



ERNEST HAYCOX

TRAIL SMOKE

MUSAICUM VINTAGE WESTERN

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MAN ALONE

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Forty hours of steady riding brought Buck Surratt across the wide desert to these foothills. The road at once left this burning plain and followed a canyon's rising tangents into broken masses of ravine and butte and deep green sweeps of pine. Far away and high up the Gray Bull peaks reared their stony shoulders.

A long training in trouble turned him aside from that canyon road. Bearing to the left, he climbed the ridge and reached its summit and there, with the invitation of the pines directly ahead of him, he paused to scan his back trail. His high, flat body became still and all the restlessness of his nature flowed into a hard, prolonged attention. The sun had dipped against the western horizon, and its edge seemed to burst and spill a golden lava across the earth; that final light laid a clear flame on the far mountains over there. Emptiness and a smoky heat haze filled the flat, tawny desert lying between. Buck Surratt's glance explored every detail of it, the whole picture engraving itself on his retentive memory. Afterwards his eyes turned to the green tangle of the hills. Up there was coolness and isolation—and anonymity for a man. And because these were the things he sought beyond all other things, he lifted his reins gladly and passed into the timber...

At dark he sat on his heels with a pipe clenched between his teeth, watching the livid coals of his campfire burn a ruby hole through the felted shadows of the forest. Water ran sibilantly along the bottom of a ravine on his left; a damp, earthy smell rose from that black depth. The voice of the forest and its mysteries pulsed around him, softened by a small cool wind flowing off the Gray Bull peaks. Out of this deep solitude came the air-borne call of wildness, intangible,

yet striking definitely through him. His shoulders swayed a little, he cocked his head to listen, and the pressure around the corners of his long lips relaxed and smoothed away the taut, dry bitterness that had so long been there. The firelight struck up a bright flash in his eyes. A windless chuckle disturbed his chest and his inscrutable, sun-darkened cheeks broke to a faint smiling. He was still smiling when he rolled the blankets around him and fell asleep, the presence of that wild mystery invoking a swift response in his wire-tough body. It eased and nourished him, though he did not know why. There was some ancient familiarity here he didn't understand. The last thing he heard was the patient stir of the pony around its picket rope...

The shot ripped a ragged hole through the stillness, its sound near enough to strike physically against him. Wakened, he remained a motionless moment in his blankets, keen to the possibilities of the night, hearing the echoes of the shot break and run down the corridors of these hills and die out remotely. His fire was dead and a thin, damp fog lay along the ground, with the curdled blackness of early morning condensed in the sky. The shot, he decided, had come from the canyon on his left. Down there brush began to break before a traveling body. He lifted his head from the saddle and reached beneath it and pulled his gun from the holster; and kicked aside his blankets, rolling quietly away. He got up and stood behind a tree. His horse blew out a gusty breath.

Somebody crashed up the side of the canyon without regard for secrecy. He heard the sound of a quirt slashing down and the reaching grunts of a pony. The rider came straight on, broke through the last brush and reached the little clearing. The pony stopped, and the breathing of animal and rider rasped heavily across the black; the pony was turning around and around, without control, and the rider's shape seemed to sway and almost fall from the

saddle. An odd groan came out of the rider, very thin and very high. After that he wheeled and went away at a reckless gallop, bound east into the deeper mystery of the hills.

Buck Surratt remained by the tree until the last fugitive murmur had faded in the distance, then came back to his blankets and packed and lighted his pipe. He crouched down, pulling a blanket over his shoulders. There was no additional rumor in the canyon, no signal of life or pursuit. He lifted his watch to the pipe bowl and blew up the tobacco coals, and by that dim glow he registered the time. Ten minutes after two of a chilly morning. He replaced the watch and lay down in the blankets, supported on an elbow, his thinking sharp and taciturn and wary. There was, he understood, no more sleep for him. That one shot had destroyed all his security; his nearness to it had enmeshed him in whatever trouble was to follow. So considering, he debated his course and at half-past three, with a dim band of light beginning to break above the Gray Bull peaks, he rose and went down that slope whence the fugitive had come. At the bottom he distinguished a small clearing and a line rider's log cabin. The door was open and a saddled pony stood near by. He came up to the door, listening for sounds that never arrived. Presently he went in.

