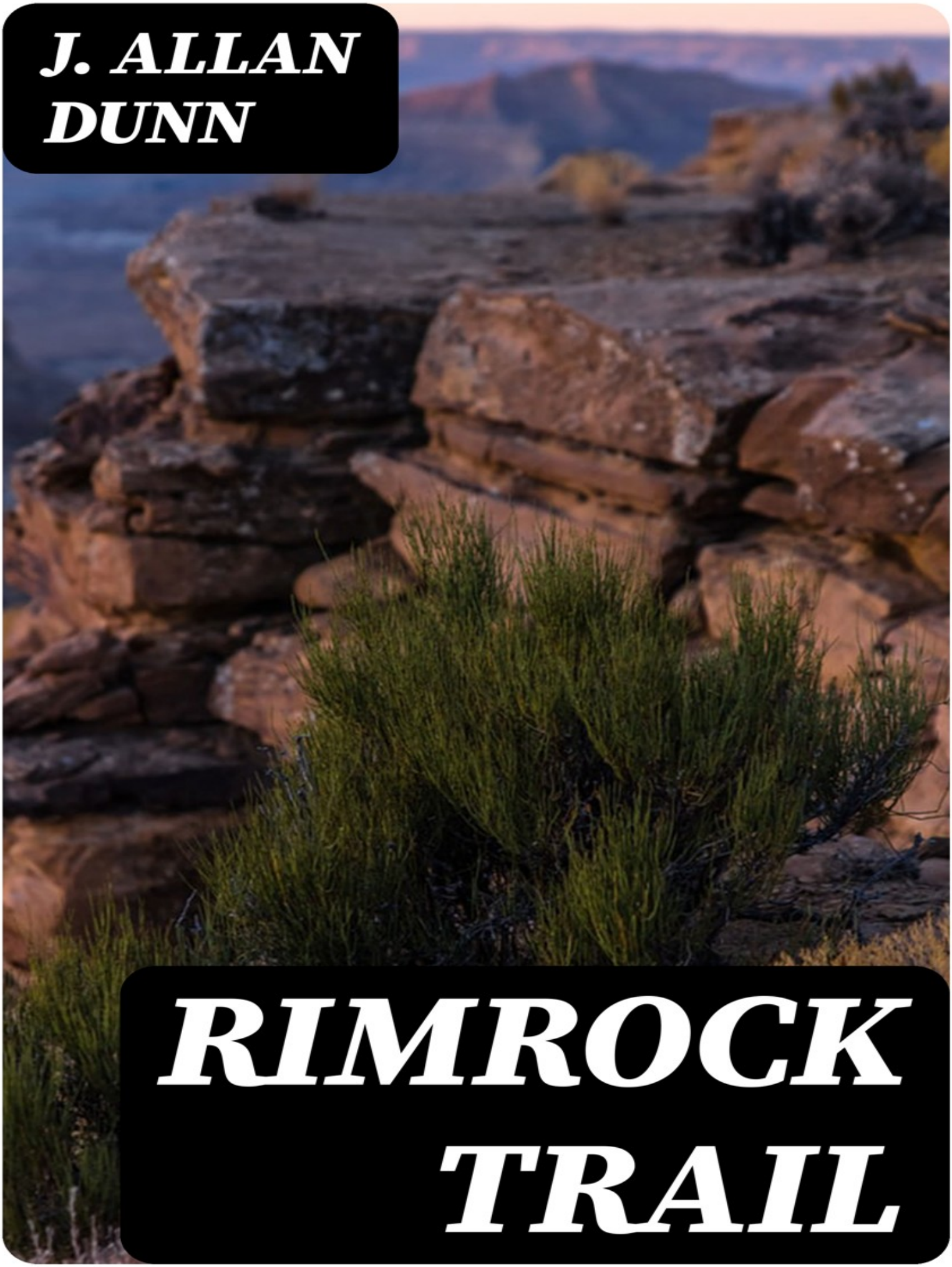
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Table of Contents

CHAPTER I
GRIT
CHAPTER II
CASEY
CHAPTER III
MOLLY
CHAPTER IV
SANDY CALLS THE TURN
CHAPTER V
IN THE BED OF THE CREEK
CHAPTER VI
PASO CABRAS
CHAPTER VII
BOLSA GAP
CHAPTER VIII
THE PASS OF THE GOATS
CHAPTER IX
CAROCA
CHAPTER X
SANDY RETURNS
CHAPTER XI
PAY DIRT
CHAPTER XII
WHITE GOLD
CHAPTER XIII
A ROPE BREAKS

CHAPTER XIV
A FREE-FOR-ALL
CHAPTER XV
CASEY TOWN
CHAPTER XVI
EAST AND WEST
CHAPTER XVII
WESTLAKE BRINGS NEWS
CHAPTER XVIII
DEHORNED
CHAPTER XIX
THE HIDEOUT
CHAPTER XX
MOLLY MINE
CHAPTER XXI
THE END OF THE ROPE
CHAPTER XXII
THE VERY END

CHAPTER I

GRIT

Table of Contents

"Mormon" Peters carefully shifted his weighty bulk in the chair that he dared not tilt, gazing dreamily at the saw-toothed mountains shimmering in the distance, sniffing luxuriously the scent of sage.

