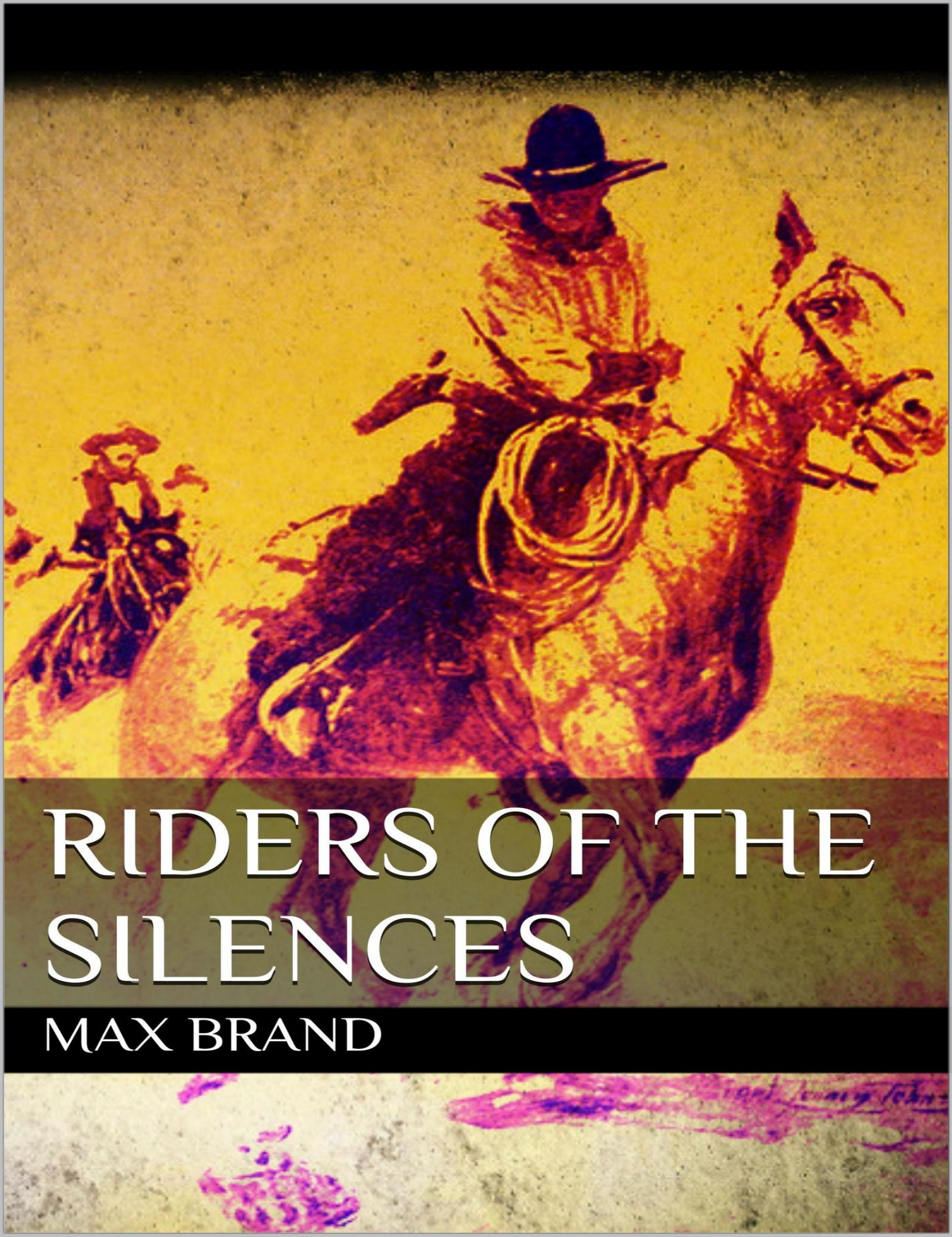

RIDERS OF THE SILENCES

MAX BRAND

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PROLOGUE

The Great West, prior to the century's turn, abounded in legend. Stories were told of fabled gunmen whose bullets always magically found their mark, of mighty stallions whose tireless gallop rivaled the speed of the wind, of glorious women whose beauty stunned mind and heart. But nowhere in the vast spread of the mountain-desert country was there a greater legend told than the story of Red Pierre and the phantom gunfighter, McGurk.