Twenty minutes later he climbed back up the canyon, breathing hard, the pipe clenched more tightly between his teeth. All his motions were swift and decided. He saddled and caught up his blankets; and then did a strange thing. Until this point in his journeyings he had worn his gun. Now he put gun and holster and belt in the blanket roll and lashed it behind the saddle. A little beyond four o'clock, with full daylight breaking, he rode eastward away from his camp.

The pony prints of the fugitive were increasingly clear to him, and at one point he got down and paid them a slow, enigmatic attention. He went on then, following the trail

continuously upward, with his mind sticking hard to the central fact of the night gone. The trees broke away in front of a small mountain meadow turned amber by summer's heat; beyond the meadow the trail coursed out to a point and from that point he saw the road again, looping its way along the bottom of the rocky canyon. Beyond the road the country continued to rise in green waves toward the Gray Bull peaks. Turning to resume the trail, he found a rider poised at the edge of the trees. The man put both his hands on the saddle horn. He said, without inflection: "Momin'."

There was in Buck Surratt the sudden leap of a wicked flame, but it made no change on that sun-darkened, wind-ruddied face; it did not disturb the enigmatic, faintly wistful gravity. He held himself straight, poised for whatever unexpected turn might come, and the powder-gray surfaces of his eyes bit into the opposite rider and absorbed all significance. The man was small and gray-haired, and his shoulders sloped from the years he had obviously spent punching cattle for thirty dollars a month. The corners of Buck Surratt's mouth relaxed imperceptibly.

He said, "Mornin'," in the same brief tone.

The small man allowed indifference to shade his talk. "Camp around here last night?"

"Back on the ridge."

The puncher's nose twitched briefly. "Hear a shot?"

"I heard it."

The puncher said, "Where—?" and definitely closed his mouth. He stared at Buck Surratt with a narrower interest. It was as though he threw up a guard and retreated from what he suddenly saw in Surratt. His glance fell to Buck Surratt's beltless waistline and remained there, showing wonder. "Well," he said, "I guess it's none of my business."

"That was my thought likewise," Buck Surratt mused. "So I rode on."

Silence fell, polite and discreet. Sunlight definitely reached over the Gray Bull peaks, slanting immaculate

golden splinters across a flawless sky. The color of day stepped up one full octave. The puncher lifted a hand casually to his shirt pocket and got out his cigarette dust and rolled a smoke. He licked the cylinder with his tongue; his eyes were bright beneath the shading brim of his hat.

"Looking for a job?"

"That pegs my situation."

"I judged so, from the desert dust you're packin'. Go see Bill Head in Morgantown."

"Why Bill Head?"

"If you want a job," the puncher softly added.

Curiosity stirred Buck Surratt. He said: "I'm a great hand to pick my outfits."

The puncher's small shoulders lifted and fell. "That may be. But if you work, Head's the man you work for."

"Nobody else?"

"I doubt it," suggested the puncher. His words had a dry rustle; remote speculation gleamed in his calico-blue glance. "Morgantown's three miles. Cut down to the road." He picked up his reins and slowly rode a circle around Buck Surratt. There was a caginess here Surratt clearly identified. Matching the gesture he put his horse in motion and passed into the trees. He wasn't impolite enough to look behind him, but at the next sharp turn of the trail he caught a glimpse of the puncher's pony sliding into the far brush. A little beyond that point the trail swung down from the ridge to the road.

A stage came careening around a high bend of that road, four horses running freely and a great boil of dust behind. The squealing of the brake blocks and the rattle of doubletree chains broke dissonantly across the dreaming peace of the morning and lingered long after the stage had rumbled out of sight beyond a farther curve. On the road, Buck Surratt took the lifting grade at a walk, his head bowed against the dust hanging heavy in the warming atmosphere.

To either side of him the canyon walls ran upward to distant vantage points, arousing in him a restless dissatisfaction at his exposure. It was a protective instinct he could not forget; and strengthening that feeling was the memory of the friendless reserve of the puncher on the ridge. There was a tension here that had its roots in some background of which he knew nothing. Once, looking behind, he caught a view of the distant desert all as smoke with its own glaring yellow heat.