"They oughter spell Arizona with three 'C's,'" he said.

"Why?" asked Sandy Bourke, wiping the superfluous oil from the revolver he was meticulously cleaning.

"'Count of Climate, Cactus, Cattle—an' Coyotes."

"Makin' four, 'stead of three," said the managing partner of the Three Star Ranch.

Came a grunt from "Soda-Water" Sam as he put down his harmonica on which he had been playing *The Cowboy's Lament*, with variations.

"Huh! You got no more eddication than a horn-toad, an' less common sense. You don't spell Arizony with a 'C.' You can't. 'Cordin' to yore argymint you should spell Africa with a 'Z' 'cause they raise zebras there, 'stead of mustangs. Might make it two 'R's,' 'count of rim-rock an'—an' revolvers."

Mormon snorted.

"That's a hell of a name for a man born in Maricopa County to call a gun. *Revolver!* You 'mind me of the Boston perfesser who come to Arizona tryin' to prove the Cliff Dwellers was one of the Lost Tribes of Israel. He blows in

with an introduction to the Double U, where I was workin'. Colonel Pawlin's wife has a cold snack ready, it bein' middlin' warm. The perfesser makes a pretty speech, after he'd eaten two men's share of victuals tryin', I reckon, to put some flesh on to his bones. An' he calls the lunch a *col-lay-shun*! Later, he asks the waitress down to the Rodeo Eatin' House, while he's waitin' for his train, for a serve-yet. A *serve-yet*! That's what he calls a napkin. You must have been eddicated in Boston, Sam, though it's the first time I ever suspected you of book learnin'."

It was Sunday afternoon on the Three Star rancheria. The riders, all the hands—with the exception of Pedro, the Mexican cocinero, indifferent to most things, including his cooking; and Joe, his half-breed helper,—had departed, clad in their best shirts, vests, trousers, Stetsons and bandannas of silk, some seeking a poker game on a neighboring rancho, some bent on courting. Pedro and Joe lay, faces down, under the shade of the trees about the tenaya, the stone cistern into which water was pumped by the windmills that worked in the fitful breezes.

The three partners, saddle-chums for years, ever seeking mutual employ, known through Texas and Arizona as the "Three Musketeers of the Range," sat on the porch of the ranch-house, discussing business and lighter matters. One year before they had pooled their savings and Sandy Bourke, youngest of the three and the most aggressive, coolest and swiftest of action, had gloriously bucked the faro tiger and won enough to buy the Three Star Ranch and certain rights of free range. The purchase had not included the brand of the late owner. Originally the holding had been

called the Two-Bar-P. As certain cattlemen were not wanting who had a knack of appropriating calves and changing the brands of steers, Sandy had been glad enough, in his capacity of business manager, to change the name of the ranch and brand. Two-Bar-P was too easily altered to H-B, U-P, U-B, O-P, or B; a score of combinations hard to prove as forgeries.

There had been lengthy argument concerning the new name. Three Star, so Soda-Water Sam—whose nickname was satirical—opined, smacked of the saloon rather than the ranch, but it was finally decided on and the branding-irons duly made.

Sandy Bourke had dark brown hair, inclined to be curly, a tendency he offset by frequent clipping of his thatch. The sobriquet of "Sandy" referred to his grit. He was broad-shouldered, tall and lean, weighing a hundred and seventy pounds of well-strung frame. His eyes were gray and the lids sun-puckered; his deeply tanned skin showed the freckles on face and hands as faint inlays; his long limber legs were slightly bowed.

Not so the curve of Soda-Water Sam's legs. You could pass a small keg between the latter's knees without interference. Otherwise, Sam, whose last name was Manning, was mainly distinguished by his enormous drooping mustache, suggesting the horns of a Texas steer, inverted.

As for Mormon, disillusioned hero of three matrimonial adventures, woman-soft where Sandy was woman-shy, he was high-stomached, too stout for saddle-ease to himself or

mount, sun-rouged where his partners were burned brown. His pate was bald save for a tonsure-fringe of grizzle-red.

All three were first-rate cattlemen, their enterprise bade fair for success, hampered only by the lack of capital, occasioned by Sandy's preference for modern methods as evidenced by thoroughbred bulls, high-grading of his steers, the steadily growing patches of alfalfa and the spreading network of irrigation ditches.

Business exhausted, ending with an often expressed desire for a woman cook who could also perform a few household chores, tagged with a last attempt to persuade Mormon to marry some comfortable person who would act in that capacity, they had reverted to the good-humored chaff that always marked their talks together.

Mormon, with stubby fingers wonderfully deft, was plaiting horsehair about a stick of hardwood to form the handle of a quirt, Sandy overhauling his two Colts and Sam furnishing orchestra on his harmonica. Now he put it to his lips, unable to find a sufficiently crushing retort to Mormon's diatribe against words of more than one syllable, breathing out the burden of "My Bonnie lies over the Ocean."