These two men of the wilderness, so unalike, of widely-differing backgrounds, had in common a single trait: each was unbeatable. Fate brought them clashing together, thunder to thunder, lightning to lightning. They were destined to meet at the crossroads of a long, long trail—a trail which began in the northern wastes of Canada and led, finally, to a deadly confrontation in the mountains of the Far West.

CHAPTER 1

It seemed that Father Anthony gathered all the warmth of the short northern summer and kept it for winter use, for his good nature was an actual physical force. From his ruddy face beamed such a kindliness that people reached out toward him as they might extend their hands toward a comfortable fire.

All the labors of his work as an inspector of Jesuit institutions across the length and breadth of Canada could not lessen the good father's enthusiasm; his smile was as indefatigable as his critical eyes. The one looked sharply into every corner of a room and every nook and hidden cranny of thoughts and deeds; the other veiled the criticism and soothed the wounds of vanity.

On this day, however, the sharp eyes grew a little less keen and somewhat wider, while that smile was fixed rather by habit than inclination. In fact, his expression might be called a frozen kindliness as he looked across the table to Father Victor.

It required a most indomitable geniality, indeed, to outface the rigid piety of Jean Paul Victor. His missionary work had carried him far north, where the cold burns men thin. The zeal which drove him north and north and north over untracked regions, drove him until his body failed, drove him even now, though his body was crippled.

A mighty yearning, and a still mightier self-contempt whipped him on, and the school over which he was master groaned and suffered under his régime. Father Anthony said gently: "Are there none among all your lads, dear Father Victor, whom you find something more than imperfect machines?"

The man of the north drew from a pocket of his robe a letter. His lean fingers touched it almost with a caress.

"One. Pierre Ryder. He shall carry on my mission in the north. I, who am silent, have done much; but Pierre will do more. I had to fight my first battle to conquer my own stubborn soul, and the battle left me weak for the great work in the snows, but Pierre will not fight that battle, for I have trained him.
"This letter is for him. Shall we not carry it to him? For two days I have not seen Pierre."
Father Anthony winced.
He said: "Do you deny yourself even the pleasure of the lad's company? Alas, Father Victor, you forge your own spurs and goad yourself with your own hands. What harm is there in being often with the lad?"
The sneer returned to the lips of Jean Paul Victor.
"The purpose would be lost—lost to my eyes and lost to his—the purpose for which I have lived and for which he shall live. When I first saw him he was a child, a baby, but he came to me and took one finger of my hand in his small fist and looked up to me. Ah, Gabrielle, the smile of an infant goes to the heart swifter than the thrust of a knife! I looked down upon him and I knew that I was chosen to teach the child. There was a voice that spoke in me. You will smile, but even now I think I can hear it."
"I swear to you that I believe," said Father Anthony.
"Another man would have given Pierre a Bible and a Latin grammar and a cell. I gave him the testament and the grammar; I gave him also the wild north country to say his prayers in and patter his Latin. I taught his mind, but I did not forget his body.
"He is to go out among wild men. He must have strength of the spirit. He must also have a strength of the body that they will understand and respect. He can ride a horse standing; he can run a hundred miles in a day behind a dog- team. He can wrestle and fight with his hands, for skilled men have taught him. I have made him a thunderbolt to hurl among the ignorant and the

