the room than there had been before the lamp had been broken.

Shoving the table aside, Paskil rushed to the doorway. Looking down he saw his victim on the floor, crumpled beside her shotgun. "Got her," he called over his shoulder. "We ain't got much time. Who was that with her?"

"Dunno," answered Leeds, rushing into the room behind Penelope, "But lookee here."

Sitting on the top of a wooden dressing table in the little bedroom was a large metal box. Its lid was turned back on its hinges as though waiting for a deposit or a withdrawal. Leeds seized the box and, stepping over Penelope's body, he carried the box into the outer room where the rising fire gave a better light with which to examine the contents.

Putting the box on the floor, Leeds snatched out a pile of papers which were neatly bundled in a thick brown file. "Jest paper," he snarled, "damn store papers."

Then his grasping hands found a smaller box. Quickly he pulled it out and snapped open its fragile tin lid. Inside his thief's eyes saw gold coins and greenbacks. "Got it," he cried in triumph.

"Find whoever it was that was with the woman," ordered Paskil.

Mise, who had already been searching the little rooms, replied, "No use in that. Back door's open. Whoever it was is gone."

"Damn!" seethed Paskil. Standing in the growing firelight he was the picture of rage. His fist clenched his pistol, his feet were planted wide apart, his taut face and intense eyes were brittle masks which stared into the flames.

Finally, he jammed his gun into its holster. With a final look at Penelope, he said simply, "Let's haul outa here, fast."

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Ketchel Creek, small but persistent and often carrying more dirt than water down its channel, had seen many things during its career as a waterway. Perhaps it had watched the era of large lizard like monsters come and go. It might even have satisfied the thirst of a few screeching giant birds whose time had long since passed away and who, centuries ago, had flapped their way into oblivion. Certainly it had been the fountain of life for untold numbers of buffalo and antelope, and it had long been the home for a few tough, bullhead fish.

Yet, despite the fact that it had seen so much, even mean old Ketchel Creek must have taken a second look at its latest strange visitor. To all appearances the old giant lizards had returned, since the new creature breathed fire and smoke. The strange beast also hissed in a wonderfully frightening way. Even better, the new creature had something of the awkward old birds about it too because once or twice it had screeched and screeched so powerfully that the extinct old birds themselves would have been impressed.

For days the monster tested its iron belly by burning the chunks of wood its tenders fed through its square iron mouth. After burning and roaring for a time the monster would fizzle and hiss and gush out white spurts of scalding steam from its belly. That seemed to please the tenders who would dash about pointing and talking. The tenders were especially excited when the monster would screech by spouting a column of white steam into the blue sky from a round black stem on the top of its fat, black belly.

Every day the tenders would awaken the beast by using large steel hammers to pound on the monster's sides and on its many tubes and pipes. A closer look at the activity might have shown that the tenders were in fact adjusting and repairing the great beast. However that might have been, the work of the two men went busily on until one day they rose earlier than usual and began feeding great quantities of wood into the hungry fire box.

With much ado and bustle, the men packed their belongings. They checked and rechecked the gauges in the iron cabin which was perched behind the long boiler. They adjusted a pipe here, they tapped at a connection there, they dabbed with cloths, they squirted with oil, they smeared with grease, and, finally, one of the men wiped at the side of the machine until its proud name written in swirling gold letters shone in the bright morning sun. "Mobilus." The earth walking steam machine sat ready to walk its way up out of the bottoms of Ketchel Creek.

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Engineer Foakes was brimming with bustle. Assistant engineer, Herman was sputtering with excitement. Mobilus was ready to roll.

Standing in the iron cabin behind the boiler, Foakes steadily pulled at a long lever. Piston chambers filled with steam. The great pistons yielded to the pressure and began to slide, one moving forward while the matching one on the other side of the machine slid to the rear. The stroke completed, the pistons each reversed. As the pistons moved and the rods attached to them slid to and fro, the opposite end of the rods gave their force to the axle of the machine. The wide, cleated, iron wheels began to turn.

Biting into the sandy soil of the creek bottom the giant, bright red wheels, rolled toward a sloping incline of dirt. Seeming to grow in power and strength as it rolled forward, Mobilus took the incline head on. Tiny spurts of steam escaping from its piston ports, the ground walking engine easily rolled up out of Ketchel Creek and onto the grassy prairie.

The little train hitched to the powerful Mobilus rolled dutifully behind. First in line and most important were the two long wood wagons. Heaped with the neatly sawed carcasses of cottonwood trees, the wagons creaked under the great weight. The caboose of the little train was the supply wagon. Shorter than the wood wagons, the supply wagon carried tools, spare parts, grease, oil, sheets of iron, and a small, portable forge. Crammed in, almost as an afterthought, were food stuffs and supplies for the men who served the purposes of Mobilus.

Trailing behind on long lead ropes were the two horses which had brought Foakes and Herman to the camp. Judging from the way they tossed their heads and rolled their eyes, the animals were content to be as far from the steam engine as their tethers would permit.

As the train lined out on a course toward the Snowy Mountains, Foakes, unable to contain his glee, gave a long pull on the rope hanging from the ceiling of the cabin. Mobilus spoke with a magnificent burst of steam through its whistle. Under the expert hand of Foakes, the steamy cry began as a shrill, piercing scream. Then as the pressure was reduced, it dropped back on the scale to a lower and deeper almost foghorn sound. The closing, produced by a firm, hard pull by Foakes, was a low, fizzling sound, rising, slowly at first, then quickly to the highest, and most sharply edged cry imaginable. It was the best of Mobilus and it was a metal and steam challenge to the sky, to the grassland and to the mountains looming on the horizon.

The course of the unusual train was marked by a stream of dark blue smoke. Belching out of the tallest of Mobilus' stacks, the smoke rose

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above the long black boiler and over the top of the engineer's cabin. There it met the cooler air outside the fire box and, seeming to lose its sense of business, began to drift lazily away, ushered by the wind which blew steadily from the mountains.

Herman, reaching down to the small stack of wood in the iron cabin, threw a couple of pieces of the fuel through the rectangular fire box opening and banged the door shut. "Pi golly, dat vissle iss one of the best I ever did hear."

Foakes, giving a tug to his engineer's cap, agreed. "Yep, it's got a sound like none I've ever heard before. I had it made special for Mobilus. It does take some steam though. I think we'll have to stick to usin' the bell."

Without waiting for an invitation, Herman reached for the bell rope and gave it three measured pulls. The rope, running the length of the boiler, was attached to the rocker arm of the bell. Upon Herman's commanding pull, the blazing brass bell rocked in its frame while its clapper hammered out a jarring clang, clang, clang for the listening grasslands.

"Got that clanger from a regular rail runner," said Foakes as Herman beamed at the bell tones. Eyeing the pressure gauge, Foakes asked, "Yuh say we'll reach a water hole before sundown?"

Herman gave the assurance that water would indeed be available. "My vell is a goot one. And I have a tank full of vater, you bet."

"Good," nodded Foakes. "Keepin' water in the boiler out here in this dry country is harder than findin' wood."

"Vee fix da vood problem alright," smiled Herman. "Tonight at my house you'll see coal. Vee have a vagonful, pi golly."

The prospect of fueling Mobilus with coal brought a wide grin to Foakes' broad face. "Coal. Why with a stock of coal and some extra cans of water we can outrun and outpull any rig in the country."

As he spoke, Foakes, leaning out of the window of the iron cabin, kept a close watch on the path of the machine. He steered the engine by the use of an iron wheel. The steering mechanism was a well greased series of iron rods and cogs which ran alongside the boiler and were affixed to the small front wheels of the engine. Fully as wide as the rear drive wheels, the front steering wheels were also painted a bright blazing red.

Even though the steering device, with its gears and cogs, was a cleverly arranged system, it required a great effort to turn the iron wheel in the cabin. Therefore, Foakes studied the terrain carefully and tried to

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follow a path which would require as little turning as possible. Fortunately, the gently rolling prairie presented few obstacles and Mobilus was able to crunch its way along a generally straight trail.

Foakes controlled the speed of the machine by the steam lever. Pushed forward, the lever cut down the amount of steam directed into the piston chambers. The reduced steam pressure would permit the pistons to slow down their work and that, of course, slowed the wheels. The reverse was also true. When the lever was pulled back the steam flow increased, the pistons worked more rapidly, and the wheels turned faster.

Mobilus' speed varied with the terrain. Over rough ground where it was necessary to ease the giant wheels over washouts and windpots, the engine would creep forward at about the pace of a man walking. On hard and level ground Mobilus' large pistons would slide to and fro with great excitement and the engine would make the speed of a horse at a fast trot.

As they rolled over the grassland at something between a walk and a trot, Herman's duty was to watch the pressure gauge. When the needle dropped to some point which indicated the need for more fuel, Herman would open the fire door and throw in a few chunks of wood.

After one such refueling, Herman leaned toward Foakes and asked, "How fast could he go on a road?"

"Better'n a full gallop," replied Foakes proudly. "Not like bein' on rails of course, but on a dry flat road we could go thirty miles in one hour."

Herman's eyes widened. "Dot much? Dem coggers I verked on in da olt country go up da mountain and down da mountain but neffer so fast."

"I never did see a cog railroad, but I've heard of `em," said Foakes. "Maybe yuh oughta build one of `em in the mountains in this country."

"Ya, so." agreed Herman.

Stopping occasionally to bring wood from the wagon to the cabin, or the "cab" as Foakes called it, the train rolled along in good order. At midday a longer stop was required. Foakes and Herman carried water from the half dozen barrels lined up on the supply wagon to Mobilus' reservoir. They carried the Ketchel Creek water from barrels to the engine by battered tin buckets which leaked considerable amounts of the precious fluid onto the thirsty grass and down the sides of the engine.

As the last bucketful was poured into the tank, Foakes shook his head as he measured the water depth. "No more whistlin' today. This ranch house of yuhr's better not be more than a few hours away or we'll be ridin' into the station on horses."

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"Not far now," Herman assured him. "Vee make it wit vater to spare, pi golly." Pointing to a long, soft rounded ridgeline directly ahead, Herman promised that "Vun hill past dat ist da ranch, you betcha."

Foakes was encouraged, but not entirely convinced. The past days working with Herman had taught him that Herman was indeed an expert on steam engines, but Foakes had also learned that Herman was not an expert about much of anything else.

Foakes recalled the day he and the ranchers had ridden back from Bright's Diggings. After crossing the mountains by way of Red Hill Road, he and Herman had decided to go directly to Ketchel Creek and begin repairing the blowout in Mobilus' boiler. With Herman as guide the two spent almost a full day making what should have been a half day journey. Foakes had wondered what kind of rancher Herman could be with such a lack of sense for distance and direction.

However, despite his poor sense of local geography, Herman had proven to be an invaluable and expert assistant. He had made suggestions which improved the efficiency of the engine, and as a result of the repair work, Mobilus was in better shape than ever before. It was proving the skill of that repair work in the excellent way it was performing on the journey from Ketchel Creek to Herman's ranch.

After a hot lunch which they heated on the fire box, they set about checking the iron joints and the innumerable pipes and connections around the fat boiler. The engineer and his assistant also smeared grease on the piston rods, on the slides, on numerous bearings, and on the axle and steering joints.

Satisfied and anxious to be on their way, Foakes and Herman fed a generous supply of wood into the fire box. They watched as the steam pressure rose and the needle on the gauge climbed. Finally, unable to resist announcing to the empty grassland that they were again under way, Foakes gave the whistle rope a quick short pull. The "whee" of the whistle snapped quickly off as Foakes released the rope and choked off the release of steam.

Again, the lever came back, the steam gushed into the piston chambers and Mobilus began rolling toward the ridgeline. The power of the engine easily pulled the train steadily up the gentle slope and they were soon ready for the descent on the down side of the hill.

Foakes controlled downhill runs and kept them from getting out of control by the use of brakes attached to the supply wagon. The brakes were applied by the use of a long rope strung from the cab over the tops of the wood wagons and back to the supply wagon wheels. Mobilus itself

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had a braking device on the axle of the giant drive wheels. On easy and gentle slopes the braking of the supply wagon or the "kaboose," as Foakes called it, was adequate. The brake on Mobilus needed to be applied only on the steeper and more dangerous descents.

The gentle upslope of the hill they had just climbed proved to be only one side of the matter. The downside looked to be sharper than any they had yet encountered. As they rolled up to where the sharp downside could be seen, Foakes expertly pulled a small handle on the wall of the cab. That device released the steam in the piston chambers and with a gush of white vapor the pressure on the pistons was released and the wheels stopped almost with a jolt. With his other hand Foakes pulled the brake lever and Mobilus found itself locked into place on the top of the hill with its trailing wagons still sitting on the slope behind.

The abrupt stop would have been necessary, or at least a good idea, to give Foakes a chance to survey the land ahead. However, in this case there was much more than a steep hillside that caused the stout engineer to bring his train to a halt.

At the bottom of the hill in a dry wash there was a large wagon. It sat at an awkward position with its front wheels and tongue at a sharp angle to the wagon box. The best and most obvious guess was that the wagon had somehow been involved in an accident. Perhaps the nearby team of six giant horses, still in harness but unhitched from the tongue, had run away and deposited the wagon in its impossible location.

Another wagon, also a large freight hauler, was pulled up nearby. That wagon's team of six horses stood in harness surveying the situation. All twelve animals seemed quiet and innocent enough. The way they all stood looking at the stuck wagon sent a clear message that they took no blame for the incident.

The humans on the scene had stopped what they were doing to look up the hill at Mobilus. One man had a shovel in his hand and had apparently been digging at the sharp waist high washout bank. Their purpose clearly was to make an incline for the removal of the wagon. Two other men had been at work on the wagon itself, probably repairing damage caused by the mishap. A fourth man had been offloading boxes from the wagon to lighten it for the removal effort. Helping him was a woman who stood shading her eyes and staring up the hill at the steam engine.

As Mobilus sat with tiny clouds of steam coiling lazily out of its piston ports, Foakes and Herman climbed down from the cab and looked back at the wagoners. "Looks like the wreck of the old 47," said Foakes.

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"Ya. A runavay," guessed Herman.

It was a short walk down to the little group and as Foakes approached, he called a greeting. "Good afternoon to yuh. It looks like yuh been derailed in a bad spot."

A large, square man stepped toward him and agreed. "It's a bad spot sure enough."

A smaller man with a wide, white moustache joined them and without any polite words of introduction, asked "What, by the great snappin' whip of the mighty loon is that?"

Following the man's pointing stare, Foakes looked back up the hill at his machine. Sitting there outlined against the sky Mobilus was a sight to behold. Its blazing red driving wheels glistened in the sun. The long black body of the boiler loomed large and imposing. Adding to the picture, smoke drifted from the funnel shaped pipe on top of the boiler and hung like a cloud over the engine. The gleaming brass bell, the pipes, the piston tracks, the iron cab, the smaller steering wheels all combined to create the image of a great living iron monster sitting above their heads.

"Why his name is Mobilus," replied Foakes. "He's a ground walkin' steamer, that's what he is."

"A steamer?" asked the stout wagoneer, "why it looks fer all the world like a railroad engine."

"Some might call `im that," agreed Foakes, "but yuh can't call him a railroad engine 'cause he ain't a rail machine. He's a ground walker. He can go most any place a wagon can."

"What good is it?" demanded the smaller man from behind his moustache.

Foakes, taken aback by the question, looked at the man for a moment. "Why, it can pull a half dozen wagons and it can go faster'n yuh can think."

"But where in tarnation is the team?" demanded the bristling man.

"Team," sputtered Foakes, "there ain't no team. It's just like a railroad engine. Can't yuh see that?"

"There ain't no railroad in these parts," argued the smaller man, "and if there ain't no railroad, how can that be a railroad engine?"

Patiently, Foakes tried again to explain, "He ain't a railroad engine cause he don't run on rails. He's made to run over the ground. He is like a railroad engine because he runs on steam. So he's a ground walkin' steamer."

"Then yuh're a..a..," the square wagon owner struggled for the word.

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Foakes supplied some possibilities. "Some would say an engineer," he suggested. "Others have said I'm a steamist."

The others had joined them, and another man from the wagon party repeated the word as though he had never heard it before. "A steamist?"

"Why yes," said Foakes, bobbing his head, "I have indeed been called a steamist. I'll take that ticket and fer my money it's good all the way to the end of the line."

"Well, then, what brings a steamist to these parts," asked the wagon owner who switched his attention from the impressive engine to the engine owner.

"I'm on a run without rails to prove that steam can pull wagons wherever wagons can go. Up there," here Foakes gestured at Mobilus, "is the pullin' power of at least forty mules, maybe more."

"Kaflooy," cried the smallish man, "yuh mean to tell me that them red wheels and that smoke can pull as much a long team?"

"More," replied Foakes confidently.

"As much as my dozen horses?" asked the smiling wagon owner as he calmly loaded the bowl of a large pipe.

"Nuthin' against draft horses," answered Foakes, "they're fine animals, but yes, Mobilus up there could outpull all twelve of `em and more, too." Surveying the wagon in the sand pit, he added, "It looks like yuh could use some pullin'. What happened, a runaway?"

"Nope," drawled the pipe smoker, "The brake rope broke plumb in two. Jess here," indicating the feisty old timer with the flaring moustache, "rode it to the bottom of the hill and saved a rollover, but now we've got some diggin' to do afore we can pull it out."

"How's yuhr supply of water in them barrels?" asked Foakes indicating the two water containers roped to the side of the stuck wagon.

"Good. In fact one of `em is full," replied the wagon owner, taking a look at Mobilus and then producing his own puff of smoke from his large pipe. "If yuh need drinkin' water, help yuhrself."

"Not me," grinned Foakes, "ole Mobilus up there is gonna need a drink cause I aim to put him to work."

"Yuh mean yuhr plannin' on dumpin' good water into that puffer up there?" demanded Jess.

"If I pull yuhr wagon out of that wash, would that be worth about a half a barrel of water?"

"Mister, if yuhr machine can pull my wagon up out of that sand ditch yuh can have all the water we got."

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"Vee pull `em out, pi golly," said Herman excitedly as they all began walking up the hill toward Mobilus.

It was the work of a few minutes to block the wheels of the wood wagons and to tie the brake and block the wheels of the supply wagon. In another moment Mobilus was unhitched from his train and set free for another task. Then, as the little group from the wagons watched, Foakes climbed into the cab. He first closed the steam ports and after throwing more wood into the fire box, watched as the pressure gauge began rising.

It wasn't long before Foakes could pull back the steam lever and set the giant red wheels in motion. Carefully Foakes steered the engine down the hill where he brought Mobilus to a halt. With some tugging and with the use of a small sledge hammer Foakes reset the handle on the drive mechanism. The effect was to reverse the power on the axle and to cause the wheels to turn backwards. With great care and ever so slowly, Foakes backed Mobilus to the edge of the sand pit. He quickly set the brake, pushed the steam lever to its closed position, and, again using the sledge, reset the drive device.