Mormon, in a husky, yet musical bass, supplied the cowboy's version of the words.

"Last night, as I lay in the per-rair-ree.
And gazed at the stars in the sky,
I wondered if ever a cowboy,
Could drift to that sweet by-an'-by.

"Roll on, roll on,
Roll on, li'l' dogies, roll——"

He broke off suddenly, staring at the fringe of the waving mesquite.

"Look at that ornery coyote!" he said. "Got his nerve with him, the mangy calf-eater, comin' up to the ranch thataway."

Sam put down his harmonica.

"My Winchester's jest inside the door," he said. "But he'd scoot if I moved. Slip in a shell, Sandy, mebbe you kin git him in a minute."

"Yo're sheddin' yore skin, Sam. Got horn over yore eyes. Mormon, you need glasses fo' yore old age. That ain't a coyote, it's a dawg," pronounced Sandy.

The creature left the cover of the mesquite and came slowly but determinedly toward the ranch-house, past the corral and cook shack; its daring proclaiming it anything but a cowardly, foot-hill coyote. Its coat was whitish gray. Its brush was down, almost trailing, its muzzle drooped, it went lamely on all four legs and occasionally limped on three.

"Collie!" proclaimed Sandy. "Pore devil's plumb tuckered out."

"Sheepdawg!" affirmed Sam, disgust in his voice. "Hell of a gall to come round a cattle ranch."

The gray-white dog came on, dry tongue lolling, observant of the men, glancing toward the tenaya where it smelled the slumbering Pedro and Joe. It halted twenty feet from the porch, one paw up, as Sandy bent forward and called to it.

"Come on, you dawg. Come in, ol' feller. Mormon, take that hair out of that pan of water an' set it where he can see it."

Mormon shifted the pan in which he had been soaking the horsehair for easier plaiting and the dog sniffed at it, watching Sandy closely with eyes that were dim from thirst and weariness. Sandy patted his knee encouragingly, and the tired animal seemed suddenly to make up its mind. Ignoring the water, it came straight to Sandy, uttered a harsh whine, catching at the leather tassel on the cowman's worn leather chaparejos, tugging feebly. As Sandy stooped to pat its head, powdered with the alkali dust that covered its coat, the collie released its hold and collapsed on one side, panting, utterly exhausted, with glazing eyes that held appeal.

Sandy reached for the pan, squatting down, and chucked some water from the palm of his hand into the open jaws, upon the swollen tongue. The dog licked his hand, whined again, tried to stand up, failed, succeeded with the aid of friendly fingers in its ruff and eagerly lapped a few mouthfuls.

Again it seized the tassel and pulled, looking up into Sandy's face imploringly.

"Somethin' wrong," said the manager of the Three Star. "Tryin' to tell us about it. All right, ol' feller, you drink some more wateh. Let me look at that paw." He gently took the foot that clawed at his chaps and examined it. The pad was worn to the quick, bleeding. "Come out of the Bad Lands," he said, looking toward the range. "Through Pyramid Pass, likely."

"Some derned sheepman gone crazy an' shot his-self," grumbled Sam. "Somethin' bound to spile a quiet afternoon."

"Not many sheep over that way," said Mormon. "No range."

Sandy rolled the dog on his side and found the other pads in the same condition. Running his fingers beneath the ruff, scratching gently in sign of friendship, he discovered a leather collar with a brass tag, rudely engraved, the lettering worn but legible.

GRIT. Prop. P. Casey.

"They sure named you right, son," he said. "We'll 'tend to P. Casey, soon's we've 'tended to you. You need fixin' if you're goin' to take us to him. You'll have to hoof it till we cut fair trail. Sam, fetch me some adhesive, will you? An' then saddle up; Pronto fo' me, a hawss fo' yoreself an' rope a spare mount."

"What for? The spare?"

"Don't know for sure. May have to bring him back."

"A sheepman to Three Star! I'd as soon have a sick rattler around. Mormon, yo're elected to nurse him."

Sam went into the house for the medical tape, then to the corral. Sandy bathed the raw pads softly, cut patches of the tape with his knife, put them on the abrasions, held them there for the warmth of his palm to set them. Grit licked at his hands whenever they were in reach, his brightening eyes full of understanding, shifting to watch Sam striding to the corral.

"One thing about a sheepman is allus good," said Mormon. "His dawg. Reckon you aim on me tendin' the ranch, Sandy?"

"Come if you want to."

"Two's plenty, I reckon. I do more ridin' through the week than I care for nowadays. I'll stick to the chair."

"Prod up Pedro to git some hot water ready. Keep a kittle b'ilin'. No tellin' what time we'll git back," said Sandy. "I'll take along some grub an' the medicine kit. Have to spare some of that whisky Sam's got stowed away."

"Goin' to waste booze at fifteen bucks a quart on a sheepman?" grumbled Mormon.

"Not if you an' Sam don't want I should," replied Sandy, with a smile. He knew his partners. "Now then, Grit," he went on to the dog in a confidential tone, "you-all have got to git grub an' wateh inside yore ribs. Savvy? I'm goin' to rustle some hash fo' you. You stay as you are, son."