At nine o'clock, hungry and alert, he rounded a final high bend of the canyon and came upon Morgantown.

It sat narrowly within the walls of the canyon, its single street bending between front-flared wooden buildings that held about them a beaten, long-settled look. The sidewalks were shaded by overhanging, second-story porches and trees grew intermittently up from the dust. Alleys ran back from this street, and down the alleys he observed houses clinging to the steep canyon walls. A woman in a blue dress and a white shirtwaist came out of one of these alleys, to look fully at him and to turn into a store whose sign read: "Annette Carvel, Dressmaker." Farther on, a saloon's ornate and varicolored windows set up a little blaze in the slanting sun. Beyond that, at the intersection of another alley, stood a new brick building with high, gingerbread cornices. Up in its central arch an inscription said: "William Head, 1887." A few horses stood three-footed at the hitching racks and a few people moved with unhurried leisure beneath the shade of the overhanging porches. All these things Buck Surratt absorbed with that insistent need for detail which forever drew his eyes to the stray motions of the world and to the subtle changes of men's expressions. At the stable beyond the bank he left his horse and quartered over to a restaurant he had noted.

He ate without haste and came again to the street, packing and lighting his pipe. The town seemed livelier than before. One rider came down from the hills into the upper

end of the street at a canter and wheeled before a group of men standing there. The girl in the white shirtwaist appeared at the doorway of the dressmaking shop and rested a round white arm against the wood. Her eyes were on him deliberately, with a faint insistence that carried over the interval and stirred him. He saw then that she was young, and that her lips were full and curving and red across a face made graphic by some warm, frank curiosity lying within. Her hair was black. Even in the shadows there it was shining and turning her forehead and her cheeks whiter, more expressive. He dropped his glance, for something came from her to him and touched him with embarrassment. A man behind him said:

"Come up to the office a minute."

There was a short civilness in the tone, nothing more. Surratt turned without hurry to look down on the broad bulk of a man whose long and gray mustaches made a half-moon pattern along a face purely unemotional, plainly dogged. Surratt's attention remained on him steadily. A softness ran on with his talk. "Whose office?"

The older man's eyes dropped to Surratt's unbelted waistline and lifted with a freshening interest. "My name's Tom Bolderbuck," he said. "Marshal of the town." His glance deepened, and a reserve and a faint courtesy rubbed the edges of his command. He stepped half a pace backward. Two thin lines started across the pink swell of his forehead. "Some gentlemen up the street want to see you a minute in the jail office."

Behind a continued impassivity, Surratt's mind ran quick and knowing. There had been a shot deep in the hills and the invisible telegraph of cattle country had picked up that rumor of trouble and carried it on. He had a part to play here, as he had known since the crash of that bullet had wakened him. He said, "Sure," and moved his high, alert body up the walk, the marshal tramping at his side.

A man at the hotel doorway wheeled and stared. The group collected farther up the street had disappeared through a doorway, but the rider who had come so rapidly into town still stood by his horse. Surratt saw the pony's flanks stained with sweat; his glance came up to the puncher and recognized him to be the thin fellow he had met on the trail. The man's eyes were fixedly on him, deliberately without recognition, remotely hostile. Bolderbuck said, "Go ahead," and Surratt bowed his neck and passed into the jail office.

In the semidarkness he saw the forms of men standing along a far wall. They were waiting for him and in the room was a feeling of challenge. It sent a rapid warning all through his flat muscles.

A voice said, in a swift, attacking way: "You camped on Soapstone Ridge last night?"

"A ridge near the road," replied Buck Surratt. "I'm not acquainted with its name."

"You heard a shot?"

"Yes."

"Know anything about it?"

"No."

"Where's your gun?"

"Packed in my blanket roll, on my horse."

Stillness came on, broken only by a curt murmur that sent Bolderbuck immediately out of the jail office. Surratt's eyes, better accustomed to the darkness here, saw five men posted beyond a table, watching him across a bottomless gulf of suspicion. They were all past middle age, except for the one who had done the talking. He was young, as young as Surratt, and he stood a halfhead above them, with a muscular swell to chest and arm and neck that was impressive. He had a round face, whose bold and lively features gave it a handsomeness that was faintly heavy and very sure. He was a yellow-haired man, with lips long and heavy and controlled.