Willing hands tugged at the wagon tongue and brought it to Mobilus' thick iron hitch plate. The iron ring in the tongue was bolted to the hitch and the wagon was pronounced ready to be towed.

Giving the connection a long look, Foakes frowned and planted his hands on his hips. "I'm afraid we may jest tear yuhr pull ring out of that tongue. Have yuh got some rope we could use to tie onto the wagon frame?"

"Better than that, we've got a log chain," offered Jess.

Amid nods and grunts of agreement, it was decided to add the chain to the hitching arrangement. It was produced and its steel links and hooks fastened to the wagon and to Mobilus.

Stepping back to survey the rigging, old Jess had a suggestion. "We oughta lighten the load before yuh try to do any pullin'. The wagon is heavy enough by itself, but with the load its got on board yuh couldn't pull it outa there with a fifty team rig."

"I'm not much fer unloadin' freight cars or freight wagons," mused Foakes, "and it's bad enough when yuh got a freight dock to work from. No, unloadin' freight jest so's yuh can load it back on ain't fer me." With a sly smile he added, "and I don't think a few boxes is gonna make much difference to ole Mobilus."

"A few little boxes," sputtered Jess, "Mister, I'll have yuh know them boxes is heavy, and if we don't off load `em, yuh'll never even budge that wagon."

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Climbing into the cab, Foakes called over his shoulder, "If yuhr wagon ain't outa that piddly little wash in two minutes, I'll unload it all by myself."

Foakes gave the fire box more fuel. He carefully checked his levers and watched the steam gauge. Leaning out of the window of the cab he called down, "Hold yuhr ears, ole Mobilus is about to call fer a clear track."

With that, and assured of a barrel of water, Foakes felt comfortable with letting off some steam through the whistle. Giving the rope a tug, Foakes again screeched away the silence of the prairie. He then eased off to a throaty roar and finished with another quick screech.

In the silence that followed, one of the wagon people, a silent man with a solemn face, said simply, "It'll work."

As though the strange assurance was some sort of signal, Foakes began easing the steam lever back. The solid, iron force of Mobilus moved forward. The giant wheels turned, their wide, flat surfaces pressed tight against the ground. The sharp cleats bit deep into the sod. The pressure of the steam against the huge pistons increased. The log chain tightened.

With apparent ease, the big freight wagon rolled forward. Its wheels came up against the embankment, and yielding to the strength of Mobilus, the wagon simply rolled up over the bank, out of the sand and onto firm ground. As an announcement of a job well done, Foakes gave two quick pulls on the bell rope. The quick clang, clang, brought a cheer from the wagon party.

The young woman, gave a warhoop. "Pa, I'm gettin' myself a steam wagon. That machine jest did what would have taken all five of us a half a day to do."

Jess, the wagon driver, was speechless. The strange man whose face was a solemn mask without expression, repeated his puzzling statement, "That'll work." The wagon attendant who had been called "Jake" during the hitching operation waved his hat over his head and called out, "Hello, yuh blamed wagon. How do yuh like that." Herman added his own comment, "Ya. Ya. Up out of da ditch, pi golly."

Again Foakes set the brake, released steam pressure, and climbed down from the cab. The unhitching of Mobilus was accomplished in short order and as Herman directed the transfer of water from the wagon barrel to Mobilus' reservoir, Foakes talked with the wagon owner and the young woman.

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The wagon owner extended his hand and introduced himself, "My name's Carpenter, Amos Carpenter. This here is my daughter, Jane."

"Pleased to meet yuh. I'm Foakes and that," indicating his busy assistant engineer, "is Herman."

"We're indebted to you, Mister Foakes," said Jane with a wide smile. "That is one very powerful machine. I'm afraid that this would have been our night camp if you hadn't come by."

"Not to mention all the unloadin' and reloadin' we would have been doin'," added Amos. Then looking at Mobilus he asked, "How many of them machines are there?"

"Mobilus is one of a kind, as far as I know," replied Foakes, "but when the newspapers back east tell about this trip I'm makin', there's bound to be more of `em made."

"Will there be lots more railroads then," asked Jane, with an edge of concern in her voice.

"Well, railroads is a different thing," said Foakes, "they'll come sure enough, even to this territory. But the ground walkers like Mobilus can do the work of mule and horse teams and they can go almost anyplace a wagon can go. That way they're better than railroad engines because railroads have got to do all that gradin' and track layin' and such as that."

"Well, I've seen somethin' today I never expected to see," said Jane as she watched the water carrying operation.

In a quiet and thoughtful way, Amos echoed her idea, "Yep, that engine rollin' up like that was somethin' I couldn't even have dreamed of happenin'." Looking at the two teams of horses, Amos added, "and I have the feelin' that, in a manner of speakin', Jane, we've seen the beginnin' of the end of the freight business as we know it."

Jane's gaze followed that of her father. "I suppose yuhr right, Pa, but it'll be a long time comin'. I don't think Mister Foakes will be takin' much of our haulin' business."

"Oh, no." cried Foakes quickly, "I'm experimentin', not goin' into the haulin' business. I ain't the one to put you and yuhr hosses on a sidetrack for an express steamer."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that, Mister Foakes," smiled Amos, "I sure wouldn't want to try outhaulin' that critter." His reference to Mobilus brought a good natured chuckle from Foakes and Jane.

"Where is yuhr haulin' business?" asked Foakes.

"It was in the minin' camps in Colorado," replied Amos. "But a lot of the mines have been worked out there so we decided to take a look at

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things up this way. Besides, we have a friend in these parts who might be needin' some help, so here we are."

Looking at Herman who had joined them, Foakes' round face beamed. "Why, Herman here might know yuhr friend. Herman lives in this area and has jest been helpin' me with Mobilus."

"Maybe our luck has taken a turn, Jane," said Amos. He explained to Herman and Foakes, "We know we're in the right area, but we don't know exactly where our friend's ranch is located. His name is Bannack, Owen Bannack. Do yuh know him?"

Foakes and Herman stared in amazement. Herman's face broke into a wide smile, "Mine Gott," he almost shouted. "Mister Foakes, here vee haf pulled out da vagon of Owen's friends. Mine Gott," he repeated.

"You know, Owen," asked Jane her eyes widening in surprise.

"Know Owen?" said Foakes, "I'm here to tell yuh we know Owen. I think we're all on the same track. We're mighty lucky we didn't miss the signals and get off on different lines."

Nobody completely understood all of what Foakes said, but like most people who talked to the energetic engineer, they got his meaning. Suddenly everyone started talking at once.

After a minute of excitement, the conversation settled down and Foakes recounted his first meeting with Owen and how the two of them had ridden to Lewistown. Amos explained how, almost two years ago, Jane had found Owen wounded in their wagon yard near Frailey, Wyoming. He went on to describe how she had kept him from falling into the hands of the outlaw group which had been hunting him. Blushing from her father's story about her and Owen, Jane explained how Owen had ridden with them to Colorado when they moved their freighting business to the mining camps.

Jane then described how Owen had tracked down the killer Serril, and finally decided to return to his ranch in Montana. "After he left," she explained, "a letter came for him. We worried that it might be important, so we read it. The letter was from the man who had been looking after Owen's ranch. In his letter Mister Andrews wrote about some trouble here with a man named Paskil. The letter also said the ranchers might even lose their land."

Amos put it simply and directly, "It sounded like Owen might be ridin' into trouble, so here we are. Meetin' up with you and yuhr steam engine seems like some kind miracle."

Jess, who had been looking at the horses and had just walked up to the group, interrupted, "What's this talk of Owen?"

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"Why, Owen's a friend of Mister Foakes here," explained Amos.

"Whoa. That's a team I never thought I'd see," exclaimed Jess. "I can't believe Owen's become a steamist."

"No, not at all," laughed Foakes. "but he sure enough saved my skin when a couple of bad wheels tried to derail me."

Soon everyone's story was told and retold enough for the pieces to come together. Jess and Jake Ritter agreed that the lush grassland around the feet of the Snowy Mountains was itself an explanation of why Owen had ranched there and had wanted to return. Foakes, looking at Jane, said he could understand why Owen had considered selling the ranch and returning to Colorado. Amos, speaking for everyone said the immediate thing was to do whatever was necessary to see that the ranchland of Owen and his neighbors was not lost to "the likes of Paskil and his hired gunhands."

"I tink vee should hitch up da wagons and Mopilus and head for Herman's ranch. Ya?" suggested Herman.

"Ole Mobilus has been under the water spout and his fire box is still hot," said Foakes energetically. "And I'm lookin' forward to seein' the coal Herman's been talkin' to me about."

Amos, taking a long puff through the curved stem of his pipe, had his own idea. "Jess can drive the lead wagon and, Jake, you can drive number two. Mister Foakes, if yuh got room in that cab, I wouldn't mind ridin' in that machine of yuhrs."

"I'll go yuh one better, Amos," replied Foakes. "I'll ask Herman to ride on one of yuhr wagons and you and yuhr daughter can both see how Mobilus works." As an afterthought he asked, "Yuh don't mind fillin' in as fireman do yuh?"

"I'll do that," laughed Jane.

"Done," announced Foakes. "It appears that I've got a new assistant engineer, and a firetender that's brighter and prettier than a new bell. If we want to keep any kind of schedule on this line, we need to be gettin our pressure back up."

Moments later the wagons were ready to roll and Amos and Jane were aboard Mobilus. Waiting for the steam pressure to rise, Foakes explained the general principle of the engine to his new helpers. He also pointed out the levers and how they operated. Satisfied that everything was in order, Foakes turned to Jane and asked, "Do yuh remember my tellin' yuh the purpose of that rope?"

"I believe yuh said it was the whistle."

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"Good. Yuh got the makin's of a real steamist. Now why don't yuh give it a tug so's yuhr friends back in the wagons will know we're leavin' the station and callin' fer all the track switches to be opened. Yuh also never know, maybe yuhr friend Mister Owen Bannack is within earshot."

Blushing, but with her face set with determination, Jane firmly grasped the rope and gave it a steady, strong pull. The long, lonesome call of the whistle sounded over the prairie. It filled the air around the wagons and the engine, then it rushed away carrying its message over the rolling hills and to the far horizon.

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Owen Bannack, his intense grey eyes fixed on the Somp's face, listened carefully. The liveryman had pulled onto the hard packed dirt of Herman's ranch yard only moments before, the horses pulling the small dray wagon, lathered white along their necks and shoulders. Somp himself was angry and each line on his weathered face seemed to be working against every other line and wrinkle.

"Yep, burned to the ground. Every board of the place went up. We was lucky to save the buildin's next door."

"And Penelope," asked Owen.

"She must'a gone up with the store, Owen," said Somp with a sad, heavy sigh. "We was all askin' and lookin', but nobody had seen hide nor hair of her."

"And the girl?" asked Owen as he watched one of the ranchers lift the still, quiet form of Maudee from the wagon box and began carrying her toward the ranch house.

"Widow Noams pulled me to one side after the fire fightin' was over and told me to come over to her place. When I got there, she showed me the girl and said the girl had showed up cryin' and jabberin' away, but not makin' any sense. The widow said the girl kept sayin' somethin' about a box from the store. Accordin' to Missus Noams the girl had kept a pintin' at the alley. I went scoutin' around and found that big box jest a ways from her back door. The best I can figure is that the girl somehow went into the store while it was burnin' and pulled that box out. Looks to me like some kind of strong box, probably Penelope's money keeper."

Somp words directed everyone's attention to the iron strong box from Penelope Hogan's store. The squat, heavy box, its two hasps and handles caked with dirt, sat in the wooden box of the liveryman's wagon. The same box the night thieves had shoved aside as being filled with useless store papers now seemed to invite inspection.

"Better have a look," suggested Owen as he reached over the side of the wagon and grasped the box. With a heave of his powerful arms he easily lifted the box out of the wagon and placed it on the ground. Little clots of the dirt which had jammed into the hasps as Maudee had dragged the box through the alley, fell easily away as Owen loosened the fasteners and lifted the thick, black lid.

Inside were more than dozen bundles of paper, each tied with a white string. Owen lifted them out and one by one, and as he did so, he inspected the outermost paper on each package. In every case there was a handwritten note explaining what was in the bundle.

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"Ordered in July" said one note. "Ordered in August," said a companion, and so on. It began to look like Maudee had rescued the useless records of a burned store. Then in the bottom of the box Owen found a large and heavy manila envelope. Scrawled across the front in a bold, roll of neat ink letters was the one word, "Affidavits."

Quickly, Owen's large hands turned the envelope over and found the thin red string which was wound around the little cardboard buttons, one on the flap and one on the envelope itself. Owen spun the string out of its figure eight pattern and the flap fell back. His hand plunged into the enclosure and withdrew a sheaf of papers. He shuffled them and found they were identical, except for the signatures.

Heekal voiced the recognition of the others. "Hot Sunday!" he called out. "Them's the papers we been signing. If Paskil was lookin' for 'em, he came up empty."

"Yep. He may have looked, but he didn't find any hay in the bunk," sang out old Wat his wide eyes dancing with excitement.

Bish's booming voice joined in. "At least all that drivin' in one by one, didn't go fer nuthin'. Paskil may have figured out we wasn't jest goin' in fer supplies, but he didn't get the papers."

Owen was relieved but less gleeful about finding the affidavits. "If I had brought the girl with me instead of smuggling her into town and putting her in the store with Penelope, Paskil might not have raided the store and burned it to the ground."

Sid Andrews rejected the idea. "Yuh did what yuh thought was best, Owen. Paskil and his men were coverin' the roads and yuh put the girl where she was in good hands and in the safest place in the whole area. Besides it worked. We went in one by one and signed our papers, and we don't know that whoever burned the store even knew about the affidavits."

To a man, the ranchers agreed with Sid. "Sendin' her into town was right, Owen," insisted Heekal, "and puttin' her in that wagon of bricks was a tick in the trail that Paskil wouldn't think of in six of his crooked lifetimes."

Somp, still sitting in his wagon, confirmed the soundness of the plan. "The boys are right, Owen. There wasn't even a hint of what the ranchers were doin'. Everyone figured they were jest comin' in fer supplies. While Paskil and his fleabite friends were watchin' the roads fer the three of yuh, the papers were bein' signed in the last place he would have looked, Penelope's store. The store burnin' and killin' of Penelope probably didn't have anythin' to do with the girl doin' her notarizin' in the back room."

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"Did Maudee say anything besides what she said about the box?" asked Owen.

"Naw, nuthin' that made any sense," replied Somp shaking his head. "She woke up once fer a few minutes. She had a kinda wild and feared look. With her eyes a bulgin' out she hollered somethin' about the floor. 'In the floor,' she said, 'In the floor.' After that she went out like a candle in the wind. I thought she might even have cashed in."

"Did anybody get a chance to look inside the store before the place really got to burning," asked Owen a flicker of new interest showing in his strong face.

"Wasn't any way to do that. When we got there the place was burnin' like the front door of Hell. All that linseed oil and kerosene stored in the back made the place a torch. We jest wet down the other buildin's. There wasn't no sense in wastin' what little water we had on the fire itself."

"We all think it was Paskil or his men, but do yuh have any proof if that?" asked Sid Andrews.

"No proof, but some woman said she was up tendin' a sick kid and she thinks she saw three men runnin' down the alley a few minutes before the fire was spotted."

"Gotta be some of Paskil's snakes," growled one rancher.

"Yeah, but why would Paskil set fire to Hogan's store," asked another, "it don't make any sense if he wasn't lookin' fer the affidavits. Him and his crew has always avoided makin' any serious trouble in Lewistown up until now."

"It's possible some of his men jest took it on themselves and went in lookin' fer whatever they could find and Penelope caught them with their dirty fingers in the cookie jar," suggested Heekal.

"Yep, yep, that's it," piped up Wat, hearing something he could agree with. "Some of Paskil's swamp rats went out on their own lookin' fer some cash."

"It sure is possible that Wat's right," nodded Bish. "but that don't change what happened." His deep, solemn bass voice bring a note of gloom back to the group.

"They musta plugged her, then fired the place," suggested Somp. "The same woman that said she seen some jaspers runnin' down the alley, said she was pretty sure she heard some shootin' right before that."

"If it was Paskil, then he's showin' himself for the yellow dog that he is," intoned Heekal, his well known temper rising. "By damn, I say we ride fer town and clean it out from one end to the other."

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There were nods and grunts of agreement as the anger of the man began to spread to others. They felt the need to strike out at their enemy.

"I feel the same way the rest of you do," began Owen, "and I feel responsible for what's happened because most of it was my idea. Still, I think we need to hold off until we know more about what actually happened. We also need to know just what Paskil is up to and what his plans are. Remember, these affidavits are worthless until they are filed with the Land Commissioner. Of course we hope that by now he's at Bright's Diggings."

"We know Paskil's gatherin' a mob in town and that he's plannin' on ridin' on us," argued Heekal, "seems to me that's enough. We could mount everyone here and ride through him and that dirt cloud he's collected. We could be at Bright's in hours, or in Great Falls in two days if the Commissioner ain't at the Diggin's."

"Maybe we could," agreed Owen, "but while we were in a shooting war, nothing would be settled, and we still run the risk that Paskil could get onto our range and start surveying before we could file these papers, anywhere. As I understand the Land Commissioner, if Paskil surveys before we file our papers, we could lose out to his claim. Therefore, we have to get these affidavits to him, whether its Great Falls or Bright's and at the same time we've got to keep Paskil and his surveyors off our land."

Sid Andrews, seeking to calm the hotheaded Heekal, agreed with Owen. "We all liked Penelope and we'll see to it that her killers are dealt with. But Penelope herself would tell us to keep our eyes on the main trail. Right now that trail leads to the land office or at least to the Commissioner, wherever he is. We need to save the ranches while we still can. We can deal with Paskil and his sneak thieves later."

"Somp," said Owen, "what did you see of Paskil's outfit before you rode out here?"

"There must be more than a dozen of `em," declared Somp, "my corral is full of their hosses. When I rolled out of town, them rannies were walkin' around like they had jest bought Lewistown, lock, stock and barrel. They had some money, that's fer sure, and they was spendin' it in the Pink Eye and in a couple of other places, even early this mornin'. The kid that helps me clean stalls said he heard one of `em say somethin' about takin' a day off before they busted through the pass on Red Hill Road and started surveyin' ranch land. My guess is they're fixin' to ride on yuh tomorrow."

The men fell silent. Somp's words made the land war somehow seem very near. Words and threats became unimportant. The fact was that the

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next day men would die. Each man realized that he himself might soon be dead or that a friend, perhaps the man standing next to him, might fall in the gunplay which now seemed to be as close and certain as morning itself.