He pressed the dog on its side once more, in the shade, and went into the house. Mormon followed him. Grit watched them disappear, gave a little whine of impatience, accepted the situation philosophically as he listened to sounds from the corral that told him of horses being caught, and drooped his head on the dirt, lying relaxed, eyes closed, gaining strength against the return trip.

Sam rode to the porch on his roan, Sandy's pinto and a gray mare leading, and "tied them to the ground" with trailing reins as Sandy came out bearing a pan of food, a package and a leather case. Mormon showed at the door.

"Where'd you hide yore bottle, Sam?" he asked.

"Where you can't find it, you holler-legged galoot. Why?"

"Fill up a flask to take along, Sam," said Sandy. "Here, Grit, climb outside of this chuck."

He coaxed the collie to eat the food from his hand while Sam brought the whisky.

"Load my guns, Mormon," he requested.

Mormon did it without comment. The two blued Colts were as much a part of Sandy's working outfit as his belt, or the bridle of his horse. Sam buckled on his own cartridge belt, holster and pistol, fixed his spurs, tied the package of food to his saddle, filled two canteens and did the same with them. Sandy-offered the pan of water to Grit who drank in businesslike fashion, assured of the success of his mission. He stood up squarely on his legs, eased by the plastering. They were only tired now.

He shook himself vigorously, sending out the dust with which he was powdered in all directions, making Mormon sneeze. He stretched his muzzle toward the mountains, threw it up and barked for the first time. As Sandy and Sam mounted, the latter leading the gray mare, Grit ran ahead of them and came back to make certain they were following. Then he headed for the spot in the mesquite whence he had emerged, marking the opening of a narrow trail. The horses broke into a lope, the two men, the three mounts, and the dog, off on their errand of mercy.

Mormon watched them well into the mesquite before he put back the hair in the water the dog had left and went on with his plaiting: As he handled the pliant horsehairs he talked aloud, range fashion.

"On'y sheepman I ever knowed worth trubblin' about was a woman. Used ter knit while she watched the woollies. Knit me a sweater—plumb useless waste of time an' yarn. If I'd taken it I'd have had to take her along with it. Wimmen is sure persistent. Seems like I must look like a dogie to most of 'em. They're allus wantin' to marry me an' mother me. I

sure hope this one don't turn out to be a she-herder. 'P' might stand fer Polly."

CHAPTER II

CASEY

Table of Contents

The two men followed the dog across the flats, through mesquite, through scattered sage and greasewood, mounting gradually through chaparral to barren slopes set with strange twisted shapes of cactus. When it became apparent that Sandy's hazard had hit the mark, as they entered the defile that made entrance for Pyramid Pass, the only path across the Cumbre Range to the Bad Lands beyond, Sandy reined in, coaxed up Grit, resentful, almost suspicious of any halt, lifting the collie to the saddle in front of him. Grit protested and the pinto plunged, but Sandy's persistence, the soothe of his steady voice, persuaded the dog at last to accommodate itself as best it could, helped by Sandy's one arm, sometimes with two as Sandy, riding with knees welded to Pronto's withers, dropping reins over the saddle horn, left the rest to the horse.

"I figger we got some distance yet," he said to Sam. "Dawg was goin' steady as a woodchuck ten mile' from water. Reckon my guess was right,—he wore his pads out crossin' the lava beds, though what in time any hombre who ain't plumb loco is trapesin' round there for, beats me. There is some grazin' on top of the Cumbre mesa, enough for a small herd, but the other side is jest plain hell with the lights out, one big slice of desert thirty mile' wide."

"Minin' camp over that way, ain't there?"

"Was. There's a lava bed strip of six-seven miles at the end of the pass, then comes a bu'sted mesa, all box cañon an' rim-rock, shot with caves, nothin' greener than cactus an' not much of that. There's a twenty per cent. grade wagon road, or there was, for it warn't engineered none too careful, that run over to the mines. I was over there once, nigh on to ten years ago. They called the camp Hopeful then. Next year they changed the name to Dynamite. Jest natcherully blew up, did that camp. Nothin' left but a lot of tumbledown shacks an' a couple hundred shafts an' tunnels leadin' to nothin'. Reckon this P. Casey is a prospector, Sam. One of them half crazy old-timers, nosin' round tryin' to pick up lost leads. One of the 'riginal crowd that called the dump Hopeful, like enough. Desert Rat. Them fellers is born with hope an' it's the last thing to leave 'em."

"Hope's a good hawss," said Sam. "But it sure needs Luck fo' a runnin' mate."

"You said it." Sandy relapsed into silence.

At the far end of the pass the dog struggled to get down. They looked out upon a stretch of desolation. Sandy had called it six or seven miles. It might have been two or twenty. The deceit of rarefied air was intensified by the dazzle of the merciless sun beating down on powdered alkali, on snaky flows of weathered lava, on mock lakes that sparkled and dissolved in mirage. The broken mesa, across which ran the road to the deserted mining camp, mysteriously changed form before their eyes; unsubstantial masses in pastel lights and shades of saffron, mauve and rose. Over all was the hard vault of the sky-like polished turquoise.