He laid out his question in the manner of a man who would not be denied, who never had been denied. "Where do you come from?"

"West of the desert."

"Whereabouts, I said."

Buck Surratt's shoulders shifted. His voice rode a steady tone. "Who are you, my friend?"

The man stared at Surratt, displeased. "My name's Bill Head. I still want to know where you're from."

"I have told you," Buck Surratt remarked softly, "as much of that as it is necessary for you to know."

A sudden tide of ruddy color washed across Bill Head's round, self-certain face. Temper flashed in his eyes and pressed arrogance into his full lips. "The hell you say. I don't like saddle bums talking that way to me."

There was a man at the end of the group in a blue serge suit that fit him loosely. He seemed deferent in this company, oppressed by it. He said a dry, cautious word to Buck Surratt: "You're in a ticklish situation, my boy. Answer the question and—"

Bill Head cut him off. "I'll do the talking, Sheriff."

It stilled the sheriff. Looking at him in curiosity, Buck Surratt saw how he accepted that rebuke without resentment—and filed the man's character in the back of his mind.

"What are you doing up here?" insisted Head.

"Just traveling."

The marshal, Bolderbuck, came back into the office. He said in his matter-of-fact voice: "It's there all right." A small interval of tight silence came on again and Surratt's eyes memorized that scene to its smallest detail. The sheriff was a nonentity in a blue serge suit, the marshal an unimaginative errand boy. It was the other four lined up side by side against the wall who had the power here. He saw them in brief clearness; the old man with the transparent skin and mild eyes who chewed silently on his tobacco quid

and listened, the fat-bodied one whose skin was dusky as that of an Indian, the long and bony and sharp-nosed one who nodded at each spurt of talk—and this Bill Head who seemed to rule them.

Bill Head asked: "Want a job?"

But there was an interruption. Somebody came into the office and stood slightly behind Buck Surratt, and then the whole atmosphere of the place changed. There had been suspicion and unfriendliness rolling against him. Now it seemed to change direction and strike beyond him, against the newcomer, with a greater and more resentful effect. Deeply curious, Buck Surratt looked around and saw the man—tall and lean and restless—smiling back at that obvious dislike with an ironic twist of his mouth. He was redheaded and excessively freckled, and his eyes were almost green against a sandy complexion.

Bill Head spoke bluntly enough. "This is a private meeting, Torveen."

"So I heard," agreed Torveen. His talk reached Bill Head with a cool and malicious effect. Bill Head's glance burned out his distrust, yet he had nothing more to say to the man. Buck Surratt remembered that, and found this Torveen's glance to be appraisingly and shrewdly on him. Bill Head repeated his question.

"You want a job?"

Surratt said: "Who with?"

"Maybe I'll give you a job."

"I'll think about it."

Bill Head's solid chin stretched forward. "Wait a minute, mister. You're too fast with your answers entirely. Maybe you've got only two things to do—take the job or go to jail."

Surratt said softly: "'Why?'"

"Because you were entirely too damned close to that shot last night. I propose to find out more than you've told me."

"I'll still think about it," Surratt drawled. There was, then, nothing to break the force of their general scrutiny. They were tearing him apart with their thoughts; their minds were fencing him in with the events of the night. He reached for his tobacco and packed his pipe. He scratched a match on the table and wiggled it across the bowl. His features had nothing to tell them; but his glance crossed to Bill Head and remained there narrowly. He turned without comment and walked from the room.

Below the jail office he stopped and considered the stable across the street, where his horse was. But he understood he could not ride away now and so went on, past the white porch of the hotel and beneath the shade of the overhanging board awnings. There were many people collecting in town, and the smell of trouble definitely lay along the street. He knew it and he understood it, this Buck Surratt who was somewhat of a specialist in trouble. It keyed him up. He came to a stand on the edge of the walk, pipestem bitten securely between his teeth, his mind alive.