The battle for land was almost upon them. For them there was no choice. Already, they had paid for their houses, for their livestock, and for the right to run cattle on the grassland with years of sacrifice and hard work. The determination that had carried them through blizzards, drought, cattle disease, and untold personal difficulties now told them they could not yield to the threats of an evil man. They would fight. But the odds against them were great, and every man wondered what hope they had of winning.

Then across the prairie, carried by the gentle morning wind came a sound or a call, perhaps a signal. It was unlike any sound heard before on Herman's ranch or on any ranch lying across the foothills of the Snowy Mountains.

The exclamations were immediate but mixed. "What in blazes...Did yuh hear that...Where'd that come from...Couldn't a been a coyote...Ain't no coyote or wolf ever sounded like that..."

Owen, however, did not immediately speak. He looked at the low, rounded horizon. His eyes found the plume of blue smoke and as he watched, the others took his lead and followed his gaze.

"A fire?" asked a puzzled Sid Andrews.

"No. At least not a wildfire," replied Owen as an easy, faint smile softened his face. "Gents, I think we're about to have some friendly company."

"Company?" asked Sid?

"Yes," replied Owen, "I wouldn't bet my hat on it, but I think we're about to see Herman make a grand homecoming appearance."

"Herman," began Wat, "why he went off with that strange talkin' railroad feller."

"Wasn't they goin' down to Ketchel Creek?" asked Bish, "somethin' about a railroad engine that Owen's friend kept sayin' wasn't a railroad engine... er..somethin' like that."

As Bish spoke, the railroad engine that wasn't a railroad engine made its appearance on the top of the hill. First the blue stem of smoke grew cleared and stronger. Then the stack came into view. A large black funnel, it rose quickly out of the ground. With it came the round black front end of the boiler, Mobilus' nose. Then the entire engine rolled into full view.

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Flashing in the sun, the spokes of the high red wheels spun round and round. Along the lower edge of the boiler near the giant wheels, spurts of white vapor spewed forth in mechanical rhythm with the powerful sliding pistons. The smaller front wheels angled a bit toward the most gentle slope of the hill, and like their larger companions, they too winked and flashed bright red against the soft green hillside.

As Mobilus' train appeared and lined out on the downhill run, a figure leaning out of the cab waved a vigorous greeting. The figure spoke to an unseen person in the cab and the result was another ear splitting greeting from the great Mobilus. The rush of steam out of the whistle came first as a long and very loud shrill scream. Then came two short bursts.

The reactions of the watching ranchers came as a chorus of mixed comments. "What in tarnation?...If that ain't a sight...By damn, that railroad talkin' man was right about a ground walker...If that ain't a kidney bean fer yuh...Lookee there at them wheels..."

Wat may have summed it up for most of the men as he whistled through a gap in his front teeth and cried out, "Yep. Ole Foakes sure has got himself one big damn steam kettle alright."

As the oncoming procession continued to grow longer, Sid Andrews puzzled over it. "I don't remember Mister Foakes sayin' anything about havin' extra wagons. Looks like there's two of `em. Big freight wagons, I'd say."

Sid's last words, intended mostly for Owen who had been standing at his side, fell into empty space. Owen was moving with long, ground eating strides, across the hard, dry ground of the ranchyard and up onto the grassy hillside. It took him only moments to close the distance to the steam engine and horse drawn wagon train.

Owen's path was a direct line toward the lumbering freight wagons. However, as he came abreast of Mobilus, the engine jerked to a halt and a slight figure leaped from the cab and made a rush toward him. Surprised, he paused, but only for the short end of a second. He turned toward the rushing figure, and in an instant the darting person from the engine disappeared into Owen's arms. Mobilus hooted his steamy approval into the wide, endless sky.

The steamer rolled on down to the ranch to the continuing awe of the crowd of men around Somp's wagon and to the utter amazement of a group of women gathered around the door of the log house. The freight wagons halted near Owen and his companion. Then they too rolled on

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down the hillside. Finally, Owen and Jane, walking slowly together, joined the others.

Everyone seemed to be greeting and introducing everyone else. There were a hundred shouted questions, most about Mobilus. Foakes was all a-bustle. He rushed about shutting off valves, adjusting some bolt here and some iron gadget there and relishing every second of the attention he was receiving.

Herman, too, was the subject of some new attention. Before, as simply a fellow rancher, he had been accepted well enough and generally liked for his good humored nature and for being a trusted and dependable neighbor. Now, he had suddenly become an expert in the new and most impressive science of steam. Holding a long spouted oil can, he explained the steam drive to uncomprehending friends who smiled a lot and shook their heads in amazement.

Amos Carpenter introduced the men from his wagons. Jess was presented as a long time friend and expert wagon driver. Jake Ritter was explained as a handy man and substitute driver. When Amos laughed and said that Jake had once "a hard man with a quick gun, but was now a man who took orders from Jane," the men laughed and made a few friendly comments at Jake's expense. They understood from what Amos said that Jake had once gone down the wrong trail and had tried to live the life of a hardcase, but that he had reformed and was paying the toll on the road back by working under the stern eye of Jane Carpenter.

Jane, her straw colored hair, wisping in the breeze stood to the side of the group and merely smiled at her father's explanations. The fact that Owen stood very near her combined with the greeting the ranchers had seen and those facts said more than words about how that matter stood.

Sitting near her was a large, dark brown dog who seemed pleased at all the talk and commotion. He even seemed to think it was all in good fun. His almost comical expression was, in large measure, the result of a large scar over one eye which made it appear he was perpetually winking at the entire world. More than one rancher stopped by and spoke friendly words to the animal, all of which he received with the very best humor.

The remaining member of the Carpenter wagon party was a shy man with a face that was nearly blank. The expression that it did wear was an almost constant faint smile. The eyes looked out upon the world and failed to understand all of what they saw. Even as he stood near other men, he seemed to be a man apart.

When Amos said simply, "Men, this is Pilfer," they instantly understood. Their acceptance of him and their understanding that his

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senses where less than their own came in the hearty and sincere way they greeted him. "Howdy, Pilfer,...Welcome to the territory Pilfer, old top, I'll bet you're the one that does all the work fer the outfit."

Pilfer accepted the greetings and even smiled a bit more than usual. For some reason, they spoke in louder voices than usual and the manner of speaking was that which people often adopt when addressing children. Somehow Pilfer was different from other men; somehow his expression, "It'll work" and the alternative, "That won't work," had greater authority than the words of others. He was reserved and detached, yet he was very much a part of the Carpenter wagon group.

The moment Jane heard about the stricken girl, Maudee, she spoke softly to Owen and moved off toward the ranch house. Sid's wife, spoke briefly to her husband and quickly walked away to join Jane and the other women.

"Sarah says there'll be food pretty soon," announced Sid. "so we probably should be helpin' Amos get his stock watered and fed."

Quickly the men turned to the task and soon Amos' two teams of big wagon horses were in Herman's round corral, munching hay and contentedly burbling water in the wooden stock tank. With tired eyes, the horses looked around at the grassland and at the white capped Snowy Mountains, wondering perhaps if they had perhaps found the end of very long trail.

While the horses were being unhitched and tended, Owen and Sid told Amos the situation they faced. Amos listened and puffed gently at his long stemmed pipe.

"I can't say I'm surprised at the way things stand," said Amos, "the way Sid laid it out in his letter, we knew there must be trouble up here on the range. That made it easy to decide to load up and follow yuhr trail."

"That's the letter Sarah told yuh about," Sid explained to Owen, "I guess yuh left jest left before it got there."

"Speakin' of letters, Owen," said Amos easily, "There is the matter of another letter that I saw after yuh left Colorado to come back up here. I think yuh should know about it."

Owen's broad face showed a mild curiosity as he asked, "Another letter?"

"Yep," drawled Amos, "It came to the general store at the minin' camp. Since the one it was addressed to was dead, nobody seemed to know what to do with it. There wasn't a return address on the envelope or inside, so they jest threw it away. About a week later I was talkin to the storekeep and he mentioned it. Right away I knowed it was somethin'

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you'd want to know about. I pried at the store man and he told me what he could remember about it."

"It was to...," Owen left the question hanging in the air, but it was clear he already had an idea about what answer he would get.

"Serril," answered Amos. "The scum that died at the Rusty Dime."

Amos' answer didn't say that Serill had been hanged at the Rusty Dime by Owen. Amos didn't need to repeat the fact that Serril had been one of the marauders that had killed Owen's wife and children. Neither did he need to say that Owen had tracked down two of the three killers and had hanged both of them.

"Go on, Amos," said Owen evenly, his face intense and silent. His steel hard, grey eyes fastened on Amos' face. The tall rancher's gaze was intense but patient with his friend.

"The storekeep said it was short and didn't make much sense. But he remembered one thing pretty clear. The letter said to Serril, 'Come on up to Montana Territory. I'm onto a way of takin' over a dozen ranches on our old hurrahin' range.' That's all he could recollect except the signature. It was 'Pa's."

Owen's eyes left Amos's face and turned to the peaks of the Snowy Mountains. One arm rested on the side of Amos' freight wagon and the other hung by his side, his large hand near the butt of his navy colt hanging snugly in the oiled brown holster. His hand moved and brushed the revolver as if checking to see that it was there and ready.

Sid's question broke the silence. "Then Paskil's the third raider?"

"Sounds that way to me," replied Amos keeping his eyes on Owen's face.

With a voice that was strong with memories, Sid added up the information they had. "Sure, that fits. Remember, Owen" The one clue we had that didn't make any sense was that someone said one of the raiders looked in the dark like he had a bandage on his head. It was Paskil's white hair."

With his face set as if in marble, Owen asked, "Amos, I'll ask you to explain to Jane."

Amos nodded. The wagon owner knew that words would not turn Owen or even change his course. Amos' face showed that he had known from the beginning what Owen's reaction would be to the Serril letter.

Quickly, the story of the letter unfolded. Sid came to realize that Paskil was one of the three men who had raided Owen's ranch almost two year earlier and killed Owen's family. Sid also knew that Owen

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could not be stopped from going after the killer. Sid did, however, hope for delay.

"Owen, yuh got a lot of friends here," Sid reminded him. "We've all got a score to settle with Paskil."

"Sid, you of all people know that I've got to be riding out," said Owen flatly.

"I know," agree Sid, "but things have changed some. I think we've got a right to defend our ranches if Paskil and his men ride on us. But since there's a sheriff in town, I don't think we can go out with the intention of hanging a man. That seems different somehow. But if yuh're bound to go, let me ride along."

"I agree that when there's law available we have to look to it, Sid," said Owen quietly, "and I don't intend to carry out the commission of the vigilance committee, if it can be avoided. I'll bring Paskil to the law, if I can. But if something goes wrong and I can't bring him in, I'll be the one to answer for any law that's broken."

Trying one last way to restrain Owen's solo action of riding after Paskil, Sid reminded him, "There's the matter of Paskil plannin' on ridin' on us. How will that play out?"

"If I can get to him soon enough, the whole land grab will fall apart," Owen reasoned. "I'll take the affidavits and get them to the Land Commissioner. If I get lucky, the war on Red Hill Road that Paskil is planning won't have to happen."

"How should we play it on this end?" asked Sid.

"The way we planned," said Owen, "take strong positions on this side of the pass. If Paskil and his men show up, hold them off, In the meantime, you might send a man to Lewistown to see if there's any help to be had there. Send another man to Bright's to see how I managed there. If I have to, I'll send the affidavits on to Great Falls by one of the boys at Bright's."

"Yuh think Anse might have gotten through?" wondered Sid, "It's sure our best chance," shrugged Owen, "he knows the road and he knows the problems. He also has the best chance of tracking down the Land Commissioner and persuading him to take a ride to this part of the territory."

"Even if yuh don't get Paskil, the land steal will fail if we can jest get them papers to the Land Commissioner in time," agreed Sid. Shaking his head with worry and concern, he added, "Things are happenin' too fast, Owen. I wish we had more time."

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Owen gave his friend a gently slap on the arm, "If I can buy some, Sid, I will." Looking at Amos he added, "I'm glad you came. It couldn't have been at a better time. We'll need every man we can get. Maybe that greener that Jess carries around will save the day again." Nodding in the direction of the ranchhouse, Owen added, "I think they're calling dinner. While you two join the others, I'll have a word with Mister Foakes and then be off."

With a wave of his hand, Owen turned and called to the engineer. "Mister Foakes, I haven't had a chance to talk to you since you made your grand entrance. Welcome."

"Thanks, Owen. Tell me what do yuh think of Mobilus now that yuh've seen him runnin'. The last time yuh saw him he was in the bottom of Ketchel Creek with a hole in his boiler."

"He's everything you said he is, Mister Foakes. And with that whistle, he a bit more." With a look at Amos' two freight wagons, Owen added, "I want to thank you for giving Amos a pull out of that washout. Sounds to me from what Jess says they were in for a lot of digging to get out."

"Hoot," waved Foakes, "wasn't nuthin'. At least fer Mobilus it wasn't no trouble at all. But I'll say this to yuh. I thought my ears had gone flat from too much whistlin' when Amos said he was a friend of yuh's. Why that was like findin' steam in a cold boiler. They're fine people."

"They came a long way to help me, Mister Foakes. I guess that tells the story of what kind of friends they are."

"Yep," beamed Foakes. In a friendly, teasing note he went on, "I can see what kind of friends they are, especially the one what almost busted my arm gettin' me to stop ole Mobilus when she saw yuh come high steppin' it up the hill. I could make a real steamist outa that girl. Maybe even an engineer-steamist. Of course, it wouldn't be fittin' fer a woman to be a steamist, but she might be an exception."

Owen gave his vote to the idea. "If there's to be a female steamist in these parts, Jane's the one for the job alright." In a more serious vein, Owen explained that he would be riding out alone and, without going into details, told Foakes the reason for his trip.

The bustle went out of Foakes and he said only, "I understand, but I don't think yuh ought to send the engine out on the tracks alone."

"There isn't any other way, Mister Foakes," Owen assured him. "I also wanted to let you know that there may be a small war starting on the Red Hill Road tomorrow. It isn't your war and you won't be asked to join

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in. The men here wouldn't expect you to involve yourself in their troubles."

Foakes' hand went up to the bill of his engineer's cap. He pulled the cap from his head and wiped the wide expanse of shining scalp. His round face looked at Mobilus for an instant and then his two sharp eyes snapped at Owen like two small darts. "Mister Owen Bannack, I thank yuh fer the advice which wasn't asked fer. I understand why the advice was given and the thought behind it. Comin' from a perfectly round wheel like yuhrself, it's to be expected. But I'll make up my own mind about what track I'll be runnin' on. Yuh were the very best man to have for sendin' the likes of them pot irons Slide and Klouse on their way, but don't be tryin' to do any sendin' when it comes to Mobilus and me."

The speech was delivered with some severity, and Owen at first wondered if had wounded the stout man's feelings. However by the time Foakes had finished speaking, Owen understood he was being given the kind of lecture that only a close friend gives to another close friend.

"I kinda thought that might be your reaction, Mister Foakes, but I had to warn you."

Foakes' moonbeam smile was returning as he countered, "It's taken as given. But enough of that. Ain't no use of whistlin' away good steam. I'll be seein' yuh later when the right of way is cleared of some little stink walkers that's givin' friends of mine some grief."

With that comment Foakes collected Herman, who had been standing nearby, and steered him toward the house. As they walked away, Owen heard Foakes telling Herman, "Unless I miss my signal lantern, them women in the house know what to do with a fire box, Herman. After we taste them victuals, I want to see yuhr coal pile."

Nodding in vigorous agreement, Herman announced that the plan was agreeable with him. "Pi golly, vee eat first. Some dumplin's maybe."

Owen, now alone, made his way to the shed which was Herman's version of a barn. Instead of a two story structure where hay would be kept on the upper level, this arrangement was long, one end for animals and the other end for feed and for ranch implements. Still the operation had ample space for stalls.

Cocoa was lazing away his day in a one of the open ended stalls looking at the smooth, polished bottom of a feed bunk. When Owen found him, he must have been wondering about ways of increasing his ration of rolled oats since he had been gently nibbling on the worn edge of the wooden bar which was usually raised at feeding time.

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Seeing Owen caused him to stop his feed plot and watch while his owner pulled the well known hackamore off a nearby nail. Apparently bored with his barn life, Cocoa gave no resistance whatever to having the rigging placed over his nose and ears. His only reaction to the saddle being settled down on his shoulders with the horn snug over his withers, was a snap of his big ears.

When Owen gently slapped the big chest, Cocoa stepped back out of the stall into the open runway of the shed. He watched out of the corners of his big eyes as Owen pulled the Winchester from its boot, checked the lever and the cartridge cylinder, and slid it back into place. Cocoa lost interest in the proceedings and stamped his foot against the soft barn floor as Owen checked the workings of his navy colt.

Finally, feeling the familiar pull against the saddle horn and feeling the weight in the stirrup, Cocoa bobbed his head as Owen swung up into the saddle. Responding to the firm pressure from Owen's knees, the powerful chestnut horse walked to the door of the shed where he broke into an easy lope out of the barnyard, across a small holding pen, through an open gate at the far end of the big corral, and onto the thick sod of the prairie.

As he found his stride, Cocoa gave a sharp pull with his head against the reins. Perhaps he was saying something about being left to find his own path, or perhaps he was taking note of the lonely figure only he had seen standing by the corner of the log house. Perhaps the big horse was simply trying to get his rider to look back, if only for a moment to see the small hand of the disappearing figure rise and wave, a small hand brushing against the troubled currents of air which seemed unsure which way to blow.

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The miles passed quickly under Cocoa's steady ground-eating pace. Owen carefully guided the horse on a path which sometimes took them off the road itself and onto higher ground. By cutting off some of the turns and the cutbacks which were required of wheeled vehicles, the horse and rider eliminated much of the distance from their trip. They also saved time, but of greater importance, Owen was able to scan the roadway and the surrounding hillsides.

By the time the sun was ready to abandon the Red Hill Road to the semi-darkness of early evening, Owen had reached a point some two or three miles from the Spring Creek bridge. Guessing that approach to town would be guarded, he headed Cocoa up an old and little known trail which would enable him to skirt the bridge and avoid whatever guards might be stationed there.

Called the "Quaso Trail" by long time residents of the area, the way over the last hill to town was dangerous and steep in places. It had received little use since the Spring Creek trail had been opened. After dynamite had given travelers a way past the rock face which met the stream, Quaso had become a relic of history. The opening of the trail and the building of the bridge consigned the high trail to use only by an occasional group of daredevil youngsters.