"I'll let him give us a lead," said Sandy, "soon as we hit the lava. We can foller his trail that fur. Sit tight, son." Grit whined but subsided under the restraining hands.

"How about a drink 'fore we tackle that?" asked Sam, nodding at the shimmering view.

"Better hold off for a while." Sandy took the lead, bending from the saddle, reading the trail that Grit's paws had left in the alkali and sand. Cactus reared its spiny stems or sprawled over the ground more like strange water-growths that had survived the emptying of an inland sea than vegetation of the land. Once the dog's tracks led aside to a scummy puddle, saucered by alkali, dotted with the spoor of desert animals that drank the bitter water in extremity. Then it ran straight to a wide reef of lava. Sandy set down the collie. Grit ran fast across the pitted surface, ahead of the horses, waiting for them to cross the lava. They had hard work to get him to come to hand again, but he gave in at last to the knowledge that they would not go on otherwise.

"Sand's too hot fo' yore pads, dawg," said Sandy, "Raise the mischief with that tape. Shack erlong, Pronto. Give you a slice of Pedro's dried-apple pie when we git back, to make up for workin' you Sunday." The pinto tossed a pink muzzle and his master reached to pat the dusty, sweat-streaked neck. Alkali rose about them in clouds. Grit's trail, though blurred in the soft soil, was plain enough. The two riders went silently on at a steady walking gait. Talk in the saddle with men who make range-riding a business comes only in spurts.

"Never see a prospector with a dawg afore," said Sam at last. "An' that a sheep dawg."

"Dawg 'ud be apt to tucker out in desert travel," agreed Sandy. "Mean one more mouth fo' water."

He, like Sam, speculated on the kind of man P. Casey—if it was Casey they were after—might be. If not a sheepman or a prospector, a third probability made him an outlaw, a man with a price on his head, hiding in the wilds from punishment. It sufficed to them that he was a man whom a dog loved enough to bear a call to help his master.

Slowly, the mesa ahead took on more definite shape. The shadows resolved themselves into ravines and cañons. They entered a gorge filled with boulders and rounded rocks, over which the sure-footed ponies made clattering, slippery progress. Here and there the gaunt skeleton of a tree, white as if lime-washed, showed that once cottonwoods had flourished before the devouring desert had claimed the territory. The cactus was all prickly pear, the gray-green flesh of the flat leaves starred with brilliant blossom. Along one side of the cañon, mounting zigzag, showed the remains of a road, broken down by landslip and the furious rush of cloud-burst waters.

Making this, finding it free of wagon sign or horse tracks, Sandy picked up Grit's trail once again. The collie wriggled, shot up its muzzle, whined, licked Sandy's face.

"Nigh there," suggested Sam. Sandy nodded and let the dog get down. Grit raced off, nose high, streaking around a curve. When they reached it he was out of sight. The road had been built up in places on the outer edge with stones, dry-piled. They had fallen away, the grade following, so that

sometimes all that was left for passage was a ledge along which the horses sidled carefully in single file, stirrups brushing the inside bank. The zigzags ended, the cañon narrowed, deepened. Sandy looked down to the dry bed of it four hundred feet below. The road rose at a steep pitch, cliff to the right, precipice to the left, stretching on and up to the summit of the pass.

Suddenly Pronto shied violently, tried to bolt up the cliff, scrambling goatwise for twenty feet to stand shivering and snorting. Sandy's balance was automatic, the muscles of his knees clamped for grip, he gave the pinto its head, trusting to it to establish footing. He saw Sam's roan dancing in the trail, the led mare plunging, dust rising all about them. Left-handed, a Colt flashed out of Sandy's holster, barked twice, the echoes tossing between the cañon walls. In the road a rattlesnake writhed, headless, its body, thicker than a man's wrist, checkered in dirty gray and chocolate diamonds.

"Git down there, you hysteric son of a gun," he said to the horse. "It's all over." The pinto hesitated, shifted unwilling hoofs, squatted on its haunches and, tail sweeping the dirt, tobogganed down to the road, jumping catwise the moment it was reached, away from the squirming terror. Sandy forced him back, leaned far down, tucked the barrel of the gun under the snake's body and hurled it looping into the gorge. Sam got his roan and the mare under control as the dust subsided.

"More'n a dozen buttons," said Sandy. "Listen!"

Grit, unseen, ahead, was barking in staccato volleys. There was another sound, a faint shout, unmistakably; human. The men looked at each other with eyebrows raised.

"That ain't no man's voice," said Sam. "That's a gal." He looked quizzically at Sandy, knowing his chum's inhibition.