A rider—a girl—ran out of the upper trees into town at a steady canter, lifting the thick dust behind her. Buck Surratt looked that way incuriously; and then was curious. She was dressed in a man's blue levi pants and a man's brown cotton shirt, open at the neck. She rode the saddle in a way that was good to see, her shoulders swinging, her body full of grace. Turning in at the rack across the street she dropped to the ground with one careless jump and went across the walk toward the door of the dressmaking shop, calling in a quick and even-pitched voice: "Annette." Surratt got one brief view of her face before she disappeared inside; she had looked back and her attention struck him and noticed him, and then the brim of her wide hat hid her expression.

Without directly watching, he saw Torveen come along the walk at a lazy stroll. Somebody said: "Hello, Sam."

Torveen's answer was plain and, as it had been in the jail office, cheerfully ironic. "Don't speak to pariahs like me,

Spud." He stopped beside Surratt. He teetered his boots on the edge of the walk and looked out into the yellow dust, his eyes half shut. He said indifferently: "You been offered one job, friend. I'll offer you another."

"What kind of a job?"

"A job," said Torveen laconically.

Surratt murmured: "I rode into this damned country to keep out of trouble."

Torveen murmured: "That's your hard luck." He was grinning, his lips thin and crooked. Some deviltry in his thoughts kept sparkling through his eyes.

"Thanks for the offer, but I guess not," said Surratt. "Who's that girl?"

Torveen chuckled. "You're an observin' scoundrel. Which girl? Annette? Or the one which just came in? She's Judith Cameron. You saw her daddy in the jail office—the benevolent-appearin' old pirate with the white mustache and tobacco chaw. I thought you were tryin' to keep out of trouble."

He turned his head quickly, toward the upper end of town. Following suit, Buck Surratt saw a file of riders coming down with a pack horse. There was a burden, rolled in canvas, lashed across the pack horse. Surratt's lips tightened; the pipe shifted between his teeth. He said: "Who've they got?"

Torveen turned and stared at him, for once not smiling. "It's the man that was killed last night in the hills." Surratt saw speculation flickering in those green eyes. "Leslie Head—Bill Head's brother. Maybe a lot of things are plainer to you now."

The two women had come from the dressmaking shop. They stood in front of the doorway, staring up the street. He saw the drawn expression on Annette Carvel's cheeks and the enormous soberness of the other girl, Judith Cameron. She felt Surratt's glance, and looked abruptly at him; and turned her eyes away again. Surratt removed his pipe; he

bowed his head and remained in this studying attitude. He said: "I'll take the job—for reasons of my own."

Torveen's grin freshened across the brick-red skin. "I got reasons of my own for askin' you. So we're even. Get your horse and ride up the road three miles till you see a fence. Turn in there." But after a minute he added dryly: "That is, if you can leave town. There may be some argument about that."

Surratt left him, quartering over to the stable. He paid the hostler and went back and got his pony. But he stood a moment by it before mounting, staring at the blanket roll. It had been pawed apart, and the end of his gun belt hung out. He withdrew the gun belt and strapped it on, and lifted the revolver and spun the cylinder before replacing it. In the saddle he sat motionless, his head bowed a little. His lips made a faintly downward semicircle and his breathing deepened. He turned and rode from the stable.

Bill Head had walked down the street with the others. They were halted by the hotel now, a circle of townsmen forming around them. Sam Torveen loitered against a near-by porch post and seemed indifferent to the scene. Bolderbuck noticed Surratt and broke from the circle walking over and waving his hands negatively. "You'll have to get down—"

Surratt brushed by, riding toward the circle. He slipped from the saddle and walked on to where Bill Head stood. Bill Head had been watching, his big shoulders reared. Surratt's cheeks were thin and his voice slashed against Head with a queer, exciting effect:

"I believe it was your suggestion that sent the marshal down to paw over my blanket roll and look at my gun. Is that right?"

Bill Head showed a sultry surprise. "Certainly."

Buck Surratt's body kinked at the waist. It threw his torso ahead of his hips. He stood this way, stiffly, with both arms hanging straight down. A man behind Bill Head suddenly

pushed himself to one side—an obvious move that agitated and shifted the other townsmen. Head looked around, scowling at this change; and then his glance whipped back to Surratt, his attention rigid and full with what he saw. All the group turned dead still.

"I am warning you," said Buck Surratt. His talk struck the silence recklessly, flattening and swelling. "Never touch my things again. Do you understand? Never touch them again."