unenlightened; and this is the hand which shall wield it. Ha!
"It is now hardly a six month since he saved a trapper from a bobcat and killed the animal with a knife. It must have been my prayers which saved him from the teeth and the claws."
Good Father Anthony rose.
"You have described a young David. I am eager to see him. Let us go."
Father Victor nodded, and the two went out together. The chill of the open was hardly more than the bitter cold inside the building, but there was a wind that drove the cold through the blood and bones of a man.
They staggered along against it until they came to a small house, long and low. On the sheltered side they paused to take breath, and Father Victor explained: "This is his hour in the gymnasium. To make the body strong required thought and care. Mere riding and running and swinging of the ax will not develop every muscle. Here Pierre works every day. His teachers of boxing and wrestling have abandoned him."
There was almost a smile on the lean face.
"The last man left with a swollen jaw and limping on one leg."
Here he opened the door, and they slipped inside. The air was warmed by a big stove, and the room—for the afternoon was dark—lighted by two swinging lanterns suspended from the low roof. By that illumination Father Anthony saw two men stripped naked, save for a loincloth, and circling each other slowly in the center of a ring which was fenced in with ropes and floored with a padded mat. Of the two wrestlers, one was a veritable giant, swarthy of skin, hairy- chested. His great hands were extended to grasp or to parry—his head lowered with a ferocious scowl —and across his forehead swayed a tuft of black, shaggy hair. He might have stood for one of those northern

barbarians whom the Romans loved to pit against their native champions in the arena. He was the greater because of the opponent he faced, and it was upon this opponent that the eyes of Father Anthony centered.

Like Father Victor, he was caught first by the bright hair. It was a dark red, and where the light struck it strongly there were places like fire. Down from this hair the light slipped like running water over a lithe body, slender at the hips, strong-chested, round and smooth of limb, with long muscles leaping and trembling at every move.

He, like the big fighter, circled cautiously about, but the impression he gave was as different from the other as day is from night. His head was carried high; in place of a scowl, he smiled with a sort of eagerness, a light which was partly exultation and partly mischief sparkled in his eyes. Once or twice the giant caught at the other, but David slipped from under the grip of Goliath easily. It seemed as if his skin were oiled. The big man snarled with anger, and lunged more eagerly at Pierre.

The two, abandoning their feints, suddenly rushed together, and the swarthy arms of the monster slipped around the white body of Pierre. For a moment they whirled, twisting and struggling.

"Now!" murmured Father Victor; and as if in answer to a command, Pierre slipped down, whipped his hands to a new grip, and the two crashed to the mat, with Pierre above.

"Open your eyes, Father Anthony. The lad is safe. How Goliath grunts!" The boy had not cared to follow his advantage, but rose and danced away, laughing softly. The Canuck floundered up and rushed like a furious bull. His downfall was only the swifter. The impact of the two bodies sounded like hands clapped together, and then Goliath rose into the air, struggling mightily, and pitched with a thud to the mat.

He writhed there, for the wind was knocked from his body by the fall. At length he struggled to a sitting posture and

glared up at the conqueror. The boy reached out a hand to his fallen foe.

"You would have thrown me that way the first time," he said, "but you let me change grips on you. In another week you will be too much for me, *bon ami*."

The other accepted the hand after an instant of hesitation and was dragged to his feet. He stood looking down into the boy's face with a singular grin. But there was no triumph in the eye of Pierre—only a good-natured interest.

"In another week," answered the giant, "there would not be a sound bone in my body."