Sandy was woman-shy. Men met his level glance, fairly, with swift certainty that here stood a man, four-square; or shiftily, according to their ease of conscience, knowing his breed. Sandy was a two-gun man but he was not a killer. There were no notches on the handles of his Colts. In earlier days he had shot with deadly aim and purpose, but never save in self-defense and upon the side of law and right and order. Among men his poise was secure but, in a woman's presence, Sandy Bourke's tongue was tied save in emergency, his wits tangled. Whatever he privately felt of the attraction of the opposite sex, the proximity of a girl produced an embarrassment he hated but could not help. He had seen admiration, desire for closer acquaintance, in many a fair face but such invitation affected him as the sight of a circling loop affects a horse in a remuda.

He gave Sam no chance for banter. Action was forward and it always straightened out the short-circuitings of Sandy's mental reflexes toward womankind. He touched Pronto's flanks with the dulled rowels he wore, and the pinto broke into a lope. A big boulder was perched upon the nigh side of the road. Grit came out from behind it, barked, whirled and seemingly dived into the cañon. Coming up with the mare, Sam found Sandy dismounted, waiting for him.

What had happened was plain to both of them. The rotten, hastily made road collapsed under the lurch of a wagon jolting over outcrop uncovered by the rains. Scored dirt where frantic hoofs had pawed in vain, tire marks that ended in side scrapes and vanished.

Sam got off the roan, the tired horses standing still, snuffing the marks of trouble. Far down the slope Grit gave tongue. The cliff shouldered out and they could see nothing from the broken road. How any one could have hurtled over the precipice and be still able to call for help without the aid of some miracle was an enigma. They listened for another shout but, save for the barking of the dog, there was silence in the grim gorge. In the sky, two buzzards wheeled.

Sandy poured a scant measure of water from his canteen into the punched-in crown of his Stetson, after he had knocked out the dust. Sam did the same, giving each horse a mouth-rinse and a swallow of tepid water so they would stand more contentedly. Each took a swift swig from the containers. Sandy untied the package of food and the leather medicine kit, Sam slapped his hip to be sure of his whisky flask. Aided by their high heels, digging them in the unstable dirt, they worked down the cliff, rounding the shoulder.

A wide ledge of outcrop jutted out from the cañon wall jagged into battlements. Piled there was a wagon, on its side, the canvas tilt sagged in, its hoops broken. A white horse, emaciated, little more than buzzard meat when alive, lay with its legs stiff in the air, neck flattened and head limp. A broken pole, with splintered ends, crossed the body of its mate, a bay, gaunt-hipped, high of ribs. It lay still, but its flanks heaved, catching a flash of sun on its dull hide.

Between the wheels of the wagon knelt a girl in a gown of faded blue, head hidden behind a sunbonnet. She leaned forward in the shadow of the wagon. Sandy caught a glimpse of a huddled body beyond her. Grit sat on his

haunches, head toward the road, thrown back at each bark. Sandy reached the ledge first. The girl did not turn her head, though his descent was noisy. He touched her gently on the shoulder, telling himself that she was "just a kid."

She looked up, her face lined where tears had laned down through the mask of dust. Now she was past crying. Her eyes met Sandy's pitifully, holding neither surprise nor hope.

"He's dead." She seemed to be stating a fact long accepted.

"He's dead. An' he made me jump. You come too late, mister."

The man lay stretched out, head and shoulders hidden, his gaunt body dressed in jeans, once blue, long since washed and sun-faded to the green of turquoise matrix. The boots were rusty, patched. The wagon-bed, toppling sidewise, had crashed down on his chest. Rock partly supported the weight of it. Sandy picked up a gnarled hand, scarred, calloused and shrunken, the hand of an old prospector.

"Yore dad?" he asked, kneeling by the girl.

"Yes." She stood up, slight and straight, with limbs and body just curving into womanhood. "The hawsses was tuckered out," she said, "or Dad c'ud have made it. They didn't have no strength left, 'thout food or water. The damned road jest slid out from under. Dad made me jump. I figgered he was goin' to, but his bad leg must have caught in the brake. We slid over like water slides over a rock. He didn't have a hell-chance." As she spoke them the oaths were merely emphasis. She talked as had her father.

Sandy nodded.

"Got an ax with the outfit?" he asked. Then turning to Sam as the girl went round to the back of the fallen wagon and fumbled about through the rear opening of the canvas tilt: "Man's alive, Sam. Caught a flirt of the pulse. Have to pry up the wagon. Git that bu'sted end of the tongue."

The girl handed an ax to Sandy mutely, watching them as Sandy pried loose the part of the tongue still bolted to the wagon, getting it clear of the horses.

"Think you can drag out yore dad by the laigs when we lift the body of the wagon?" he asked her. "May not be able to hold it more'n a few seconds. May slip on us, the levers is pritty short."

She stooped, taking hold of a wrinkled boot in each hand, back of the heel. A tear splashed down on one of them and she shook the salt water from her eyes impatiently as if she had faced tragedy before and knew it must be looked at calmly.

The two men adjusted the boulders they had set for fulcrums and shoved down on the stout pieces of ash, their muscles bunching, the veins standing out corded on their arms. Grit ran from one to the other with eager little whines, sensing what was being attempted, eager to help. The wagon-bed creaked, lifted a little.

"Now," grunted Sandy, "snake him out."