He took a backward step and got into the saddle; and turned and went trotting up the street. Nobody spoke. Sam Torveen, with his shoulders against the porch post, was silently laughing. Judith Cameron saw him doing this and looked at Bill Head with a deepening wonder, and then watched Buck Surratt rise at the head of the canyon and turn beyond the bend of the road and disappear. Bill Head's cheeks were locked in a flushed, angry confusion. Annette Carvel at once whispered to Judith: "Who is he—who is that new, good-looking man?"

SAM TORVEEN

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He rode out of Morgantown at a short trot, as deliberate in retreat as he had been in attack. But when he turned the first bend of the road he set his horse to a fast, reaching canter and held it.

The road kept winding and climbing, with lesser roads angling off at intervals to ranches hidden somewhere behind the trees. Now and then, up an occasional vista, he got a brief view of the Gray Bull peaks, but otherwise his roving glance struck against the solid green wall of the forest. The day was fresh and still, with the fragrance of pine resin strong in it. All the details of this mountain world were vivid and pleasant. They fed his senses in a way that was strange to him, fulfilling a hunger he did not understand, covering him with a comfort and a familiarity even as his regretting thoughts dwelt on the scene in Morgantown. He had crossed the desert to find ease and rest—the deep desire of his life; yet the echoes of that night bullet had laid an ancient pattern of trouble over these hills, and he was trapped in the pattern. The ways of a man's life, he thought wistfully, always caught up with him.

Around the next quick bend of the road he came upon a man riding loosely and sleepily, the fatness of his body jiggling to the motion of the horse. A black-brimmed stetson slanted over his features and hid them until the sound of Surratt's nearing pony roused him. He hauled himself back in the saddle then and hoisted his shoulders. His eyes were a sparkling black, set close to a gigantic nose that brought the rest of his face to a point. He stopped immediately, and Surratt, following suit, saw some kind of an emotion ripple through this vast hulk and straighten the loose lines of a pendulous mouth. Surratt dropped his hands on the saddle

horn. Severe and motionless he watched the man scan him and identify him. He said then:

"You never saw me before, Blackjack. And I don't know you. Do you get it?"

The man's lips spread and became loose again. He folded both arms across his bulky chest and seemed to struggle darkly with his confused thoughts. His eyes dropped from Surratt, and that was all. Surratt went by him. Three hundred yards up the slope he saw a fence and a road paralleling it. This he followed, passing into the semidarkness of the pines, into a thick warm silence. Five minutes later the trees dropped away and left him on the edge of a rolling basin surrounded by timber and ridges. A creek slashed its way through the meadow, glistening under the sunlight; across the creek stood a ranch house, long and low and gray, surrounded by the customary clutter of sheds and corrals of cattle land. Surratt went over a plank bridge, lifting a hollow signal of arrival, and circled the house. A dark little man sat on the edge of the porch oiling a rifle. He looked up with the sharpest and briefest of glances, and returned his attention to the gun. Surratt dismounted.

The man's head instantly lifted again. He said, uncharitably: "Anybody invite you to light here?"

"Torveen's place?"

"Yeah."

Surratt shrugged his shoulders. He walked to an empty box and overturned it and sat down; he got out his pipe and loaded it. But his nerves were alert, keened by the suspecting unfriendliness of that other man's attention. He was beyond forty, Surratt judged, and gray at the temples; there was a thinness of body and temper about him, a wicked excitability. Something struck Surratt on his left side then, something that had weight but no physical substance. He got a match out of his pocket and lighted it, his glance sliding quickly along the porch. A sort of an ell ran back from the left corner of the house, with four doors opening into

what he judged to be kitchen and bunkroom. His eyes went along the ell and reached a window and stopped. Behind the window was the attentive face of a young man, pallid and prematurely etched by lines of violence.

Surratt ground the burnt match into his palm, creating a sooty disk there. He pulled smoke into his lungs, his lips lengthened and tightened. The feel of this place was bad. It rubbed his fur the wrong way, it kept plucking at his senses, it cocked his muscles. A horse scudded out of the trees. Looking up, he saw Sam Torveen wheel around the house and step to the ground. The little man on the porch rose immediately. He stared at Torveen.