In recent days, the almost forgotten Quaso Trail had been used by Owen and the other ranchers to cross from their ranches on the southern face of the Snowys to the Lewistown side undetected. It was the way the ranchers had gotten to Bright's Diggings when the guards were stopping traffic at the Spring Creek bridge. The Quaso Way, as it was sometimes called, was also the route by which Owen had avoided the roadguards and returned from his ride to Great Falls.

Hoping to get past the most dangerous part of the trail before the light faded, Owen urged Cocoa forward. At one point, ground gave way and the horse had to stumble hard against the uphill side of the path in order to keep from falling over the rock wall below. Stubborn branches of Larch slapped at the horse and at Owen's legs and face. At an especially narrow and difficult point where trees seemed determined to choke off the trail, Owen had to dismount and lead the way through a tangle of broken limbs and fallen deadwood.

As they broke through the cluster of trees at the summit of the trail, the last band of light was fading from the western edge of the sky and was dissolving into a deepening blue. The darker eastern sky was sliding ever higher into the sky like a rising curtain of gloom and the early signs

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of the evening tide told that a difficult and dark night was descending on the mountains. Nor was there hope for light from the tilted and pitifully thin silver crescent moon. Even its poor and feeble light was already being absorbed by a layer of clouds rushing in from the North.

The wind which was bringing the cloud cover was also the bearer of a sharp, eye-watering chill. Owen was, therefore, glad to begin the descent from the top of Quaso Way since that path took them down into the protective shelter of a long narrow ravine. Cocoa, too, seemed more comfortable once they left the high ridge and found the easier trail below. That trail widened and intercepted another, and soon Owen found himself on the wagon road which ran out of Lewistown toward the eastern reaches of the Snowys.

After riding for a time along the darkened road, Owen reined Cocoa to a halt as they topped a small rise. Below, Owen could see a pattern of small yellow dots which outlined the town. Realizing that each point of light marked a house, Owen found himself thinking that behind those curtained windows men and women were finishing their evening meals. Perhaps the men would be reading newspapers or journals brought in from Great Falls by the stage. Most of the men would be puffing on pipes, frequently tamping them with darkened, stained fingers. Wives would be knitting, or perhaps they would be pulling socks over their white porcelain darning bulbs; others, wearing the dimpled protection of thimbles, would be driving silver needles through hems and patches on shirts, pants, and whatever else needed attention. Children would be sprawled around struggling with schoolwork and plotting ways to abandon that for more interesting activities of whittling, ribbon tying or playing nick-on-the-hoop.

Owen also knew that, in the hotel, there would be a few drummers sitting in the cafe. They would be talking with each other and exchanging yarns and stories of their sales adventures. In the hotel bar, others would be engaged in idle card games of Slap John or Stud Poker. Maybe one or two would be playing Keno and drinking Trimly, considered to be light, easy drinking whiskey.

Yet, in still other places in the town, there would be less peaceful scenes. There would be loud, vulgar talk in the Pink Eye as men there swilled down the raw, biting bar whiskey which was so cheap it had no name. Collected together in that dismal and desperate place would be men who had failed themselves and others, men who could not look beyond a few coins, and men who had found life to be a frantic rush through bitterness.

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There, in the Pink Eye or in some other hunched and dim corner, would be the man who manipulated and schemed and had collected a band of derelict men to do his bidding. Paskil, the renegade killer, Paskil the despoiler, Paskil the plotting and lurking presence who had driven events and men to the very edge of a bloody land war.

Paskil was the key. If he could be found. If he could be separated from his cronies, from his hirelings, if he could be put into the hands of the law and if the law would hold him and put him on trial,... if and if again. There were many unknowns and doubts and each one led to still another.

Finally, Owen shook off the nagging questions. It was time to act.

He reined Cocoa off the road and toward town through a rolling hillside pasture. By the time Owen reached the edge of town, many of the lights had disappeared from the windows and many of the houses stood only as indistinct shapes along darkened streets. As they passed by a fenced yard, a dog barked, tentatively as though it was unsure of itself. Then another, farther away, took up the invitation. Soon the yapping and barking was nearly a commotion.

Owen nudged Cocoa. The big horse welcomed the invitation to put some distance between himself and the noise. The easy lope soon left the turmoil behind, and as Owen looked back, he could hear angry human voices calling in the night. The shouted invitations to the dogs to discontinue their evening entertainment were not gentle, nor were they delivered without some descriptive names being offered.

As he looked down the main business street, Owen recalled Somp's description of the fire which had destroyed Hogan's General Store. He also remembered what Somp had said about Maudee, and how the girl had been raving and crying out about the floor. A memory of years past crossed Owen's mind.

Working his way along the street, he soon came to the block of building which had contained the store. Not wanting to chance a meeting with men from the Pink Eye, Owen headed Cocoa around the buildings and approached the burned remains of the store from the alleyway.

Even by nightlight Owen could see that Somp had not exaggerated his description of the fire. It must have been a terrifying and raging sight to behold. Nothing of the walls or roof remained. A few stark wall studs still remained upright, like black, skeletons standing and presiding over the charred wreckage.

Owen dismounted and carefully stepped through the rubble. The smell of ash and char was still strong and it hung over the dead building

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like a pall. The blackened boards and debris crunched dry and brittle beneath his boots. Gently Owen reached down with a gloved hand down and moved a burned board here, a blackened object there. He felt his way along until he stood in the area where Penelope's living quarters had been.

Feeling as much as seeing, Owen worked at clearing the space in what he judged to have been the bedroom. Not all the wooden rafters from the roof had burned completely, yet even they broke easily and were surprisingly easy to move. Kneeling, Owen began searching the charred floor board with his hands. Because the floor had been scrubbed with pumice and had, in years past, been covered with talc which had been rubbed into the surface, the floor had not burned through.

It was slow work, but after a time his careful search began to pay a reward. His gloved fingers whisked away ashes and cleaned out a recessed pocket in the floor. That made it possible for him to loosen and then grasp a large iron ring. Steadily and using the great strength of his arms and shoulders, Owen lifted the door through the layer of ashes and debris which covered it.

Below the cover, there as a small cellar. Dug under the original store as a refuge from both storm and Indians, but never used for either, the pit had survived damage from the fire. At least the floor had not collapsed into it and Owen's hands told him the walls had not given way. Remembering what Penelope had once told him about the "scary hole" Owen eased his legs over the edge until his feet found a set of steps.

Working now in total darkness, Owen found the bottom of the cellar and began exploring along the walls. Even as he began, he found that he need go no farther. He had found Penelope Hogan.

Pulling off his gloves, Owen felt her face and neck. The skin seemed cold, but Owen couldn't be sure that there was not a pulse. Knowing that there was nothing he could do in the darkness and alone without any water or bandages, even if she was still alive, Owen quickly gathered the limp form up in his arms and made his way up out of the putrid, dank air of the cellar.

In a moment he was out of the wreckage and in the alley. Giving a low whistle to Cocoa, Owen walked down the alley to the end of the block then into the back yard of a house and up to the door. With the toe of his boot Owen knocked gently. Soon there was a tiny light, in the kitchen window, a match. Then the light grew larger and brighter as the wick of a lamp was fired.

"Yes?" the voice was that of a woman, steady and firm.

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"Missus Noams, it's Owen Bannack. I've..."

Before Owen could finish his explanation, the latch rattled under a quick hand, and the door swung open. Standing before him was the plentiful Widow Noams. In a generously sized nightgown, her shoulder covered by a checkered red shawl, the ruddy faced woman fairly gasped. "Owen, what in the name of storm and hail, are yuh doin' in this town?"

As the words tumbled out, her eyes were taking in the sodden shape in Owen's arms. Widow Noams' next words showed even greater shock. "What...why bless my poor dead husband's hat if it ain't Pen Hogan. Is she dead, Owen? Where did yuh find her? Do yuh know what's wrong with her?" Then, suddenly all business, the Widow directed the next question at herself. "Why in blazes am I standin' here askin' these featherhead questions? Owen, get in here. Take her through that door into the bedroom."

As Owen stepped into the kitchen, the Widow quickly swept the door closed behind him. Moving with a quickness which was surprising for one of her extraordinary width she then darted around Owen and, carrying the lamp, led him into the bedroom.

The rumpled, thrown back comforter and crumpled pillow said that the bed was the one the Widow herself had just vacated. Placing the lamp on a round bedside table, the Widow's small dimpled hands tugged and smoothed the bedcovers in preparation for the blood smeared body of Penelope Hogan.

Immediately, the Widow began straightening the sagging and limp limbs. Seeing the blood, she began making an assessment of the wounded woman's condition. "She's been shot and she's lost a lot of blood. Maybe she's dead. Owen there's clean dishtowels in the cupboard, bring some. While yuh're out there put a pan of water on the stove and stoke up the fire. There's a dab of drinkin' spirits in the pantry. Bring that, too. Now git and be quick about yuhr chores."

By the time Owen returned, carrying the soft, cotton dishtowels and the bottle, Widow Noams had stripped the outer clothes from Penelope's still, white form. Not even looking at Owen, the Widow took the towels and soaked one thoroughly with the strong smelling whisky. Ever so gently, but with a firm and seemingly practiced hand, she began cleansing the ugly black wound which was high in Penelope's shoulder.

"I think I found a pulse, but the slug's still in there and it's gotta come out," announced the Widow in a matter of fact tone. "It's a blessin' ole Pen's out cold. Get me the ice pick and tweezers from the drawer out there and git that water in here."

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Owen obeyed without question and without comment. He knew that Penelope would not be the first person to undergo surgery by Widow Noams. Owen himself had been a subject of her doctoring when he had injured a hand in a roping accident years ago. In fact, the Widow was often consulted by people who took no stock in the town doctor or who had no money to pay for professional medical care.

The Widow's husband had been a sometimes horse trader and sometimes horse doctor. His wife had learned more about horse business and doctoring than most women would have. When a horse that trader Noams had sold to the army was found to have come from a nearby ranch, Noams came out of the deal with a .44 slug in his head. The Widow had continued the doctoring but not the trading.

Generally jolly and universally liked, Widow Noams always said exactly what she believed. Even the town doctor sometimes deferred to the wisdom of the Widow, at least he never questioned her doctoring of either sick folks or sick animals. No doubt he would have approved her treatment of Penelope Hogan.

"Owen, don't jest stand there, turn up the wick on that lamp and hold it up so's I can see what I'm doin'."

Bending low over Penelope's white form, the Widow began probing the wound with the ice pick. Moving in small, searching circles, the point went around and around again, then ever so slightly deeper it again went around and around. Feeling it scrape against the slug, the Widow slid the tweezers down into the wound along the shaft of the ice pick. Almost immediately she closed on small plug of lead and pulled it through the hole in the white flesh. Dropping the dark red pellet onto a corner of the cleaning towel, the Widow resumed her probing.

"I don't feel any splinters or chunks. Owen wipe that slug clean and see if it looks busted."

With his free hand, Owen wiped the blood from the bullet and held the dark slug up to the lamp light. "Flat nose, but it looks like you got the whole thing."

"Alright," agreed the Widow, "let's plug her up. I hope yuh thought to shove the poker in the stove."

Without speaking Owen stepped back into the kitchen and immediately returned with the stove poker, its small elbow smoking a dull red. The Widow noted that the wound had bled some and muttered that fresh blood was a good sign. She then spread the wound open with her fingers and poured in a liberal helping of whiskey. Massaging the area gently, she repeated the procedure and then took the poker. "Like I

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said, its a good thing ole Pen ain't awake. She'd a been howlin' like a treed bobcat."

Without hesitation and with a practiced hand, she applied the poker to the wound. The burned flesh and blood sizzled and sputtered. She removed the hot steel and examined her work. Not satisfied, she cauterized a bit more, and finally the job was done. A bit more cleansing with whiskey and water was followed by a smear of blue sulphur salve and bandages.

"I'm gonna take the rest of them clothes off, clean her up some, put on a fresh robe and get her warmed up. So you can get yuhrself out to the kitchen, Mister Owen. I'll be out in a few shakes."

True to her word the Widow Noams soon joined Owen in the kitchen. After cleaning her surgical tools, she joined him at the table and poured herself some of the coffee Owen had warmed on the kitchen stove.

"Where'd yuh find her?" asked the Widow.

"In the cellar under the floor," replied Owen. "According to Somp, that girl you tended woke up and said something about the floor. At first it didn't make any sense. Then I remembered Pen showing that cellar door to me years ago. So I followed a hunch and took a look. I'd have to guess that Maudee couldn't carry Pen out of the place so she shoved her into the cellar. It was good thinking by the girl."

"Frail little thing, that girl. She was plumb outa her head when she came a stumblin' up to the door. I didn't want to move her, but it wasn't safe to keep her here. Some of Paskil's scum were askin' questions around town. They were tryin' to be sly and easy about it, but it was clear they were lookin' fer her. Sooner or later somebody was bound to say somethin' about me and my doctorin'. If them guns had found the girl in my bed, it would have been the end of her notarizin' fer good."

"You did the right thing," agreed Owen, "besides there didn't seem to be anything wrong with her except a good scare. The women out at Herman's think she'll get over that after a time."

"Well, at least we know that the fire warn't no accident," said Widow Noams simply, "and nobody with any wit would doubt that it was than damn Paskil or some of his crowd. I've got a shiver in my liver, Owen, that says this Paskil thing has been wound about as tight as it'll go. Ain't that about right?"

"That's about it," nodded Owen.

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The quick mind of the horse trader's widow had already thought about the situation and reached at least one conclusion. "Yuh didn't ride into town jest to check out yuhr hunch about Pen, did yuh Owen?"

"No."

"Yuh came in after that damned renegade, Paskil."

"Yes, partly that, but do you remember the box that Maudee dragged out of the fire?"

"Sure. She was cryin' and blabberin' about the box all along. When I got Somp over here, he went out and found it."

"Well, it's a good thing he did. Inside we found the affidavits that Maudee had been notarizing."

"From what I hear, them papers have got to be carried to the land office in Great Falls. Yuh ain't hopin' to make that ride in time to stop this land war are yuh?"

"No. At least I hope not. I sent Anse back up there to bring the Land Commissioner down here. If he had any luck, the Commissioner will be up at Bright's Diggings. I've got the papers in my saddle bags and I'm headed for Bright's now. Finding Pen was just a guess and a lucky detour."

"Then you'll be comin' back fer Paskil I imagine."

"He's the key to all the trouble, and it's his doing that we're on the bottom step of a land war and going down. I have to see if there isn't some way of stopping it. Maybe filing the papers with the Commissioner will do it."

As usual, the Widow went directly to the heart of the matter and said what was on both their minds. "Maybe's are cheap, Owen. Yuh'll have to kill the snake or he'll keep slidin' into the hen house and eatin' the eggs."

"You may be right because there are other things for Paskil to answer for," said Owen as he rose to leave, "but I'll try to turn him over to Henley."

Stopping at the door, Owen turned and asked, "Do you know anything about Henley? Nobody seems to have a good line on him."

The wide ruddy face of Widow Noams brightened. Her hands went up to her hair and patted at the rumpled curls, mostly brown with some grey creeping in. "I'd say I know something of him."

Owen smiled an easy wide smile. "I won't ask into that," he said, "but I would find it some help to know if he's beholden in any way to Paskil."

"He ain't beholden to no man," answered the Widow quickly, "and by the Great River Dan, I'll swear he don't answer to Paskil." Then in a

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less positive voice she added, "Of course, he does sort of answer to that jackass critter in Great Falls that's parcelin' out the new jail, brick by brick."

The Widow's quick defense of the Sheriff told Owen something about Widow Noam's social life. The Widow's words about the jail made it clear she knew more about Henley than she could have learned from casual town talk about the man. It was just as clear she was an ally and a friend of Sheriff Henley. The message Owen received was as clear as if it had been written. Sheriff Henley was not in Paskil's camp.

Opening the door, Owen added, "Thanks for taking care of Pen. I know she's in good hands."

"Pshaw," waved the Widow, "Yuh ain't the only friend Penelope Hogan has in this world Mister Owen. I guess I've known Pen fer a hundred years. I woulda felt bad if I wasn't given the chance to help her. Now be on yuhr way. And be careful. I don't want to be pickin' any slugs outa yuhr hide."

It was only moments before Owen was out of town and on the lonely dark trail to Bright's Diggings. At first the way was not difficult to follow, because the lighter colored dried dirt of the road lay in contrast to the grass which was not visible in the blackness of the night.

As the wagon road dwindled away into a trail, Owen trusted his instincts and Cocoa's good sense and night vision to carry them deeper into the forest and ever higher toward the old miner's fortress on the ridegline. As they passed through the clearing where Owen and Foakes had been ambushed, Owen recalled the shooting and wondered how that strange event could be explained. So far nothing suggested an explanation for the dude killer who now rested in the cold ground of the Diggings.

Suddenly Owen's musings were interrupted. "Hold yuhr hoss right there, mister."

The voice was that of a young man, a nervous young man. Owen halted immediately. "Done," he called out.

"Now let us know who yuh are," demanded the voice.

"I think I'm a friend," called back Owen.

"What kind of answer is that?" shot back the nervous voice.

Owen had heard enough to feel confident that he recognized the guard as being one of Anse's young companions. He reassured the unseen, nervous caller. "Name's Owen Bannack and I'm looking to see Anse."

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There was a tone of relief in the directions which came immediately out of the darkness, "Don't move, Mister Bannack. There's some trip ropes jest ahead of yuh. One's at yuhr feet and the other is neck level. I'll lower `em."

There was a pause, followed by the sawing sound of lariat rope on wood. Then came the slap of ropes on rocks and hard ground.

"Should be clear now, Mister Bannack, but move real careful like. Yuh might hold yuhr hoss though, cause I'm gonna rattle a can to wake up the camp. It's up ahead of yuh some."

The warning was followed by a loud grating and rattling sound up the trail. Cocoa shied, but only a step or two and he quickly accepted the noise when Owen gently patted his neck. The harsh sound was one of stones being rattled in a dry can. Owen smiled at the clever warning device invented by the camp guards. Probably hung from a tree and tied to a long line the rig was foolproof and bound to be effective.

By the time Owen rode into the central clearing of the Diggings, there were two figures standing near the fire watching him approach. A third stood in the shadows, a rifle resting in the crook of his arm. Again Owen found himself admiring the caution of the young men who had been entrusted with holding the encampment against any approach by Paskil or his gang.

When Owen's tall form came into view, one of the men stepped forward and called to him. "Owen, great smoke! It's good to see yuh. I guess the fact that yuh rode through means that those galoots of Paskils have given up guardin' the road."

Anse, his youthful enthusiasm apparent on his face and in his voice, fairly leaped forward as Owen dismounted. "Owen, I been almost bustin' to know what's goin' on."

"First things go to the head of the line, Anse," Owen reminded him. "Did Fraser come back with you?"

"Right here, Mister Bannack." The Land Commissioner, answering for his own presence, joined them and raised his hand as if answering a roll call.