CHAPTER 2

"You have seen him," murmured the tall priest. "Now let us go back and wait for him. I will leave word."
He touched one of the two or three men who were watching the athletes, and whispered his message in the other's ear. Then he went back with Father Anthony. "You have seen him," he repeated, when they sat once more in the cheerless room. "Now pronounce on him."
The other answered: "I have seen a wonderful body—but the mind, Father Victor?"
"It is as simple as that of a child—his thoughts run as clear as spring water."
"But suppose a strange thought came in the mind of your Pierre. It would be like the pebbles in swift-running spring water. He would carry it on, rushing. It would tear away the old boundaries of his mind—it might wipe out the banks you have set down for him—it might tear away the choicest teachings."
Father Victor sat straight and stiff with stern, set lips. He said dryly: "Father Anthony has been much in the world."
"I speak from the best intention, good father. Look you, now, I have seen that same red hair and those same lighted blue eyes before, and wherever I have seen them has been war and trouble and unrest. I have seen that same smile which stirs the heart of a woman and makes a man reach for his revolver. This boy whose mind is so clear—arm him with a single wrong thought, with a single doubt of the eternal goodness of God's plans, and he will be a thunderbolt indeed, dear Father, but one which even your strong hand could not control."
"I have heard you," said the priest; "but you will see. He is coming now."
There was a knock at the door; then it opened and showed

a modest novice in a simple gown of black serge girt at the waist with the flat encircling band. His head was downward; it was not till the blue eyes flashed inquisitively up that Father Anthony recognized Pierre.
The hard voice of Jean Paul Victor pronounced: "This is that Father Anthony of whom I have spoken."
The novice slipped to his knees and folded his hands, while the plump fingers of Father Anthony poised over that dark red hair, pressed smooth on top where the skullcap rested. The blessing which he spoke was Latin, and Father Victor looked somewhat anxiously toward his protege till the latter answered in a diction so pure that Cicero himself would have smiled to hear it.
"Stand up!" cried Father Anthony. "By heavens, Jean Paul, it is the purest Latin I have heard this twelvemonth."
And the lad answered: "It must be pure Latin; Father Victor has taught me."
Gabrielle Anthony stared, and to save him from too obvious confusion the other priest interrupted: "I have a letter for you, my son."
And he passed the envelope to Pierre. The latter examined it with interest. "This comes from the south. It is marked from the United States."
"So far!" exclaimed the tall priest. "Give me the letter, lad."
But here he caught the whimsical eyes of Father Anthony, and he allowed his outstretched hand to fall. Yet he scowled as he said: "No; keep it and read it, Pierre."
"I have no great wish to keep it," answered Pierre, studying anxiously the dark brow of the priest.
"It is yours. Open it and read."
The lad obeyed instantly. He shook out the folded paper and moved a little nearer the light. Then he read aloud, as if it had never entered his mind that what was addressed to him might be meant for his eyes alone.
"Morgantown,

"R.F.D. No. 4.

"SON PIERRE:

"Here I lie with a chunk of lead from the gun of Bob McGurk resting somewheres in the insides of me, and there ain't no way of doubting that I'm about to go out. Now, I ain't complaining none. I've had my fling. I've eat my meat to order, well done and rare—mostly rare. Maybe some folks will be saying that I've got what I've been asking for, and I know that Bob McGurk got me fair and square, shooting from the hip. That don't help me none, lying here with a through ticket to some place that's farther south than Texas.

"Hell ain't none too bad for me, I know. I ain't whining none. I just lie here and watch the world getting dimmer until I begin to be seeing things out of my past. That shows the devil ain't losing no time with me. But the thing that comes back oftenest and hits me the hardest is the sight of your mother, lying with you in the hollow of her arm and looking up at me and whispering, 'Dad,' just before she went out."

The hand of the boy fell, and his eyes sought the face of Father Victor. The latter was standing.

"You told me I had no father—"

An imperious arm stretched toward him.

"Give me the letter."

He moved to obey, and then checked himself.

"This is my father's writing, is it not?"

"No, no! It's a lie, Pierre!"

But Pierre stood with the letter held behind his back, and the first doubt in his life stood up darkly in his eyes. Father Victor sank slowly back into his chair, his gaunt frame trembling.

"Read on," he commanded.

And Pierre, white of face, read on:
"So I got a idea that I had to write to you, Pierre. There ain't nothing I can make up to you, but knowing the truth may help some. Poor kid, you ain't got no father in the eyes of the law, and neither did you have no mother, and there ain't no name that belongs to you by rights.