"You know this fella?"

"Sure," said Torveen.

The man's wire-edged features snapped to anger. He said something under his voice and picked up his gun and went scowling through a doorway, into the ell.

Torveen's grin streaked angularly across his sandy cheeks. "You may like Nick Perrigo," he said carelessly. "Or you may not. He's my foreman. Come inside." The restlessness of this redheaded man sent him across the porch at a high stride. Soberly following, Buck Surratt came into a long bare room cluttered with the gear of a cattleman. There was a bunk at one end, and a fireplace, and a desk with a tally book and a pad of writing paper on it, and two chairs. The windows had wooden shutters that closed from the inside; a stand containing four rifles stood near the bunk. Torveen dropped into a chair. He hooked a leg over the chair's arm and began swinging it. The greenness of his eyes was brighter and there was the stronger impression of a controlled rashness playing behind that color.

"Want a drink?"

"No."

"You've heard my name mentioned. I don't know yours."

"Buck Surratt."

Sam Torveen bent forward. "What was the idea of that play against Bill Head?"

Surratt said, gently: "Just to freeze things up long enough for me to get out of town."

"Supposin' the play hadn't worked?"

"It worked."

"Supposin' it hadn't?" insisted Torveen.

"I never figure more than one step ahead at a time," murmured Surratt.

"The hell you don't," countered Torveen. "You're half a mile ahead of yourself, every foot of the way. I been laughin' to myself ever since—the way you framed that." His grin was hard and cheerful. "You're trapped in town but you walk up to Bill Head, give him hell, and ride off before he can get unsnarled from his surprise. If he was a man quick on the recoil you couldn't of made that play stick, friend Buck. But you pegged him as bein' slow. I take off my hat to you."

Surratt's mind reviewed the scene in Morgantown methodically. There was a need in him for information, as there always was. "Who's Bill Head?"

"He runs the Crow Track for his old man, who's a cripple. It's a big jag of land, north of here, up in the hills."

"There was a dark, heavy fellow standing beside him."

"Dutch Kersom, another old-timer with plenty of cattle. I already named you Ab Cameron. The fourth fellow, the one with the bony face, was Hank Peyrolles. They'll account for eighty per cent of the beef in this section."

"The sheriff's not a proud man," reflected Surratt, "and the marshal just does what he's told."

Torveen chuckled broadly. "You're figgerin' again." But his eyes were curious. "Why did you ride into Morgantown, instead of goin' back to the desert? You must of known that shot would get you in trouble."

Surratt looked at Torveen steadily. Torveen shook his head and made a dry observation. "Pm not sayin' you did

the shootin', Surratt. I meant that you're a stranger and you're pulled into it."

"Where would I run?"

Torveen remarked, very quietly: "So you're here, for reasons of your own. The pay is thirty a month."

"If I stay."

Torveen had a poker expression on his roan cheeks. "You came for a reason. It still holds good, doesn't it?"

"Yes," said Surratt. But his thoughts were on Nick Perrigo and the pallid face in the window, and his mind balanced evenly, with no decision. He could not resolve the puzzle. The reflection of it crept faintly into the studying soberness of his cheeks.

Slack in his chair, Torveen watched this out of his jade eyes. "Your head," he murmured, "never stops working. You got this ranch sized up and there's somethin' about it you don't cotton to."

"That's right."

Torveen shifted his body. The smile left him, the corners of his mouth stiffened. Inscrutably patient, Surratt searched the sandy cheeks of this Torveen, seeking some solid bottom behind the surface recklessness, beyond the skeptical glint of deviltry. He could not help it. All the hard training of his years had disciplined him to silence, to patience, to a perpetual vigilance against the trickeries of men. Faintly, he saw something now. Torveen's cheeks relaxed and a strain showed itself and his tone became ragged. He said: "If you stay, you'll find out for yourself. I need help, friend Buck, but I'll tell you no more—and I'm not askin' you to stay."

A steel triangle on the porch began to beat harsh sound across the day. It was noon, it was dinnertime. Boots scraped the porch boards and there was a rider coming in from the meadow. Torveen said, "Let's eat," and rose and led the way to the porch. He ducked through a door of the ell, into a dining room. Coming in, Surratt found three men