Owen, his fingers working the small buckles on his saddle bags, called over his shoulder, "Is the Territorial Land Office open for business at this time of evening?"

"Mister Bannack, the Land Office has rode long and hard to get here. It wouldn't seem very efficient to turn away a good customer. Do yuh happen to know anyone who has anything to offer to the Land Office?"

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Turning, Owen held out the tied bundle of affidavits. "Commissioner, I'd like to file these papers with the Land Office. They were signed by men and women claiming land by right of first settlement. Each and every paper was notarized and stamped by your assistant."

Fraser accepted the bundle of papers and walked immediately to the fire. Kneeling, he opened the bundle and in the flickering light examined each paper. Satisfied, he retied the papers, stood and spoke solemnly to Owen and Anse.

"Gentlemen, I have examined the documents you have tendered to the Montana Territorial Land Commissioner. I have found them to be in good order and properly signed and notarized. These affidavits are accepted and considered to be filed as of this moment. One fact remains to be established. If I can visit the subject range lands and confirm that no competing person has made a prior claim by right of survey, the land will be deeded by the government to the signers of these affidavits."

Anse, unable to contain himself any longer, broke in, "Does that mean the filin' has been done?"

"The filing has indeed been done," Fraser assured him, "but the last step remains. I've got to see for myself that no survey claim has been staked on those lands."

"Does that mean..." began Anse.

Interrupting him, Owen finished the thought, "It means, Anse, that Mister Fraser needs to see the land and officially confirm that Paskil has not started survey work."

"Exactly correct," chimed in Fraser.

"How long will it take to round up your crew, Anse?" asked Owen, "I think we should be riding out of here as soon as possible."

"About as long as it takes a nasty bad bronc to toss a dirt farmer," said Anse as he disappeared into the circling darkness. Pausing, he called back to the Owen and Fraser. "Yuh got about enough time to heat and drink one cup of that bad coffee."

After the battered little coffee pot had been settled into the hot coals of the fire, Fraser settled down onto one of the worn logs which had, by long usage, become fireside furniture. From one of the wide inner pockets of his surveyor's coat, he pulled a small white folded paper.

"Message from your banker friend, Tiswell," explained Fraser.

Owen unfolded the paper and read the scrawled message. Then he carefully refolded the note and placed it in his shirtpocket. Looking at Fraser, he asked, "Did Mister Tiswell explain any of this to you?"

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"Some, but I'm afraid it doesn't add up fer me," shrugged Fraser. "When yuh get past surveyin', writin' field notes, keepin' records and makin' out deeds, I get lost pretty fast."

"To tell the truth, this," Owen tapped his shirt pocket, "doesn't explain much. In fact, it raises more questions, some very interesting questions. But they'll have to keep for a time yet."

"I'm not surprised to hear that," agreed Fraser, "and I expect you plan on doing some asking pretty soon."

"I hope so." Pouring steaming coffee into two tin cups, Owen changed the subject. "I haven't gotten around to thanking you for coming down here. By making it possible for us to file our affidavits now rather than two or three days from now, you may have helped stop a land war."

"Your young friend Anse, has got his ways of persuading," laughed Fraser. "Besides, I feel some responsibility for this problem. This man, Paskil, should never have received a survey commission. There ain't a doubt but what it will be revoked when the higher ups get around to looking at everything. The problem is that the upper story people usually take months, even years to getting around to doing what they're paid to do. Because you and your friends filed and settled, the land should be deeded to you by right. The trouble started when some cross wise clerk listened to Paskil and decided that resurvey meant the land had to be refiled on. The same clerk then gave Paskil a paper which he undoubtedly changed to suit his purposes. It's mainly just a government mixup."

"There's bound to be trouble when the law and government take too long to catch up to people and their problems," reflected Owen quietly.

"And sometimes government can create a problem where there really isn't one," put in Fraser. "Sometimes I get the feeling that big wigs do nothing but start a problem so they can come around later and get credit for finding the solution."

"That may be," nodded Owen with a easy smile, "but I expect that when you boil `em down to grounds, all people are pretty much the same."

Anse joined them and announced, "Everyone's ready to ride, Owen. We should be able to make the Red River Road by sunup."

"It's so dark now," observed Fraser, "that you begin to wonder if we'll ever see light again."

The three men then began kicking the fire apart and stamping out the coals and embers. The waiting darkness hungrily closed in around the

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camp. Yet, even as the last sparks blinked out, the first hint of light may have already begun to touch the lower edge of the eastern horizon.

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When the band of ranchers at Herman's learned that Owen had ridden for town with the affidavits and had left orders that the south end of the Red River Road should be guarded, they set about making sure that was done. In planning their defense, they had a new and unexpected ally.

Mobilus, pulling a wagon load of coal, led the procession from the ranch toward the nearby mountain road. Behind the coal wagon were the wood wagons and the caboose of supplies along with equipment added by Herman and his neighbors. The men strung out alongside Mobilus but stayed a respectful distance from the machine which now puffed out a long billow of black coal smoke.

Bringing up the rear was yet another wagon, this one pulled by two mules, each one keeping a wary eye on the steam engine ahead. The mule team was, perhaps, not necessary, but it gave a feeling of comfort to those who had only suspicion about Mobilus and who probably expected the engine to behave in some strange and undependable way.

As they drew closer to the mountains, trails from different directions came together and merged into a respectable road. Soon the caravan was on the well worn and familiar Red Hill Road. Mound topped hills rose up on both sides and the road began angling upward. Ground hugging, scrub evergreen began to appear in the sharp ravines which sliced up and down the mountainsides.

Then the mountain slopes began disappearing under the cover of evergreens. Fir, spruce and even a few ponderosa pine covered the face of the rising and falling mountains.

Not the trees, not the mountains, nor the wide blue sky above had ever seen the likes of the steam machine which rolled up the road. The wide, cleated wheels crunched their way over the hard packed dirt. With each stroke of the giant pistons a tiny gusher of steam spurted from the pressure holes in the cylinders. The pace of the machine was steady and monotonous. The trailing wagons were towed along, their weight of no consequence and of little interest to the powerful engine.

As the journey progressed into the mountains the procession strung out with Mobilus in the lead, streaming smoke back of the heads of the others like a long, vaporous tow rope. After hours of steady progress, Mobilus rounded a wide curve at the foot of a lazy slope. There, the proud engine was finally levered to a halt. The riders who had, at times, trotted to keep up and who, at other times, had walked their horses and

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had fallen behind, now began to catch up with the mechanical head of the parade.

After a time, the little army of ranchers came together where all eyes could look up and see the face of the mountain which had given the road its name. Red Hill, rising above the surrounding hilltops, had been planted directly in the path of man and beast. Its lower reaches were gentle and inviting. They rolled around the foot of the mountain in idle green swells. The mid section was much steeper and showed jutting red rocks among the trees. Above the sharply rising middle belt of the mountain, a higher rim of sheer rock curved like a giant stone hatband around the final peaked mound of rock and dirt at the top.

The red stone forehead of the mountain denied access to the top to all living creatures except a few mountain goats and whatever birds might have had business there. The abrupt slopes of the mountain and its long breadloaf shape, joined at either end to higher and more jagged peaks, made it an obstacle and at the same time a route for passage. Since there was no way of going over Red Hill, the only way left was to go high up on its side and thus around the top.

Because travelers insisted on traveling, and because this was the best way across the narrow waist of the Snowys, a road had to be built to carry men, horses and wagons from one side of the mountain to the other. Indeed, the road was the only practical way to get from the south to the north side of the mountain, or, in the case of Lewistown people, to get from their side of the mountain to the rancher's side.

For the road builders the matter of choosing a route had been simple. Building the road had been another matter.

Beginning at the little creek which dribbled its muddy red water along the foot of the mountain, the road had an easy time of it, loafing through the surrounding lower green forest. The red gravel was almost an avenue on these softly rolling slopes.

Almost abruptly, the road then became a test. Carved out of the very side of the mountain, it climbed in a long and frightening arc. Well up the mountain, near the rubble which had accumulated below the rock face, the road builders had, out of necessity, decided to reverse course and install a switchback. The result was a road which rose along the side of the mountain and then took a sudden reversal to creep along the lower edge of the red rock face. One wagon driver had called the arrangement a "hard road with a bad elbow." Others called the turnabout itself a "quicky," because it seemed to appear suddenly and because it required quick reactions in hauling a team around the sharp angle.

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Many horses and many of their cousins, long eared, straight backed mules, had been challenged by the mountain hugging road which was simply one very long, hard pull with no place to stop and rest except for the one hitcharound below the rock face. After the long haul along the side of the mountain, the road became a nervous series of switches and dodges, almost as if it had become lost, looking for a way out of the rocks and sharp ravines. Then, happily, the road rounded the top of the mountain and found its way down the north face into the Spring Creek area for the relatively easy run into town.

The ranchers, closely familiar with the road and its habits, had decided that the switcharound, up near the rock wall, would be the ideal place to make their stand. Their plan was to blockade the elbow itself. Because the switchback appeared so suddenly, riders coming down the road would not see the blockade until they were close upon it. When that happened, they would have no choice but to turn around since the avalanche of rocks above would be occupied by the armed ranchers and the hillside immediately below was too steep for men on horseback.

However, the hard side of the plan was the building of the blockage. The elbow was high up on the mountain and almost out of the tree line. Timber would have to be cut and hauled, mostly uphill. Because the turnaround had been built wide enough to accommodate the wide swing of an eight team wagon, the blockade would have to be more than just a few trees. It would also have to be something that a determined horse could not scramble over or around.

Adding to the difficulty was the lack of time. If Somp's information was correct, Paskil and his pack of hired guns, would be on the road the next day. That left them only hours to make their preparations.

Following a short conference between Foakes, Sid Andrews and the others, Mobilus accepted a helping of coal from his fireman, took a barrel of water in his reservoir, and then with strong armed twist of the iron control wheel, he pointed his round black nose up the road. With a belch of steam the climb toward the bad elbow began.

In a steady rhythm of power the high red wheels rolled against the mountain road. The sharp cleats, welded at angles to the wide faces of the wheels, now began to prove the wisdom of the man who had created the machine. They dug into the road surface and gave traction where smooth wheels might have spun. The cleats left a strange track of indentations in the road, evidence of the weight of the machine and the danger presented by the sharp digging wedges of iron.

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The mighty machine gave no outward appearance of working any harder on the climb than on flat land. Yet, Foakes, the designer and the operator of Mobilus, knew the machine was straining to keep its great red wheels turning. Foakes kept an anxious eye on the pressure gauge and watched as the small black needle climbed ever higher.

Foakes also knew that high pressure was needed to keep the pistons working. As the ground walking machine continued up the mountain road, Foakes kept his own counsel about the dangerous steam level. His silence came partly because he was busy operating the levers and watching the pressure gauge and partly because there was no point in alarming his fireman who stood looking out the opposite window of the cab.

If the boiler blew anywhere on the long climb, there was a good possibility that Foakes would not be able to hold the machine with the brake. If the power failed and if the brake was not strong enough, Mobilus would probably end up as a heap of hot iron at the foot of the Red Hill Road.

Grimly, Foakes handled the heavy iron steering wheel with one hand and carefully applied power on the control lever with the other. The demand for steam was great, and that meant heat and lots of it.

Over his shoulder, Foakes called, "Coal. Lean into that shovel. Quick now!"

The fireman leaped to obey. The fire door was unhooked, and because of the tilt of the engine, it swung back wildly. Heat from the flaming bed of coals rushed into the cab. The iron rectangle framed an angry red, orange fire.

The fireman seized the blackened shovel and levered it full of coal. With a mighty heave the shovel came up, the heaped black coal swung back in an arc, then the shovel came forward and the fuel was dashed into the flames. A shower of sparks leaped from the open door like a swarm of angry red gnats seeking victims in the outer world. A gasp of black smoke rolled out and curled up over the upper lip of the door.

Undaunted, the fireman repeated the fueling operation. More hot, angry gnats and more gasps of thick coal smoke. A third shovelful of coal proved that the gnat colony was heavily populated and that the disturbed firebed was determined to send out a black signal, perhaps demanding even more coal.

Foakes, however, felt the fire had enough for the moment. "Hold off there," he cried out. "and hook up that door before yuh cook the both of us."

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The ambitious fireman nodded and, with a shove, returned the door and its latch to their closed positions. Seeing that Foakes had both hands occupied and that he was squinting at the pressure gauge, whose glass had been a victim of the escaping smoke, the fireman brushed a sleeve over the gauge.

Foakes nodded his appreciation, but his eyes widened at what they saw. "Steam's up," he said through clenched teeth, "them boiler plates is gettin' tighter'n than new boots on a conductor's fat feet."

"Yuh mean there's somethin' wrong with the engine?" asked the fireman.

"Not yet there ain't," replied Foakes, "but this hill and Mobilus is locked in a test. One of `em has got to give."

Sensing Foakes' intense concern, the fireman pressed for more information, "Got to give, Mister Foakes?"

"Iron against granite, man against nature, steam against gravity," ground out Foakes as he gave the steering wheel an adjusting twist, "it's a grand test but the decidin' ain't done yet. Not by a silver whistle's hoot it ain't."

Foakes interrupted his own comment as he called out, "Hey, ho, what's that on the track ahead?"

His fireman darted to the window and looked up the road. There in the direct path of Mobilus lay a fallen lodgepole pine. Uprooted from its thin crust of life giving dirt, the tree had fallen with its roots pointed up the hill and its tapering trunk and branches pointed downhill.

"Shouldn't we stop?" yelled the fireman.

Shaking his head the engineer gave a flat, "Can't" for his answer. "Hill's too steep to trust the brake. If we stop now, the game's up and the hand goes to the mountain. Mobilus and I say a bit more steam is our only chance. Hold on, we could derail."

Foakes eased the power lever back sending a stronger current of steam into the pistons. The small driving wheels rolled into the tree snapping branches and immediately lurching into the trunk itself. The upper and thinner section of the fallen tree snapped in a whirl of green needles and red road dust. The thicker lower trunk of the tree held and the front wheel bumped into the tree and churned into the air. Spinning as though searching for ground where there was none, the front wheels rose ever higher. The nose end of Mobilus, already considerably higher than the back because of the sharp incline of the road, seemed uncertain on its new road of thin air.

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The engine teetered between falling back to earth and grinding upward until it could fall back upon its cab. The force of the large drive wheels added to the threat and the engine seemed certain to crash back upon its own top. Foakes jambed the power lever toward the fire wall and gave a hard pull on the steam release lever. The power to the wheels was instantly released.

Then with a great jarring thump the front wheels fell back to the road. Steam gushed from the open valves, smoke belched black and thick from the funnel stack, red dirt swirled up in a confused cloud. Anything and everything that was not bolted, tied, or clamped in place flew in directions never before heard of or known to man or machine. The worst was over. Foakes quickly restored steam power with his lever and the giant rear wheels crunched over the tree as though it were a mere nuisance. Splinters and branches were churned into the roadbed leaving a wide path behind for the trailing supply wagon.

The fireman, realizing the immediate danger was over, gave a whoop. "By Uncle Bob's whiskers! Mister Foakes, I ain't never seen anything like that before, and I don't expect to again."

Foakes' round face beamed. The soot which had begun to collect on his face crinkled. "Ain't no rail roller in the world that could be bounced off the face of a mountain like that and then keep on chuggin' away. I think ole Mobilus proved that he's here to stay. Yes, sir, this Red Hill has jest learned a thing or two about steam power."

Looking out his cab window to inspect the boiler and to see if he could see any damage Foakes called out, "I hope that switch in the track ain't too far up the line. Even this ground walker can't take too much more of this without startin' to pop his rivets."

Almost as an answer to Foakes, the switchback appeared. First, the slope of the road began to ease off. Then, came the turn itself where the road widened as it swept around and turned back on a line along the rock face. Earlier experiences of men, horses and mules had the creation of a level space where breath, blood, brain, and spleen could recover from the trip up or prepare for the descent to the bottom.

Mobilus rolled onto the wide and relatively level staging area and steamed to a halt. Foakes reached for the whistle but thought better of it as he remembered the string of riders and horses still coming up the road. Not wanting to turn the engine's victorious climb into a rearing, bucking panic, Foakes reached instead for the steam vent rope and gave it a long steady pull.

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Thick plumbs of steam vapor spurted from the boiler and from the piston cylinders. Foakes then roped the steam port open to keep the pressure from building up. He securely locked the brake in place and turned to his fireman.

"Janie, old girl, that was some haul. But if yuhr pa had known how close we was goin' to come to a derailment and to flattenin' our wheels, I think yuh would have been ridin' with them mules back there instead of up here."

"Mister Foakes," laughed Jane, "I wouldn't have missed that run up the hill fer anythin'. Pa and Jess will be jealous. They both would have loved it."

"This ain't the last run fer Mobilus," promised Foakes. "I aim to see to it they get their chance to do their share of firin' this old rascal's boiler."

As Foakes and Jane climbed down from the cab, the others began to collect around the engine. Everyone expressed amazement and near disbelief at what they had just seen.

Old Jess, the Carpenter's wagon driver, fairly sputtered his surprise. "Yuh missed comin' over backwards by the tip of a whip. I never see'd the like. That big black tank reared up like a snake shied hoss. And then down it comes and grinds up that tree into a enough matchsticks to light every pipe in the territory."

"Pi golly," said a wide eyed Herman, "I didn't see dat tree and I tink Mopilus was blowin' himself to chunks. I tink we build a cog rail up dis hill, pi golly."

Sid Andrews and Amos Carpenter, who had driven the wagon up the hill, joined the group. Amos quietly shook his head. That itself was a comment on his wonder at what he had just seen. "When I saw that machine come up, I figured Jane had overcoaled the thing."

"She's a natural fireman," laughed Foakes, "she handles that shovel like an expert."

Sid, shaking his head and stroking his beard, was almost serious in his observation. "A few more of these contraptions, and we won't need horses."

"Not need horses," cried Jess, "that ain't likely to happen. Besides, this is the only one of this ...this kind of hot iron belly we'll ever see."

"Iron belly," frowned Foakes, "what do yuh mean by that?"

"Why, the way this puffer smokes and fumes and the way yuh feed and stuff coal into that iron stove in there, it's plain to me the thing is Old

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Scratch's iron belly come up from down below and even Old Scratch can't have more than one belly."

"Jess," scolded Jane, "that ain't no way to talk about Mister Foakes' engine."

Foakes, who had caught the glint in old Jess's eyes, took up the spoo. "Why don't trouble yuhrself Miss Fireman. Jess here has hit on the truth of the matter. Mobilus here is jest that, Old Scratch's iron belly. Here to roast and cinderize them that is threatenin' yuhr land."