"I was a man in them days, and your mother was a woman that brought your heart into your throat and set it singing. She and me, we were too busy being just plain happy to care much about what was right or wrong; so you just sort of happened along, Pierre. Me being so close to hell, I remember her eyes that was bluer than heaven looking up to me, and her hair, that was copper with gold lights in it.

"I buried Irene on the side of the mountain under a big, rough rock, and I didn't carve nothing on the rock. Then I took you, Pierre, and I knew I wasn't no sort of a man to raise up the son of Irene; so I brought you to Father Victor on a winter night and left you in his arms. That was after I'd done my best to raise you and you was just about old enough to chatter a bit. There wasn't nothing else to do. My wife, she went pretty near crazy when I brought you home. And she'd of killed you, Pierre, if I hadn't took you away.

"You see, I was married before I met Irene. So there ain't no alibi for me. But me being so close to hell now, I look back to that time, and somehow I see no wrong in it still.

"And if I done wrong then, I've got my share of hell-fire for it. Here I lie, with my boys, Bill and Bert, sitting around in the corner of the room waiting for me to go out. They ain't men, Pierre. They're wolves in the skins of men. They're the right sons of their mother. When I go out they'll grab the coin I've saved up, and leave me to lie here and rot, maybe.

"Lad, it's a fearful thing to die without having no one around that cares, and to know that even after I've gone out I'm going to lie here and have my dead eyes looking up at the ceiling. So I'm writing to you, Pierre, part to tell you what you ought to know; part because I got a sort of crazy idea that maybe you could get down here to me before I go out.

"You don't owe me nothing but hard words, Pierre; but if you don't try to come to me, the ghost of your mother will follow you all your life, lad, and you'll be seeing her blue eyes and the red-gold of her hair in the dark of the night as I see it now. Me, I'm a hard man, but it breaks my heart, that ghost of Irene. So here I'll lie, waiting for you, Pierre, and lingering out the days with whisky, and fighting the wolf eyes of them there sons of mine. If I weaken —If they find they can look me square in the eye—they'll finish me quick and make off with the coin. Pierre, come quick.

"MARTIN RYDER."
The hand of Pierre dropped slowly to his side, and the letter fluttered with a crisp rustling to the floor.

CHAPTER 3

Then came a voice that startled the two priests, for it seemed that a fourth man had entered the room, so changed was it from the musical voice of Pierre.
"Father Victor, the roan is a strong horse. May I take him?"
"Pierre!" and the priest reached out his bony hands.
But the boy did not seem to notice or to understand.
"It is a long journey, and I will need a strong horse. It must be eight hundred miles to that town."
"Pierre, what claim has he upon you? What debt have you to repay?"
And Pierre le Rouge answered: "He loved my mother."
"You are going?"
The boy asked in astonishment: "Would you not have me go, Father?"
And Jean Paul Victor could not meet the sorrowful blue eyes.
He bowed his head and answered: "My child, I would have you go. But promise with your hand in mine that you will come back to me when your father is buried."
The lean fingers caught the extended hand of Pierre and froze about it.
"But first I have a second duty in the southland."
"A second?"
"You taught me to shoot and to use a knife. Once you said: 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' Father Victor, my father was killed by another man."
"Pierre, dear lad, swear to me here on this cross that you will not raise your hands against the murderer. 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.'"
"He must have an instrument for his wrath. He shall work through me in this."
"Pierre, you blaspheme."