The girl tugged, stepping backward, her pliant strength equal to the dead drag of the body. Sandy, straining down, saw a white beard appear, stained with blood, an aged seamed face, hollow at cheek and temple, sparse of hair, the flesh putty-colored despite its tan. Grit leaped in and

licked the quiet features as Sam and Sandy eased down the wagon.

"Whisky, Sam."

The girl sat cross-legged, her father's head in her lap, one hand smoothing his forehead while the other felt under his vest and shirt, above his heart.

"He ain't gone yit," she announced.

The old miner's teeth were tight clenched, but there were gaps in them through which the whisky Sandy administered trickled.

"Daddy! Daddy!"

It might have been the tender agony of the cry to which Patrick Casey's dulling brain responded, sending the message of his will along the nerves to transmit a final summons. His body twitched, he choked, swallowed, opened gray eyes, filmy with death, brightening with intelligence as he saw his daughter bending over him, the face of Sandy above her shoulder. The gray eyes interrogated Sandy's long and earnestly until the light began to fade out of them and the wrinkled lids shuttered down.

Another swallow of the raw spirits and they opened flutteringly again. The lips moved soundlessly. Then, while one hand groped waveringly upward to rest upon his daughter's head, Sandy, bending low, caught three syllables, repeated over and over, desperately, mere ghosts of words, taxing cruelly the last breath of the wheezing lungs beneath the battered ribs, the final spurt of the spirit.

"*Molly—mines!*"

"I'll look out for that, pardner," said Sandy.

The eyelids fluttered, the old hands fell away, the jaw relaxed, serenity came to the lined face, and no little dignity. For the first time the girl gave way, lying prone, sobbing out her grief while the two cowmen looked aside. The bay horse began to groan and writhe.

"Got to kill that cavallo," said Sam in a whisper.

"Wait a minute." The girl had quieted, was kneeling with clasped hands, lips moving silently. Prayer, such as it was, over, she rose, her fists tight closed, striving to control her quivering chin—doing it. She looked up as the shadow of a buzzard was flung against the cliff by the slanting sun.

"We got to bury him, 'count of them damn buzzards."

"We'll tend to that," said Sandy. "Ef you-all 'll take the dawg on up to the hawsses...."

"No! I helped to bury Jim Clancy, out in the desert, I'm goin' to help bury Dad. It's goin' to be lonesome out here—" She twisted her mouth, setting teeth into the lower lip sharply as she gazed at the desolate cliffs, the birds swinging their tireless, expectant circles in the throat of the gorge.

"Dad allus figgered he'd die somewheres in the desert. 'Lowed it 'ud be his luck. He wanted to be put within the sound of runnin' water—he's gone so often 'thout it. But—" She shrugged her thin shoulders resignedly, the inheritance of the prospector's philosophy strong within her.

"See here, miss," said Sandy, while Sam crawled into the wagon in search of the dead miner's pick and shovel that now, instead of uncovering riches, would dig his grave, "how old air you?"

"Fifteen. My name's Margaret—Molly for short—same as my Ma. She's been dead for twelve years."

"Well, Miss Molly, suppose you-all come on to the Three Star fo' a spell with my two pardners an' me? You do that an' mebbe we can fix yore daddy's idee about runnin' water. We'd come back an' git him an' we'll make a place fo' him under our big cottonwoods below the big spring. I w'udn't wonder but what he c'ud hear the water gugglin' plain as it runs down the overflow to the alfalfa patches."

Molly Casey gazed at him with such a sudden glow of gratitude in her eyes that Sandy felt embarrassed. He had been comforting a girl, a boyish girl, and here a woman looked at him, with understanding.

"Yo're sure a white man," she said. "I'll git even with you some time if I work the bones of my fingers through the flesh fo' you. Thanks don't amount to a damn 'thout somethin' back of 'em. I'll come through."

She put out her roughened little hand, man-fashion, and Sandy took it as Sam emerged from the wagon with the tools. The bay mare groaned and gave a shrill cry, horribly human. Sam drew his gun, putting down pick and shovel.

"Got any water you c'ud spare?" asked the girl. Sandy handed her his canteen.

"Use it all," he said. "Soon's it's dark, it'll cool off. We'll git through all right."

He picked up the tools and moved toward Sam as the bay collapsed to the merciful bullet. The girl washed away as best she could the stains of blood and travel from the dead face while Sandy sounded with the pick for soil deep enough for a temporary grave.

The body would have to lie on the ledge over night, nothing but burial could save it from marauding coyotes, though the wagon might have baffled the buzzards. The two set to work digging a shallow trench down to bedrock, rolling up loose boulders for a cairn. The whirring chorus of the cicadas drummed an elfin requiem. Now and then there came the chink of bit, or hoof on rock, from the waiting horses in the broken road. The sun was low, horizontal rays piercing the flood of violet haze in the cañon. Across the gorge the cliff, above the wash of shadow, glowed saffron; a light wind wailed down the bore. Lizards flirted in and out of the crevices as the miner was laid in his temporary grave, the girl dry-eyed again.