Seeing the grins widen on the faces around her, Jane called to the ever winking dog sitting on the supply wagon. "Come on Wink. Let's scout out the work that's got to be done before Old Scratch himself shows up to put an end to these stand around jaspers."

In a flash Wink was off the wagon. He rushed at the engine and began barking at the front wheels and at the rear wheels and at Mobilus in general. As he leaped around in every direction, it would have been easy to imagine that he understood Jane's every word and that he was giving a warning that he was ready for the legendary Mister Scratch.

Everyone, including Jane, joined in the laugh. However the good natured moment of laughter and the relief over the end of the long climb soon dissolved into concern over the work which lay before them.

Heavy ropes were taken from the supply wagon and rigged to thick pulley blocks. Axes found their way into strong, willing hands and soon the air rang with the rhythmic clop of steel biting into wood.

While the business of felling trees went on, Foakes made a careful inspection of Mobilus. The rotund engineer adjusted a valve or two, oiled a gear here and there, dabbed grease on slides, shafts, and other black, greasy surfaces. Foakes, with the help of his fireman, rearranged and restocked the coal pile. Jake Ritter, Carpenter's handyman and probationary badman, was recruited to help add water to the reservoir.

In the cab, Foakes tested his levers and his gauges and his valve ropes. Finally, he pronounced the engine fit and ready for service.

Logs which had been cut and stripped of branches were tied and hitched to the ropes. Mobilus was maneuvered into position, and, without even strained his boiler, the machine began pulling the logs up the hill and into position.

Because the barricade had to be positioned out of the line of sight of riders coming along the rock face section of road, the task was more difficult. The barrier had to stretch across the wide turning arc of the road and that required two lengths of logs. To insure that it couldn't be easily knocked down, the rude wooden fence also had to be braced with short

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logs. The propping or bracing logs, to properly to their jobs, had to have their feet planted in the hard ground.

Through the entire building process, Mobilus proved to be an invaluable assistant. The engine pulled the logs into position. A crude plowl-like device was rigged from some scrap pieces of iron found in the supply wagon. Mobilus easily pulled the simple digging tool through the ground and made the digging for the braces easier and faster.

The busy Mobilus was everywhere and Foakes, the master of the steam marvel kept things moving. Backing to the edge of road, chugging forward with a log in tow, raising the log into place in the barricade, plowing a crude furrow into the face of the mountain for the bracing logs, the bustling steamist never stopped smiling.

It was Foakes in the left hand window of the cab, it was Foakes in the right hand portal, his was the hand on the power lever, and his was the hand on the reversing device. A wave, a nod, a signal. Attendants to the left and to the right, attendants carefully working behind and watchfully working in front. Eyes on the high red wheels, thoughts on the churning cleats, and ears tuned to the hiss of steam, the barricade grew. Anchored to the sky by the spear tops of the trees, a cloak of coal smoke hovered over the work, concealing the chopping of wood, and the dragging of logs through the dry red soil. Inevitably and inexorably, the barricade took root on the mountain road.

Then it was complete. A wall of logs closed the Red Hill Road. On the uphill end, the wall found and joined the impassable rubble of fallen rocks which heaped around the lower rim of the rock face. On the downhill side, the wall jutted over the road and hung over the empty space of the sharply sloping mountainside.

Riders coming down the road would meet the wall when they began to take the turn of the switchback. There, where they would be stopped, those same riders would be sitting below the fortress of rocks which, over uncountable centuries, had fallen from the face of the rock wall. Those stones, slabs, and boulders now rested on ends, on sides, and on one another. They tilted, they angled, they jutted, and they took positions on every point of the compass while threatening one another and everything in the world below.

Shadows began to climb up the side of Red Hill. Twilight came to the foot of the road where the long climb had begun, and the sunlight took level aim at the top of the mountain. The forehead of stone, the band of sheer rock, stared back into the eye of the sun and the face of the mountain grew more red than ever before, even as red as blood.

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In the close darkness of small, cheap rooms in Lewistown's wooden frame hotel, men slept heavily. They slept from drinking, they slept in grateful relief from their weary waking lives. Some slept in their clothes, others in handlebar underwear, and for reasons known only to men whose lives are often spent in outdoor camps, many wore their boots and some their spurs.

Other men lay in the hay loft of the livery. The warm moist air from the horse stalls below invaded their clothes and their nostrils. Yet they, too, slept heavily, and it was as though they did not know nor care about what daylight might bring.

In the back room of the Pink Eye, there had been little sleep. Mise, the deserter from Land Commissioner Fraser's surveying party, had dozed a bit. With his head back in the slatted chair his snoring had irritated Paskil who wrathfully kicked at the chair legs until the noise stopped. Later, Mise's head had fallen to the top of the table where his snoring had been muffled by his full face beard. That had earned him scornful looks until a half glass of whiskey had brought him back into contact with the conscious world, but that too lasted only for a few moments.

Leeds, too, had slept, but only in short naps. Like a discontented cat his eyes seemed only to slit for a few moments. Then they would fly open and would stare directly ahead, seeming to be waiting to be directed toward a sound the ears had picked up in the heavy air.

Paskil, his thick, long white hair highlighted by the lamp, did not sleep. During long silent intervals he glared with contempt at his lieutenants. His nervous eyes moved constantly. Every time he refilled his glass from the bottle of Power Jim's Pure Mash, he would wring his hands together, each one in turn squeezing the other.

As the long moments of the night collected themselves into hours and slid away, Paskil marked them only by his steady drinking and by continuing to survey the room with his eyes. As the chimney of the lamp darkened and the night offered to come closer, Paskil reached out and turned the wick higher.

During his vigil, a faraway dog barked. Then another and another. It seemed for a moment that Paskil would rise and go to the door. His head turned in that direction and his hand reached for his hat. The muscles of his face tightened and his watchful suspicion told him to investigate the

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noise. Then the commotion died away and Paskil turned his eyes away from the door and back to the room.

Sensing rather than seeing that the time left to the night was growing short, Paskil suddenly stood up. From the scarred seat of the empty chair next to him he took his hat and pulled it down tight onto his white hair. He slid his hands down across the lapels of his black coat and looked at his white shirt front as if assuring himself that it had not been soiled or stained. His slender hand found the butt of his six shooter. He pulled the weapon from its holster and checked the cylinder. He held the gun carefully, almost respectfully, taking comfort from its weight and balance.

Looking up, Paskil found that the cat eyes of Leeds were watching, measuring, evaluating. Without moving, Leeds asked simply. "Is it time?"

Paskil nodded. His answer was that the time had indeed arrived. Leeds instantly curled up to his feet and with a quick stretching arc of his arms came to the table.

Leeds grabbed Mise by the shoulder and shook him roughly.

"Wake up, yuh sour bellows. It's time yuh earned yuhr money."

Mise took a moment to come around. He grumbled, he pawed at his eyes, and he scratched at his wide beard.

"What the hell time is it,?" Mise muttered.

"It's time to ride," answered Paskil. "Now the two of yuh get a move on and roust the others. We'll meet outside on the street."

As Leeds and Mise moved toward the door, Paskil added, "Ten minutes, no more. Anybody that questions that or isn't on time will answer to me."

Waking sleeping men, usually a thankless job, can even be dangerous. This is especially true when the men to be awakened have the night before been partaking of hard, raw liquor, the swill of cheap, rough saloons. Adding even more to the difficulty and the hazard might be the fact that such men have, for too long a time, been living on the sore side of life.

Still, the job had to be done. Outside the saloon the two men paused and talked for a moment. They divided the assignment.

Since Leeds had given himself the task of waking the hotel group, it fell to Mise to go to the livery and awaken the others. Mise resented the way that Leeds seemed give orders and the way Leeds acted the part of the boss when Paskil was not around. However, Mise contented himself with the thought that there would be a time to settle such questions later.

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Hoping that noise and a good, healthy yell would have the desired effect, Mise banged the livery door open and accompanied the sound effect with an order. "Come on down outa there, gents. There's work to be done." While waiting for a reply, Mise brought light to the dark world of the livery by lighting a lamp, which for safety purposes, was securely nailed high up on a wooden post.

Nothing. Mise tried again. "Hey up there, yuh damn galoots. Shake outa there."

Perhaps someone cleared a throat or coughed. Certainly no one called back a morning greeting.

Grumbling, Mise went to the wooden ladder and began climbing to the loft. The wooden steps, built by someone who had more concern for saving lumber than breath and muscles, were far apart, with one almost the equal of two ordinary steps. Mise cursed the designer and stretched his legs to make the ascent.

Still angry with the wood saving architect of the ladder, Mise forgot standard, well known wake up rules. Instead of standing back and yelling, he leaned over a sprawled form and yelled. As a reward for his carelessness, Mise took a solid right fist to his face. The blow tumbled him back almost over the edge of the loft into the hay bunk below.

The punch on the jaw also loosed Mise's temper. Still smoldering over Leeds's attitude and over being rudely shaken awake by that same arrogant person, Mise caught fire. Scrambling to his feet he leaped back at his drowsy attacker.

"Sock me will yuh," cried Mise, "that ain't the way I dealt this game."

Jerking his hat off, Mise used it as a whip and began lashing the man's face and ears. Growing more and more angry, Mise took some hard swipes at the offender with his booted foot. "Yuh ornery whelp," snarled Mise, "get on yuhr feet."

Now fully awake and roused to resentment, the man shoved Mise's thrashing arm aside. With a lunge he charged at Mise and drove him back, again near the edge of the loft. The two men rolled in a tangle of arms and legs. Muffled curses and grunts filled the air and, in a whirl of hay, the two struggled, each trying to free an arm for a good, clean blow.

In getting himself involved in a brawl, Mise had accomplished at least part of his larger purpose. The half dozen other men in the loft had been awakened. A couple of the men had risen and amused themselves by standing idly by watching the fight. Others sat where they had been

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sleeping and either watched or scratched and yawned themselves out of their sleep.

After a few moments during which more damage was done to some perfectly good horse hay than to the jaws, mouths, or heads of the combatants, the struggle began to slow somewhat. More than likely the struggling men realized they were doing little more than using up valuable strength. They needed little encouragement to stop the fight. That was supplied by one of the watchers who, bored with the rolling and thrashing, unspectacular struggle, called out. "Oh, lay off that. I've seen better fights by saloon girls."

"Yeah, hold off," called another, "what started it anyhow?"

Mise's opponent, sat up and began brushing hay from his shirt. "He did," the man said, "the damn fool came stumblin' up and started screamin' in my ear."

"If yuh think I was screamin'," threatened Mise, "wait til Paskil hooks into yuh if yuh ain't saddled and in front of the Eye in short order."

"Paskil had best not get on his high hoss with me," ground out one man. "He ain't got much comin' in my book. If he thinks that promises and a few dollars fer drinkin' whiskey buy him the right to hurrah me, he's dead wrong."

"Skeetal's right," put in another, "I'm about ready to ride outa this town. This whole shindig smells and, to my way of thinkin', hasn't been worth the candle. Now here we are up in the middle of the night to ride to who knows where. I've said it before, Paskil didn't pay me enough fer any killin'."

There were nods and grumbled words of agreement with the complaint. The men were out of sorts, tired, and on the verge of an open revolt.

Mise recognized the sound of trouble and made an effort to head it off before it became a stampede. "I didn't hear any of this yappin' last night when yuh were rollin' them silver cartwheels across the bar. How is it that yuh start bellyachin' when the time come to earn yuhr pay?"

Mise's argument had enough truth in it to quiet the men. They were not persuaded, but they began stepping down the ladder and saddling their horses. That clearly meant they were willing to go along with their agreement with Paskil, at least long enough to see how the string was going to play out.

The arrival of the group from the livery stable, with Mise in the lead, came a full half hour after Paskil had given the order to assemble and had commanded that it be in ten minutes. Paskil sat as a shadow in front of

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the Pink Eye. His rigid form was outlined in the dim light which spilled out onto the street through the uncurtained top half of the filthy window.

Darkness for Mise was a welcome cloak. He and the others pulled their cold and still protesting horses to a halt well back from the edge of light.

Paskil, seeming to sense the hostility of the men in his command, spoke only with sarcasm, not with threats. "Have trouble findin' the livery, Mise?"

"We're here, Paskil," replied Mise, taking some comfort from the knowledge that the men around him joined in his dislike of Paskil. "If yuh had come to get yuhr own hosses, it wouldn't have taken so long."

As ordered by Leeds, the horses for Paskil and the others had been saddled and brought along by the men who had chosen to spend the night in the loft of the livery. To some degree those leading the horses had been tenants of the stable less by choice than by necessity. Having been losers in late night stud poker games, they had gone to sleep knowing that the winners were spending the night in the hotel. That fact created a sense in the men that there were two groups on the street, one lucky and one unlucky. Mise, feeling somehow that he was the leader of the unlucky, was not in a charitable mood.

The differences between the hotel sleepers and the loft sleepers might have disappeared and been forgotten had Paskil not let his anger control his tongue. "Mise yuh not only talk like a cayuse, yuh smell like the north end of one. Now git that bronc over here."

Mise's temper rose. It was fueled by the arrogance of Leeds, by being shaken out of a sound sleep, and by having been soundly punched in the face. Now the demanding tone of Paskil was another heavy straw on his back.

"Paskil, I saddled yuhr damn horse and I brought him this far. If yuh want to ride'em, walk yuhr fancy duds over here and git `im."

The silence in the black street suddenly grew heavy. Every man there, the ones sitting on horses and the ones standing waiting to get mounted, knew that Paskil had been directly challenged. Nobody spoke and nobody moved. Two men wearing clothes cleaner than the others and wearing the lace up boots of surveyors did try to shrink back from the light and out of the scene.

Paskil noticed the movement and turned to look at them. The sight of the two out-of-place men, the surveyors he planned on escorting to the south slopes of the Snowys, seemed to remind him of the larger issues at stake. He may have told himself he could kill Mise later, but his action

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was to merely shrug. Without another word Paskil walked to the horse, took the reins from Mise's hand and climbed aboard.

After everyone was mounted, Paskil turned his horse and faced the others. "Some of yuh have been waitin' fer quite a while to get to the doin' of this job. The time is now. Remember one thing. Our push today is to get these surveyors planted on the other side of the pass, on the Ketchel rangeland. I ain't askin' fer a blood lettin' with them damn ranchers, but I'm sayin' this. We're ridin' over the Red Hill Road, road guards or no road guards. We'll do what we have to do. Once I get a deed to that land, I'll give every man here a stack of gold eagles two fingers high. If that ain't enough or, if there's any trixie livers here, ride out now and keep goin'."

Paskil waited. Even the horses stood still as if they were waiting for objection, for a trixie liver to bolt, or for the sun to rise in the East.

The moment passed. One man called out, "The sooner we ride, the sooner we can get some pork belly and beans in our guts. We are goin' to eat somewhere along the line, ain't we, Paskil."

The others laughed and began heading their horses down the street. Leeds answered for Paskil. "Grub'll be served at the top of Red Hill pass."

With an easy slap here, a snap of reins there, with the dull rubbing of cold leather on coarse cloth, and with the clap of iron horseshoes on the cold ground, the band of men rode into the darkness. Paskil, the leader, waited a moment. He looked down the length of the street as though feeling there was something he had forgotten. His absent gaze might have been that of a man looking back reluctantly, wondering if he might have done a thing, said a word differently, somewhere, sometime long ago.

Then, he too, nudged his horse into motion. Without looking back he spurred away, anxious to be gone, not wanting to be alone with the black sky which was with weakening resolve holding back the morning light.

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As Anse had predicted, the first light of morning found them at the intersection with the Spring Creek Road. To their right was the short ride into Lewistown and to the left was the road to the Spring Creek bridge and beyond that the Red Hill Road.

They paused for a few moments to let the horses blow, and to stretch their own arms and legs. Land Commissioner Fraser, though not as trail hardened as Owen and Anse, was in good spirits and ready to continue.

"I haven't worked in this area, Owen," remarked Fraser looking around and taking stock of the line of mountains which was rapidly taking shape in the growing light, "tell me where we are and what kind of trail is ahead."

"That way," Owen waved his big hand to the right, "is town. The other direction is ours. That'll take us to a road which follows a small creek which drains the north facing slopes of the Snowys. A couple of hours of hard riding along the creek will put us on Red Hill."

"And from what I've heard, the Ketchel Rangeland is a few more hours over the mountain pass?"

"That's what we hope, Mister Fraser," put in Anse. "In times without trouble, that's the way it would be. Today we don't know."

"If Paskil rides today like yuh think he will, Owen," began one of the younger men who had been on duty at Bright's Diggings, "won't he be pretty close behind us?"

Looking at the road, Owen didn't answer immediately. He scuffed the dirt with the toe of his boot and then knelt down. Still he didn't speak. The others followed his lead and searched the road surface with their eyes.

Owen led Cocoa and began walking down the road. The others also walked with him. It was only a few moments before Owen was satisfied. Stopping by a string of fresh horse droppings, he looked at the young man who had asked the question.

"If I'm not mistaken, Waite, Paskil and company are about an hour ahead of us."

"Ahead,..." stammered the young man, "does that mean we're too late?"

"No," replied Owen, "if I know our folks, that means we have Paskil between us. I imagine that Sid and the others have staked out a strong holding line somewhere on the road. When Paskil and his crowd run into that, they'll have to stop. If there's a stand off, it won't be any comfort to Paskil to find out that he got us closing off his back trail."

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"That sounds like yuh expect this thing to turn to pretty hot gun play," observed Anse.

Owen looked at Anse and the four other young men in the group. Their faces were tense and their eyes were fixed on Owen. He knew them and he knew their families. Owen considered ordering them to stay back while he rode on ahead, but he knew their brothers and their fathers would be ahead trying to hold the road. They simply would not accept an order that kept them back out of the war which was about to begin.

As he considered the matter, Owen realized there really wasn't much of a choice to be made. They had to keep up with Paskil and his crowd and they had to keep close enough to move in when they were needed. When the shooting started, and there didn't seem to be any way of keeping that from happening, they would be in it all the way.

Owen sighed heavily. They were too young and they were too brave and they might die, and they were his responsibility.

"Yes, Anse, this thing could turn ugly very soon. I won't ask any of you to hang back and not join in, but let's get one thing straight," Owen's intense grey eyes stared hard at each of the men in turn, "you follow my lead, and you do exactly what I tell you to do, without arguments. Plunking at rabbits and coyotes with those pistols is one thing, drawing down on a man is another, but if that man is fixing to shoot, you shoot first."

Owen's instruction left no room for argument. The command in his voice was strong and, although his stern voice spoke of restraint, his words gave them confidence. His tall figure dominated the road and every man there felt the power of his presence.

Taking their silence as understanding, Owen turned and swung up onto Cocoa's back. The others mounted and reined their horses in the direction of the mountains.