"'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.'"
"It was a demon in me that quoted that in your hearing, and not myself."
"The horse, Father Victor—may I have the roan?"
"Pierre, I command you—"
The light in the blue eyes was as cold and steady as that in the starved eyes of Jean Paul Victor.
"Hush!" he said calmly. "For the sake of the love that I bear for you, do not command me."
The stern priest dropped his head. He said at last: "I have nothing saving one great and terrible treasure which I see was predestined to you. It is the cross of Father Meilan. You have worn it before. You shall wear it hereafter as your own."
He took from his own neck a silver cross suspended by a slender silver chain, and the boy, with startled eyes, dropped to his knees and received the gift.
"It has brought good to all who possessed it, but for every good thing that it works for you it will work evil on some other. Great is its blessing and great is its burden. I, alas, know; but you also have heard of its history. Do you accept it, Pierre?"
"Dear Father, with all my heart."
The colorless hands touched the dark-red hair.
"God pardon the sins you shall commit."
Pierre crushed the hand of Jean Paul Victor against his lips and rushed from the room, while the tall priest, staring down at the fingers which had been kissed, pronounced: "I have forged a thunderbolt, Father Gabrielle. It is too great for my hand. Listen!" And they heard clearly the sharp clang of a horse's hoofs on the hard-packed snow, loud at first, but fading rapidly away. The wind, increasing suddenly, shook the house furiously about them.
It was a north wind, and traveled south before the rider of the strong roan. Over a thousand miles of plain and hills it passed, and down into the cattle country of the mountain-

desert which the Rockies hem on one side and the tall Sierras on the other.

It was a trail to try even the endurance of Pierre and the strong roan, but the boy clung to it doggedly. On a trail that led down from the edges of the northern mountain the roan crashed to the ground in a plunging fall, hitting heavily on his knees. He was dead before the boy had freed his feet from the stirrups.

Pierre threw the saddle over his shoulder and walked eight miles to the nearest ranch house, where he spent practically the last cent of his money on another horse, and drove on south once more.

There was little hope in him as day after day slipped past. Only the ghost of a chance remained that Martin Ryder could fight away death for another fortnight; yet Pierre had seen many a man from the mountain-desert stave off the end through weeks and weeks of the bitterest suffering. His father must be a man of the same hard durable metal, and upon that Pierre staked all his hopes.

And always he carried the picture of the dying man alone with his two wolf-eyed sons who waited for his eyes to weaken. Whenever he thought of that he touched his horse with the spurs and rode fiercely for a time. They were his flesh and blood, the man, and even the two wolf-eyed sons.

So he came at last to a gap in the hills and looked down on Morgantown in the hollow, twoscore unpainted houses sprawling along a single street. The snow was everywhere white and pure, and the town was like a stain on the landscape with wisps of smoke rising and trailing across the hilltops.

Down to the edge of the town he rode, left his cow-pony standing with hanging head outside a saloon, strode through the swinging doors, and asked of the bartender the way to the house of Martin Ryder.

The bartender stopped in his labor of rubbing down the surface of his bar and stared at the black-serge robe of the

stranger, with curiosity rather than criticism, for women, madmen, and clergymen have the right-of-way in the mountain-desert.

He said: "Well, I'll be damned!—askin' your pardon. So old Mart Ryder has come down to this, eh? Partner, you're sure going to have a rough ride getting Mart to heaven. Better send a posse along with him, because some first-class angels are going to get considerable riled when they sight him coming. Ha, ha, ha! Sure I'll show you the way. Take the northwest road out of town and go five miles till you see a broken-backed shack lyin' over to the right. That's Mart Ryder's place."

Out to the broken-backed shack rode Pierre le Rouge, Pierre the Red, as everyone in the north country knew him. His second horse, staunch cow-pony that it was, stumbled on with sagging knees and hanging head, but Pierre rode upright, at ease, for his mind was untired.

Broken-backed indeed was the house before which he dismounted. The roof sagged from end to end, and the stove pipe chimney leaned at a drunken angle. Nature itself was withered beside that house; before the door stood a great cottonwood, gashed and scarred by lightning, with the limbs almost entirely stripped away from one side. Under this broken monster Pierre stepped and through the door. Two growls like the snarls of watch-dogs greeted him, and two tall, unshaven men barred his way. Behind them, from the bed in the corner, a feeble voice called: "Who's there?"