She had brought a little work box from the wagon, of mahogany studded with disks of pearl in brass mountings. Out of this she produced a handkerchief of soft China silk brocade, its white turned yellow with age. This she spread over her father's features, showing strangely distinct in the failing light.

"I don't want the dirt pressin' on his face," she said.

From the dead man's clothes Sandy and Sam had taken the few personal belongings, from the inner pocket of the vest some papers that Sandy knew for location claims.

"Want to take some duds erlong to the ranch?" he asked Molly. "We can bring in the rest of the stuff later. Got to shack erlong, it's gittin' dark. Brought an extry hawss with us. Can you ride?"

"Some. I ain't had much chance."

"Don't know how the mare'll stand yore skirt. If she won't Pinto'll pack you."

"I'll fix that." She clambered into the wagon. Before she came out with her bundle they piled the cairn, a mask of broken rim-rock heavy enough to foil the scratching of coyotes.

It looked to Sandy as if the girl had changed into a boy. The slender figure, silhouetted against the afterglow, softly pulsing masses of fiery cloud above the top of the mesa, was dressed in jean overalls, a wide-rimmed hat hiding length of hair.

"I reckon I can fool that hawss of yores now," she said. "I gen'ally dress thisaway 'cept when we expect to go nigh the settlements or a ranch where we aim to visit. We was makin' for the Two-Bar-P outfit, where Grit came from when he was a bit of a pup. I expected that's where he was headin' for when I sent him off after help, but you come instead."

"I was wonderin' how he come to make the ranch," said Sandy. "You see we-all bought the Two-Bar-P, though I never figgered old Samson 'ud ever own a sheepdawg. He might give one away fast enough."

"Grit was sent him for a present by a man who summered at the ranch an' heerd Samson say he wanted a dawg," said the girl. "He was a tenderfoot when he come, an' when he left, 'count bein' sick. Samson didn't want to kill the dawg an' didn't want to keep him, so he gave him to Dad an' me when I was ten years old. Are you ready to start?"

She had avoided looking toward the grave, purposely Sandy thought, talking to bridge over the last good-by, the chance of a breakdown. Suddenly she pointed down the cliff.

"Wait a minute," she cried and disappeared, sliding and leaping down like a goat, reappearing with her hat half filled with crimson silk-petaled cactus blooms, scattering them at the head of the cairn.

"Seemed like there jest had to be flowers," she said as, with Grit nosing close to his mistress, they mounted to the road. The gray mare made no bother and soon they were riding down toward the strip of Bad Lands. Sandy let the collie go afoot for the time.

The glory of the range departed, the cliffs turned slate color, then black, while a host of stars marshaled and burned without flicker. The wind moaned through the trough of the cañon as they rode out on the plain. Up somewhere in the darkness the buzzards came circling down, to settle on the ledge beside the carcasses of the two horses.

It was close to midnight when they reached the home ranch, riding past the outbuildings, the bunk-house of the men where a light twinkled, the cook shack, the corrals, up to the main house. There they alighted. All about cottonwoods rustled in the dark, the air was sweet and cool, not far from frost. Molly Casey shivered as she moved stiffly in her saddle. Sandy lifted her from the saddle and carried her up the steps, across the porch, kicking open the door of the living-room where the embers of a fire glowed. There was no other light in the big room, but there was sufficient to show the great form of Mormon, stowed at ease in a chair, asleep and snoring.

Sam struck a match and lit a lamp. He struck Mormon mightily between his shoulders.

"Gawd!" gasped the heavyweight partner. "I been asleep. But there's a kittle of hot water, Sandy. Where's the—what in time are you totin'? A gel or a boy?"

"This is Miss Molly Casey," said Sandy gravely, setting down the girl. "Miss Casey, this is Mr. Peters. Mormon, Miss Molly is goin' to tie up to the Three Star for a bit."

Mormon, a little sheepish at the suddenly developing age of the girl as she shook hands with him, recovered himself and beamed at her. "Yo're sure welcome," he said. "Boss hired you? Cowgirl or cook?"

Sandy noticed the girl's lips quiver and he slipped an arm about her shoulders. He was not woman-shy with this girl who needed help, and who seemed a boy.

"Don't you take no notice of him an' his kiddin'," he said. "We'll make him rustle some grub fo' all of us an' then we-all 'll turn in. I'll show you yore room. Up the stairs an' the last door on the right. Here's some matches. There's a lamp on the bureau up there. Give you a call when supper's ready."

He led her to the door and gave her a friendly little shove, guessing that she wanted to be alone.

"The kid's lost her father, lost most everything 'cept her dawg," he said to Mormon. "Thought we might adopt her, sort of, then I thought mebbe we'd hire her—for mascot."

"Lost her daddy? An' me hornin' in an' tryin' to kid her! I ain't got the sense of a drowned gopher, sometimes," said Mormon contritely.

"She's game, plumb through, ain't she, Sam? Stands right up to trouble?"

"You bet. Mormon, open up a can of greengages, will ye? I reckon she's got a sweet tooth, same as me."