"Let's get a bit closer to the bridge," suggested Owen, "and then we can take a longer break for something to eat."

The idea met with approval. In fact, the pace of the ride picked up. The light of morning and the light of hope grew stronger. The young men dropped back a few lengths and soon began joshing one another as though only food lay ahead of them.

Fraser, riding alongside Owen, remarked, "These young friends of yours are prime stock Owen. A body'd think they were going to a May evenin' barn dance."

"If it comes to a fight, I want `em on my side, every time," agreed Owen. "They'll make mistakes, but they'll stick. In fact, that may be the

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difference between our people and the easy money drifters that Paskil has collected."

Fraser realized there was little more to be said. He fell silent and turned his surveyor's eyes to the mountains which were rising on both sides of the little band of riders.

Soon, they came to a point where the road and Spring Creek veered close together. There was an easy slope of ground leading to the water and an open area where the horses could be turned loose for a rest.

As promised, Owen called a halt to the ride, and in moments willing hands had a small fire going. In the space of a few more moments, a battered pot full of fresh creek water was put on to boil and a companion skillet was sputtering merrily away on the eager flames.

As the men poked at their tin plates with hardtack to soak up dabs of fugitive bacon grease, and as they sipped carefully on cups of strong, black coffee, there was little talk of what lay ahead. It would have served no purpose to try and make firm plans since they didn't know how things would develop. However there was some speculation on where Sid Andrews and the others would try to hold the road. There was also some talk of how the road could be blocked and how it could be held.

"I'd set up somewhere on top of the mountain," argued one. "that way yuh could shoot down on `em if they didn't ride back."

"Either there or somewhere on the steepest part of the road," said another, "wherever the stand is made, the important thing is not to let `em get to the bottom of the road."

"Why is that?" asked Fraser.

"Simple," replied Anse, "after the road gets to the bottom of Red Hill, there are a dozen places where riders could spread out and get onto our rangeland."

Before the conversation go any further, the sound of a rider approaching brought everyone to their feet. Guns weren't drawn, but nervous hands felt for the butts of six shooters. The rider was coming fast and from the direction of town.

Owen spoke quietly. "Easy now. It sounds like one horse and whoever it is isn't likely to start anything."

Almost as the sound of his caution died away, the rider came into full view. He saw the group of men and rode directly toward them.

As the rider wheeled his horse to a halt, the burly figure of Sheriff Henely suddenly became a large presence in the little camp. He made no sign of getting down, but instead sat and looked deliberately at the face of each man. Finally, his gaze met Owen's calm, waiting grey eyes.

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"Howdy, Bannack. Want to introduce me to yuhr army?"

"Sure, Sheriff. This man," Owen nodded at Fraser, "is Territorial Land Commissioner Fraser. Mister Fraser, the man asking the questions is Sheriff Henley. I won't trouble you with names, but the others are sons of some of the ranchers from Ketchel range."

"Yeah, I know the Commissioner," replied Henley. With a thin, quick smile he greeted him, "Howdy Tom, good to see yuh. What brings yuh to these parts, as if I didn't know."

With a broad grin, Fraser looked at Anse, "That very persuasive young man there and his story about a nasty land war which I may have accidentally gotten started."

"I don't think yuh had anything to do with some six-fingered clerk giving out a bad commission, Tom. So don't blame yuhrself for this shindig."

Returning his attention to Owen, the Sheriff, his hands resting easily on his saddle horn, asked another question. "And where are yuh plannin' on leadin' this outfit, Bannack?"

Owen chose his words carefully. "My first choice would be to just ride quietly and peacefully back to our homes, Sheriff. But I'm afraid there's a problem between us and our range. The problem is a man named Paskil and a herd of cheap thieves he's rounded up to help him steal our land."

Owen watched the Sheriff's face. Clearly the Sheriff knew far more about the land grab and Paskil's plans than anyone had suspected. Henley's reference to the Commission and the fact that he labeled it bad encouraged Owen. Still, Owen didn't fully understand what had brought Henley out of town and caused him to get involved.

"Well, I've got to repeat what I told yuh once before, Bannack. I won't have any vigilante justice around here while I'm Sheriff. I've done some askin' and I've done some more investigatin' since I last talked to yuh, and I'd guess yuh have pretty good reasons to want Paskil's hide nailed to a tree, but I want him too, and since I'm the law, I come first."

"Would you mind spelling that out a bit, Sheriff?" asked Owen quietly.

"If yuh hadn't gone ridin' off so fast after ploppin' Missus Hogan onto Effie Noams' bed yuh'd know why I want Paskil. At least yuh'd know part of the reason. Missus Hogan came to and named Paskil as the man who shot her. In my book that's attempted murder, stealin' money from her strong box makes fer a charge of robbery, and burnin' her store

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is called arson. I aim to pull him in on those counts, and I want to talk to him about some other murders."

Henley's closing words were spoken softly and clearly directed at Owen only. Owen knew he was being told that the Sheriff had become convinced that Paskil was one of the men responsible for the killing of Owen's family.

Knowing that the law was finally taking over for the tragic murders committed some two years earlier, made Owen realize that his long hunt was drawing to a close. Bringing justice to men in places where there had been no law or where the law itself had been worse than criminal had always weighed heavily on Owen. He recalled his words, spoken to another group of angry men, that when men are forced to resort to vigilante action, every man's hand is on the rope. He had been trying to say that men who stand by and permit criminal violence to go unpunished are responsible for the final and often brutal reaction of other men.

Now he was being told that duly appointed law was taking up his cause. From the look in Henley's eyes and from the tone of the man's voice, Owen realized this lawman was going to be stubbornly honest and unshakable in his determination to follow the rules.

Although he felt relief, Owen also felt disappointment. The thought of standing aside while the Sheriff arrested Paskil sent a rush of bitterness through Owen's thoughts. His mixed feelings must have registered on his face, because Henley's explanation seemed aimed at him.

Henley continued with his tale of how he had suddenly become involved in events. "Effie Noams came bangin' on my door a few hours ago. She told me about how yuh brought Missus Hogan to her house. I went over there and Missus Hogan, though she wasn't talkin' too good, gave me the story on how she had been shot. She also told me about the affidavit signin' that had been goin' on in the store. It might have been a good idea for yuh to tell me about that because yuh see, Bannack, I been lookin' into this land grab fer some months now. In fact, Tom Fraser, started my investigation by wirin' the Governor about it when he first got wind of it through Tiswell the banker."

"You never said anything about that, Mister Fraser," said Owen looking at the Land Commissioner.

"It never came up," shrugged Fraser, "besides, I thought the telegram had probably been forgotten or lost. It wasn't until jest now when I saw

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Henley come foggin' up here on his horse, that I even guessed the Governor had ordered him to take a hand in this game."

"So what set yuh off this mornin'?" asked a puzzled Anse.

"I had been plannin' on arresting Paskil any day now," explained Henley, "I figured I jest about had enough to bring him in fer the Bannack killin's, but I wanted to tie up a few loose ends first. Then I talked to Missus Hogan and fer me that put Paskil in a bag and tied it shut. When I went lookin' fer the pesky louse, I found out he and his pack had ridden out this mornin'. I knew that meant the war was on."

"Yuh planned on takin' on Paskil and his whole herd alone?" asked a wide eyed Anse.

Henley didn't react to the idea except to comment, "There probably ain't one solid backbone in Paskil's whole lot. My guess is they'll scatter when they find out takin' land ain't the easy pickin's Paskil has made it out to be. Besides, I expected yuhr folks might be waitin' fer Paskil somewhere along the road."

"We're still headed for home, Sheriff," Owen reminded him.

"Oh, I know that Bannack, and I think I know how yuh must feel. Bein' near the end of a long chase and then havin' yuhr man seem to slip away or havin' someone else take him. It's happened to me. Still, I can't have a lawless rabble goin' off shootin' and raisin' hell, so raise yuhr hand."

Owen, seldom surprised by anything, was taken aback. "Do what?"

"I ain't arrestin' yuh, yuh overgrown cow chaser. I said raise yuhr hand, not hands."

Even as he spoke, Owen realized what the Sheriff was going to do. As the Sheriff raised his own right hand, Owen followed suit.

"The rest of yuh do the same, except you Tom. You ain't fit fer anything except peeping through that transit of yuhrs and writin' out land deeds."

"Bannack, you and this mob here with yuh, repeat what I say. I, now say yuhr name."

A mixed chorus of "I's" and names filled the air. "swear that I will uphold the law of this here Territory, that bein' the Territory of Montana.." The chorus followed, more intelligible than before. "and that I will follow the orders of the duly appointed Sheriff, that bein' Lawrence Henley,..." The chorus dutifully swore to follow the duly appointed Sheriff. "and that I will give up bein' a deputy when this job is done.." The chorus swore to be deputies for the job at hand only. "So help me God."

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The group did as directed and called upon God.

"That makes yuh deputies," announced Henley solemnly. "I ain't got but one deputy badge. Bannack, since yuh're some kind of foreman of this rabble, here, pin it on."

Henley held out a silver star. Owen took it and weighed it in his hand. "I wonder if it belongs on my shirt..." he began.

"On yuhrs more than any other's," Henley said quietly. "If Paskil's goin' to be shot, arrested, or otherwise made to answer for bein' bad air from a bloated cow, it's goin' to be by a lawman, and, as of right now, that's what yuh are."

Owen did as he was ordered. The star, though it was dull silver, scratched and worn by hard use, seemed to catch the morning light.

"Now yuh can do yuhr outlaw huntin' and nabbin' from a new angle," said Henley, "but yuh'll have to let the judge order the hangin's, and yuh'll have to at least try to bring `em in still breathin'. The badge looks good on yuh."

With a terse, "Thanks," Owen shook Henley's outstretched hand. Despite his gruff exterior, the Sheriff, a seasoned law officer, knew how much it meant to Owen to be placed on the right side of the law for the last step in a long and lonely quest for justice.

For his part, Owen looked at though he had worn the symbol of the law for years. The silver star fit him and looked at home on the plain, honest shirt.

"I think it's time to clean up this camp and get on up the road," Owen said simply.

With that, the flames were stamped out, the cups and plates washed in the stream, and the left over provisions retied into their canvas stow sacks and saddle bags. The horses were collected and the group, now one important person larger, was again on the road and headed toward the upside of Red Hill Road.

By the time the sun had dealt with a wide raft of reluctant gray clouds and gotten almost to its half way point in the wide sky, Owen, the Sheriff and his collection of deputies had reached the top of the pass. They paused to take note of a very sloppy campsite where Paskil's men had eaten either a very late breakfast or an early lunch as they rested their horses. Henley and Owen studied the road and concluded that the outlaw band was only moments ahead of them.

"Yuh know this area better than I do, Deputy Bannack," said Henley, smiling at his own use of the title, "tell me what's ahead."

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Owen didn't immediately answer. Lifting the tall McKibben, he ran his fingers through his unruly hair and rubbed the back of his neck. He found himself drawn to the lawman and he found satisfaction in working with him. The dry, seldom smiling wit, was present in almost everything the solid lawman said, and, at the same time, his face and his eyes seemed always to be watching and seeking information.

Settling the tall hat back onto his head, Owen replied to the Sheriff's question, "The road turns a bit here where it starts downhill. Then it straightens out as it follows the rimrock for almost a mile. At the end of its run along the rim it takes a complete turnaround and heads down the mountainside for the bottom. That part of the road is plenty steep. After that it's mostly some up and some down until it comes out on the Ketchel range."

"Where do yuh figure yuhr people have set up?"

"Of course I can't say for sure, but knowing Sid and how he thinks, I'd guess he'd pick the switchback. The only problem there would be stopping them from just riding through."

"Yuh think they might have put up some kind of road block, maybe usin' rocks or logs?" mused Henley.

"Not much time for that," answered Owen, "putting up something like that would be heavy work, but if they could stop 'em there, that would be the place."

"Well, if that was the case, yuh'd think we would have heard somethin' by now," frowned Henley.

The words were hardly out of his mouth before the faraway pop of six guns followed by the snap of Winchesters punched through the air. Owen and Henley looked at one another.

"Yuh know yuhr friends pretty well. I'd say the cork in the road is at the switchback," said Henley. "Is there any way of gettin' above or below that turnaround in quick time?"

Owen shook his head, "No. The best way to it, in fact the only way, is down the road."

"Then that's where we're headed," announced Henley. Looking back at the young men behind him he added, "Now remember yuh're deputies. I want to ride up and announce us as the law before we do any shootin'. In this business the cusses always get the first shot. Is that clear?"

Eager nods and a couple of "Yes, sirs," gave the Sheriff the answer he wanted. At a brisk trot, the group moved down the mountain road, throwing a cloud of red dust up into the warm air.

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Ahead of Owen and Henley, and in the moment before the gunfire had begun, Paskil and his riders had found themselves confronted by the log wall. Rounding the switchback turn they had suddenly found the barrier sitting immediately in front of their bewildered horses.

The wall in front, the rocks on one side and the impossibly steep mountainside on the other, neatly boxed them in. At first there had been surprised curses and loud exclamations. "What the Hell...Whoa...whoa...Them damn ranchers..."

The initial surprise had been followed by calls from Paskil and Leeds, "Ride around...ride around the damn thing."

Horses had been whirled to and fro along the wall, from one side to the other. Frantic calls from different riders began to make the situation more and more clear. "Hell, we can't go down, we'd kill ourselves and the horses. This end runs into the rocks."

Then closer inspection of the wall was begun. At the dozen riders milled around stirring up road dust, a loud call greeted them from the rock fortress above.

"Turn them nags around and skeedadel back up that road," came a booming voice.

"They're up in them rocks," cried Leeds, "we'll have to blast `em outa there."

The remark made little sense since Paskil's group was in the open and in no position to blast anyone or anything. Paskil, the cooler head tried to rally his confused men.

"Off the horses," he yelled, "off them cayuses. Take cover in the trees."

At first there was hesitation, but as the men realized they were sitting targets for the rifles in the rocks scattered over their heads, they obeyed. A general rush followed and soon Paskil's men had stumbled, scrambled and scurried to protected positions over the far edge of the road away from the rocks.

Again the booming voice ordered their departure. "Ain't nobody been hurt yet, so get on them horses and ride out of here."

"Who says?" demanded Paskil. "We've got a right to ride through here." As he spoke, Paskil stared at the rocks. He saw what might have been a hat here, a rifle barrel there, maybe an elbow or shoulder there, but no really good clean target. In frustration, he threw back another

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futile order, "I don't know who yuh are but, I'm tellin' yuh to clear outa there before we blast yuh."

To his right and to his left, Paskil began to hear complaints and questions. "Maybe we oughta pull back fer now," said one of the men.

"Yeah, this ain't my idea of a fair fight," agreed Skeetal further down the road, "they got all the aces in their hand, and all them damn aces are on the high ground."

Others grumbled agreement. "They won't shoot if we pull out," guessed one nervous voice.

Paskil knew the moment was crucial. If his followers began to leave, the day was going to be lost. Indeed, the whole plan would collapse. He knew that the only way to keep the men in place would be to place their lives at risk. There was only one thing left to do. Leveling his six shooter at the rocks, Paskil triggered off two quick shots.

One of the slugs hit a rock and whined menacingly away. The other slammed hard into the mountainside. He paused, then he slammed three more shots into the rocks. He slid down the hill a bit and quickly thumbed cartridges out of his belt and into the hot chamber of his pistol. Rock fragments showered someone in the rocks.

Paskil's shots were answered by a volley of fire from the piled rocks. The rifle slugs from the ranchers snapped at the hard road surface and at the trees above the raiders. Other rifle bullets screamed harmlessly away over the sloping mountainside.

Immediately, Paskil's men answered the volley. The air was suddenly filled with the sharp crack of rifle fire mixed with the pop of handguns. After a few moments, a lull settled over the battleground. It was punctuated by an occasional shot from first one side then from the other. The matter seemed to be quickly settling into a standoff.

Then, from behind the protection of a rock, located lower than most of the others and therefore almost as close as the other side of the road, another voice spoke. It was that of a powerful shotgun, a greener. It boomed out over both the rifle and handgun fire. Its heavy buckshot raked the edge of the road, scatterin dirt and gravel down onto Paskil's men. The crashing fire was random. First, it went to the right, then to the left, then the left again, then to the center of the roadline where the Paskil group lay.

"Boom...boom...boom." The buckshot fire was ominous. It came quickly, making it a high risk for anyone below the road to rise up and get off a shot.

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The men crouching along the side of the road were frightened and alarmed by the shotgun. "Boom...boom," the even rhythm went on and the double 00 shot went again to one side, to the middle, back again, and each time a cloud of road dust went up from the menacing hail of lead.

Then as both parties held off to take stock of the first volleys, a loud voice came from up the road. "Hold yuhr fire, everyone hold yuhr fire. This is the law."

The battleground fell silent. The rock protected ranchers called back. "Whose law?"

Henley roared back, "There ain't but one law here and that's me, Sheriff Henley."

The rancher's voice called back, "Welcome to our side of Red Hill, Henley. Where yuh been until now? If yuh come to pull the fat outa the fire fer Paskil, fergit it."

"I ain't pullin' no man's fat outa any fire. I'm here to make an arrest, and Deputy Sheriff Owen Bannack is here to help me."

Stunned silence, unbelieving silence. Finally, another voice, that of Sid Andrews, came from the rocks. "That true? Are yuh out there, Owen?"

"The Sheriff has told you the truth, Sid. I'm here and for now I want all of you to hold your positions. Paskil, as for you, I know you're there. I'm arresting you for attempted murder, for robbery, for arson, and for cold blooded murder."

Henley bellowed out support. "That's the size of the pill, Paskil. As fer the rest of you coyotes, this show's over. I'll give yuh one chance to climb up outa that ditch and scatter. If I see any of yuhr skunk butt faces in the territory again, I'll tuck yuh away in my brand new jail fer the lifetime of a fat tree. Now yuh got about one short swallow to haul outa there. This chance is fer everyone except Leeds and Mise. Them two have got jail time comin'."

Men who ride hard and live on the short side of life know when to cut and when to run. One man darted up out of the ditch and grabbed at the reins of his horse. Leeds screamed at him.

"Come back here yuh coward, or I'll plug yuh in the back."

Two more jumped up and scrambled for horses. Then three, another and finally it was a rout. Mise, hoping to make his escape in the general retreat, joined the others.

Leeds, his face drawn and tight with hate and anger, leaped to his feet and leveled his six shooter at Mise. Two shots in quick succession

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belched from Leeds' gun. The slugs found Mise's back and shoved him down into the road face first and dead even as he fell.

The maddened Leeds then began firing at the others as they swung into their saddles and spurred up the road. In their frenzy to escape, they ignored Leeds and fled for safety.