"In the name of God," said the boy gravely, for he saw a hollow-eyed specter staring toward him from the bed in the corner, "let me pass! I am his son!"

It was not that which made them give back, but a shrill, faint cry of triumph from the sick man toward which they turned. Pierre slipped past them and stood above Martin Ryder. He was wasted beyond belief—only the monster hand showed what he had been.

"Son?" he queried with yearning and uncertainty.
"Pierre, your son."
And he slipped to his knees beside the bed. The heavy hand fell upon his hair and stroked it.
"There ain't no ways of doubting it. It's red silk, like the hair of Irene. Seein' you, boy, it ain't so hard to die. Look up! So! Pierre, my son! Are you scared of me, boy?"
"I'm not afraid."
"Not with them eyes you ain't. Now that you're here, pay the coyotes and let 'em go off to gnaw the bones."
He dragged out a small canvas bag from beneath the blankets and gestured toward the two lurkers in the corner.
"Take it, and be damned to you!"
A dirty, yellow hand seized the bag; there was a chortle of exultation, and the two scurried out of the room.
"Three weeks they've watched an' waited for me to go out, Pierre. Three weeks they've waited an' sneaked up to my bed an' sneaked away agin, seein' my eyes open."
Looking into their fierce fever brightness, Pierre understood why they had quailed. For the man, though wrecked beyond hope of living, was terrible still. The thick, gray stubble on his face could not hide altogether the hard lines of mouth and jaw, and on the wasted arm the hand was grotesquely huge. It was horror that widened the eyes of Pierre as he looked at Martin Ryder; it was a grim happiness that made his lips almost smile.
"You've taken holy orders, lad?"
"No."
"But the black dress?"
"I'm only a novice. I've sworn no vows."
"And you don't hate me—you hold no grudge against me for the sake of your mother?"
Pierre took the heavy hand.
"Are you not my father? And my mother was happy with you. For her sake I love you."
"The good Father Victor. He sent you to me."

"I came of my own will. He would not have let me go."
"He—he would have kept my flesh and blood away from me?"
"Do not reproach him. He would have kept me from a sin."
"Sin? By God, boy, no matter what I've done, is it sin for my son to come to me? What sin?"
"The sin of murder!"
"Ha!"
"I have come to find McGurk."

CHAPTER 4

Like some old father-bear watching his cub flash teeth against a stalking lynx, half proud and half fearful of such courage, so the dying cattleman looked at his son. Excitement set a high and dangerous color in his cheek. "Pierre—brave boy! Look at me. I ain't no imitation man, even now, but I ain't a ghost of what I was. There wasn't no man I wouldn't of met fair and square with bare hands or with a gun. Maybe my hands was big, but they were fast on the draw. I've lived all my life with iron on the hip, and my six-gun has seven notches.

"But McGurk downed me fair and square. There wasn't no murder. I was out for his hide, and he knew it. I done the provokin', an' he jest done the finishin', that was all. It hurts me a lot to say it, but he's a better man than I was. A kid like you, why, he'd jest eat you, Pierre."

Pierre le Rouge smiled again. He felt a stern pride to be the son of this man.

"So that's settled," went on Martin Ryder, "an' a damned good thing it is. Son, you didn't come none too soon. I'm goin' out fast. There ain't enough light left in me so's I can see my own way. Here's all I ask: When I die touch my eyelids soft an' draw 'em shut—I've seen the look in a dead man's eyes. Close 'em, and I know I'll go to sleep an' have good dreams. And down in the middle of Morgantown is the buryin'-ground. I've ridden past it a thousand times an' watched a corner plot, where the grass grows quicker than it does anywheres else in the cemetery. Pierre, I'd die plumb easy if I knew I was goin' to sleep the rest of time in that place."

"It shall be done."

"But that corner plot, it would cost a pile, son. And I've no money. I gave what I had to them wolf-eyed boys, Bill an'