Henley rode into full view of the confusion and sat like a rock as the rushing men rode past him. Leeds' shots came in his direction, but Henley seemed not to notice. With cool calculation, Henley raised his revolver and drilled Leeds with a single shot. The outlaw crumpled to his knees, his eyes wide with surprise. His gun, smoke curling from its muzzle, sagged in his hand, then fell in front of him. The gunman then collapsed onto his own deadly revolver. As he fell, his face twitched in pain, and he cried out a pitiful, "Help, me...oh my...oh..."

Henley turned to his newly sworn deputies. "Now turn yuhr horses around and hurrah them jaspers over the hill. Stay close to `em, and if any of `em turn around, give a hoop and tell `em they're headed fer my jail if they slow down this side of the Missouri."

During the rush to escape the rancher's trap, Paskil, realizing his land grab had failed, slid backwards down the hill. On his stomach and hands and knees, he scuttled into the covering protection of the trees. Keeping as low and as close to the mountainside as possible, he fought his way over the steepness, over the loose dirt, and finally around the lower end of the barricade.

Pumping his legs frantically, Paskil churned his way back up the hillside toward the roadbed. Before stepping up to the road on the downhill side of the wall, he scanned the area, his eyes darting in all directions. Not comprehending what he was seeing, Paskil stared at Mobilus. He recognized it as the engine of a train.

More shots came from the other side of the barricade. Paskil didn't know that the shots meant the end of Leeds and the frightened rush of the last of his riders, but he did know that if he was going to escape, quick and desperate action was needed. There were no horses in sight. Again his eyes returned to the wheeled steam engine. Somehow it invited him. The little spurts of steam from its side said that the engine was alive. The red wheels glistened and sparkled in the sun. He could only believe they were somehow ready to roll.

Still he waited, undecided. then a movement in the cab caught his attention. Someone was there! Either they could drive the engine down the hill or they could be a hostage.

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Paskil sprinted across the open road and clambered at the steps leading to the cab. As he pulled himself up onto the last step, just outside the protection of the small iron booth, he came face to face with a woman.

For an instant they faced one another. Jane Carpenter, her blue eyes wide with surprise, stood looking at the intruder. Instantly she knew that the man with the wild white hair, matted with dirt, was her enemy. His dirt cover face was that of a trapped killer animal.

Thrusting his six gun at her face, he hissed, "Stand quiet or I'll blast yuh where yuh stand."

Jane slid her foot back, then rocked back away from him, carefully and slowly. Paskil slid into the cab and knelt down out of sight. His breath came in gasps, and to make breathing easier, he tore at his shirt front and ripped away his dirt encrusted collar. "Jest don't move if yuh want to live," he seethed between gulps of air. As he began to recover his breath, he looked around the cab, "What in blazes is this?"

His question came through tight, drawn back lips and his voice was low and menacing. Before Jane could answer, another figure appeared on the step, and his head and shoulders popped up into view.

"Janie, I think the shootin' may be about over..." Foakes stopped speaking the second his gaze fell on Paskil. Looking at the kneeling, tattered and frantic man, Foakes spoke in a mock tone of friendliness. "Well, if we ain't got a humbug hidin' out here."

Without waiting to be ordered, Foakes quickly stepped up into the cab and stood in front of Jane. "It's gettin' crowded in here," said Foakes in the same easy tone of voice, "Jane why don't yuh skip down and check the wheels on the coal wagon."

Paskil lifted the muzzle of the gun and aimed it at Foakes' head. "If she moves, first you die, then she gets a slug in her face."

Foakes kept up his mock serious banter, "Well, Janie our passenger wants company, so yuh better stand pat fer now. Jest what do yuh think this is goin' to get yuh, Paskil?"

"Can yuh run this train?" demanded Paskil.

"I surely can run it, when it's in runnin' condition," replied Foakes, "but the old thing ain't ready or able to go anywhere. It's got a blowed out piston and can't even move."

"I think yuhr lyin'," growled Paskil, "now hear me, trainman. My string is lookin' short right now so I ain't got much to lose. Either yuh get this thing movin' down the mountain or I'll start shootin'. Now!"

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"The man wants us to leave the station without even wavin' a flag," said Foakes, shaking his head as though pitying Paskil's lack of knowledge about trains. "I suppose yuh know we'll have to lever up the drivers, and we'll have to boil up some pressure before we switch onto the main line."

As Paskil blinked at the strange line of patter and tried to focus on what he was being told and on whether or not there was some kind of truth in it, Foakes threw him another concern. "One more thing, Mister Badman, when we move, we'll attract attention. As even you can see, the back end of this here cab is open to the world and yuh're bound to be seen by someone. So what's yuhr pleasure? Want to ride on top? Yuh'd be jest about as easy to see."

Paskil's gaze swept the cab. The truth of what Foakes said was apparent to him. The moment the engine started down the hill, the rear of the cab would be in full view of anyone around the barricade. His attention fell on the small window which had been cut into the front wall of the cab. Its purpose was to enable the operator to look out on the top of the boiler. It was less than a foot high and only slightly more than a foot long.

Paskil thought he had his solution. "Maybe ridin' on top might not be a bad idea, trainman."

Keeping the muzzle of the revolver aimed at Foakes' head, Paskil surveyed his footing and his handholds. He then, eased his way out of the cab and along the walkway toward the boiler. Then with a quick leap he was on top of the boiler lying flat on his stomach with his pistol pointing through the viewing port. In that position the top of the cab almost totally concealed him from the view of anyone looking at the rear of the engine.

"Now get this thing moving," commanded Paskil. Responding with deliberately slow motions, Foakes began adjusting levers and making ready to set the engine into motion. Paskil's face glared through the viewing port, "I ain't even goin' to warn yuh again, trainman. Instead, I'm goin' to kill the woman."

"Hold off that talk," called Foakes casually as though Paskil was some kind of casual nuisance. "Pressure's up and we can move now."

Not daring to delay any longer and unable to find any ruse to divert Paskil's attention, Foakes set Mobilus in motion. The engine rolled toward the downhill road. The supply wagon obediently trailed along. Foakes kept the power on its lowest level and Mobilus moved at only at a fast walk.

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Someone at the barricade yelled at them. "Hey where yuh goin'?" Others joined in, "Foakes, are yuh drivin' that thing or is it runnin' away?"

"Faster," ordered Paskil, his tense face framed by the little window.

Foakes gave him a tiny bit more speed. "Any faster and we'll lose control of this thing and yuh'll end up in a heap at the bottom of this mountain."

However gravity began to work on the heavy Mobilus and the red wheels began spinning faster. Foakes gave all of his attention to the iron steering wheel. He called to Jane, "That lever there...yes, that's the one. Pull it as hard as yuh can, Janie. We're only a puff or two from a runaway."

Jane put her weight on the lever. She put her foot on the fire wall and pulled. The brake had only a slight effect on the engine's speed, yet, it kept the engine from running away. Somewhere below, smoke began to rise from the friction of the brake on the axle.

The little train crashed through the remains of the tree which had tried to stop Mobilus the day before. This time branches and splinters flew in every direction as though they had been hit by a fast moving tornado.

Then came a strong, loud command, "Jane, Foakes, duck."

Owen, standing on the supply wagon, was leveling his navy colt at the viewing port. Without a word, both squatted to the floor of the cab. The colt spoke and a bullet slammed into the fire wall.

Paskil, who had heard the order, but who hadn't seen Owen, cursed. He scrambled to his feet and screamed, "Yuhr gonna die, Bannack. Take this with yuh to Hell!"

Two shots roared from Paskil's gun. One found Owen's right arm and it fell limp to his side. His colt fell from his hand and clattered to the floor of the wagon, lost among the bouncing odds and ends. Ignoring the lost revolver, Owen began climbing forward toward the raging, screaming killer. When he reached the front edge of the supply wagon, Foakes yelled to him, "Owen, here, catch."

Foakes tossed his "coyote rifle" into space. Owen caught it with his good left hand. Owen began trying to work the lever with his wounded hand.

While Owen had been climbing forward, Paskil had reloaded. Again he leveled his fully loaded pistol at Owen. Only a few yards separated the two men and, even in his rage, and even with the bouncing engine disturbing his aim, Paskil could not miss.

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Paskil even realized he had a few seconds to aim while his helpless target stood trying to work the rifle. His white hair blowing around his face, Paskil leveled the muzzle of his sixgun. Then in the rushing madness of the moment, a piercing scream split the air. It came almost under Paskil's feet. From the throat of the whistle a burst of steam gushed out and swirled around the frenzied killer. Startled and pained by the sound and the steam, his hands involuntarily clapped around his ears.

Realizing that he had given up his advantage, Paskil again tried to bring the muzzle of his gun to bear. But it was his last conscious movement. His eyes widened as though he could see the rifle slug coming at his chest. He screamed a foul oath and began dying. His body rocked backward onto the boiler. It then began sliding off the rounded iron tank toward the ground. His hands, in futile and weak gestures, grasped for a hold.

For a few seconds, Paskil's hands found the bell rope, struggling to hold it, Paskil rolled and became tangled in the rope which became wound around his neck. The dying man's grasp weakened. His body slid over the side of the boiler and hung by the bell rope. For a few seconds, Paskil hung in space in front of the churning cleats.

Finally, the near lifeless Paskil fell to the ground. The wide, spinning red cleated wheels rolled the length of his body grinding it into the red dirt of the road.

Inside the cab Foakes called loudly to Jane. "Leave off the whistle, Janie. It's over."

In another moment Owen made his way to the cab. With his good arm and his shoulder strength, he forced the brake one notch tighter and Mobilus began to slow. Foakes used the steam pressure and the brake on the supply wagon to further slow the rush of the train, and in a few moments the engine came to a halt.

"That man's drive wheel was about as far out of round as any I've seen," said Foakes. Grinning at Owen he added, "I don't think that coyote rifle of mine has ever been put to better use."

Soon the men from the barricade were milling around Mobilus and getting the story of the wild run from Foakes. Jane was applying a crude bandage to Owen's arm and with tears sliding down her cheeks, she was scolding him soundly for not being more careful.

"Jess, that cannon of your's may have carried the day," smiled Owen. Looking at the others, he asked, "How in the world did you get that kind of wall up so fast?"

"Mobilus," said Foakes simply.

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His gaze going back in the direction where Paskil had fallen to the ground, Jess put in, "That may be what you call this engine, Mister Foakes, but my name ain't bad either."

Foakes smiled grimly, "Old Scratch's Iron Belly. I guess I'd agree with that. Jane and Owen did what they had to do, and I guess Mobilus with his iron belly did the rest.

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The late afternoon sun, having warmed the wide prairie, during the morning and during the longer part of the afternoon, took refuge for a time behind a drift of idle clouds. Gathered by a passing, stout breeze from the nearby Snowy Mountains, the clouds had seemingly lost their purpose and now simply floated in the sky, perhaps waiting for another wind to give them direction. However, for the few moments that the clouds shielded the sun, the escaping rays of light formed wide golden shafts which sprayed golden sunlight out in every direction. Then, as the sun sank below the level of the cloud bank, it flooded the prairie with a wide band of light which brought every aspect of the landscape into sharp relief.

The ranchers of Ketchel Range looked at the sky and the wide grassland and made easy comments about moisture and cattle. An evening meal of roast beef, potatoes, hot bread, wide leafed greens, and thumb berry pie with warm thick cream awaited them. Until the meal was called by the women in Herman's house, the men were content to lean on and stand around Mobilus while they talked about his possibilities and laughed at names some had given to him.

The Red Hill War, as Jess called it, was two days past and already things were returning to normal. Land Commissioner Fraser had stayed on and written out some very ornate and official looking deeds for every man who had filed on land. Maudee supervised the operation from the overhanging porch. She insisted her head was healed, but everyone noticed that she didn't try too hard to put an end to the close and constant attention of a very attentive Anse.

Earlier in the day Foakes had returned from a trip to town and had reported that a new load of bricks had arrived from Great Falls, and Sheriff Henley, with moral support from Widow Noams, was hoping to get a roof on the new jail sometime soon. Foakes also reported that Penelope Hogan was already planning the new store to be built on the site of the old one. In fact, Foakes talked a lot about Penelope and some of the ranchers smiled at one another as they listened to the energetic steamist.

There were questions in every man's mind about Foakes himself. Where had he actually come from? How did he decide to build Mobilus and where did he get the money to do such a thing? Of course, no one asked such questions. The plain fact was that such things were Foakes' own business.

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When talk drifted to other matters, Owen took the opportunity to draw Foakes aside. Reaching into his shirt pocket, Owen pulled out the note from banker Tiswell and handed it to the engineer.

Foakes read the note. For a moment his round face lost its smile and his twinkling eyes seemed to be seeing something far away.

Owen broke the silence. "I'd say that pretty well clears up one thing that's been puzzling me."

"Indeed it does, Owen. Indeed it does," agreed Foakes. "How much of the story have you been able to piece together?"

"Very little," shrugged Owen, "That note tells me that you were the one that hired killer was really after, not me. It also tells me that you're a businessman and that you own most of a railroad back east somewhere."

"Yes. That's true enough. My company is the Eastern and Central Express," nodded Foakes, "for years now we've been a company which hauls grain, some timber and building materials. Some time back, I decided to buy some new style engines and to extend our line to pick up some new business. I borrowed some money and took in some partners to help pay for all that. Trouble began when the partners started taking more than their share of the profits. I kicked the whole kaboodle out and thought I had done with `em. That's the way I left things when I headed out west with Mobilus."

"I figure from that note that they didn't go peacefully," mused Owen. "Tiswell says the police in St. Louis have records on Craver, our bushwacker."

Foakes waved the note, "Yes, it's clear the police think my partners hired Craver to kill me, but they can't prove it. That creates something of a problem."

"Which is?" asked Owen.

"Well, I've got to get back there and clear things up with the business. I suppose that if they tried once, they'll try again. I'll be watching my backside."

"Is any of this connected to land along the Musselshell," asked Owen.

"Not that I know of," replied Foakes, "I heard Anse and Maudee talking about the maps missing from Fraser's office. The more I think about it, there was talk about one of the big railroads moving out this way, but that's all I know. Of course, I think that's something I want to look into when I go back through St. Louis."

Foakes then lapsed into thoughtful silence. After a few moments, his face brightened a bit. "One thing, Owen."

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"Yes?"

"I suppose you've noticed that...well, I guess it's pretty obvious that the way I..."

"I've noticed, Mister Foakes, that you're a railroad owner who loves railroads. I'd guess that a businessman who loves what he does as much as you do gets to talking like the men who are in shirtsleeves and who are outside getting in the oil and grease and such. I don't know why there can't be two Mister Foakes'. One who has an office back east and one who is a steamist, and the engineer of a ground walking, steam machine. The men here know only one Foakes. I don't see any reason to argue with that."

"Owen, I want to thank..."

Owen waved him to silence. "If I started thanking you for what you've done, I be here for a long time. You're Foakes the steamist for as long as you like in this part of the country."

They continued talking and discussing Foakes' business and ways of dealing with his plotting partners. The conversation continued until they were joined by Amos and Jess.

Foakes became his animated and jovial self again as he greeted them. "Here's my new fireman and brakeman. Are the two of yuh ready fer our steam run on into Lewistown?"

"Steam run?" asked Owen with a broad smile.

"Yep," beamed Foakes, "before I head back east, these two and me are headin' fer town with ole Mobilus."

Owen joshed with the two about running a freight business with a steam engine. Jess stoutly maintained that the whole idea of steam power was a passing fad, but he also admitted he was curious about the machine and was looking forward to the trip.

Amos, too, was interested in learning about the machine. "But I don't think I've got the makin's for a steamist," he laughed, "I've spent too many years lookin' at the north ends of south bound horses to change now."

The talk turned to Foakes' troubles with his company. Without revealing the "back East Foakes," Owen and Foakes talked of problems which needed special help, the kind of help Owen might supply.

Jess, who had very fixed ideas about nearly everything was not shy about offering his idea on the subject.

"Mule, plopp. That's what it is Owen. I never heered such a fool notion. There ain't no point in any kind of sashay back East. Partners of Foakes, would be strangers to yuhr way of doin' things. Yuh might as

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well go off to the other half of the world, China would make as much sense."

"Easy, Jess," soothed Amos, "Owen ain't said he's goin'. He jest said Foakes asked him to go."

"We may owe our ranches to Foakes," reasoned Owen, "and he isn't asking for much. Besides, I think Anse might have some plans which could include running my ranch for a time. To you, my friends, I also have to say, I'm still uncomfortable about living here myself, and I think getting away for some more time would be the right thing to do."

"I might understand why someone might want to shoot one of those steamists," argued Jess, "but who'd want to shoot Foakes. That's what's got me by the short reins."

"It's something to do with ownership of his company," explained Owen, looking at Foakes for support.

"Owen's tellin' it the way it is," put in Foakes. "Back in my part of the country, the tracks have gotten loose from the ties and they need hammerin' down. Owen's the one to help me with the spike driver. There ain't no doubt about that."

"Trouble, Owen. That's what yuh'd be ridin' into, dude, slicker kind of trouble," fumed old Jess.

"Well, even if I decide to go, it wouldn't be for a week or more," shrugged Owen, "That is if you two and Foakes are still planning on your steam run to Lewistown."

"The East troubles can wait," declared Foakes with great energy. "Me and my new crew are headed fer town tomorrow." "Who's takin' my job as fireman," laughed Jane, who walked up the group and overheard the last of Foakes' promise to run Mobilus to Lewistown.

"I think I am," admitted Jess, "Coal and firin' an engine," he scoffed, "I never thought I'd hear of such things. But if Owen can go ridin' off with Foakes to some place in the East that no respectable person ever heard of, I guess I might as well become a fireman."

"Back East," cried Jane, "What are yuh talkin' about?"

Jess, getting a stern look from Amos, made a feeble comment about lookin' at harness and walked away. Amos tamped at his pipe and said, "I expect the two of yuh have some things to talk over, I'll help Jess with that harness."

However before Amos could make his tactful retreat, Foakes too, tried to make an escape, "Amos, maybe we could talk about startin' a steam powered haulin' business."

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"Now before yuh start talkin' about freight and coal and steam, I've got a question, Mister Foakes," insisted Jane, "and I mean to have an answer."

"Why sure, Janie. Say yuhr piece," said Foakes, "whatever could be firin' them sparks in yuhr eyes?"

"I jest heard about a remark about a trip back East," she began.

"I hope yuh don't mean yuh won't go," frowned Foakes, "Owen said he wouldn't go without yuh."

While Amos and Foakes began laughing, Jane gave Owen a hard, suspicious look. "Owen Bannack," she fumed, as she took his arm, "I think there's some explainin' to be done."

With that she began pulling the tall rancher away, but she had time to turn and smile at her father. "Tell `em not to hold dinner, Pa."

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