

Ernest Haycox



*The Wild
Bunch*

Ernest Haycox

The Wild Bunch



Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4066338075826

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. — THE OWLHORNS

II. — VOICE OF HATE

III. — SUN RANCH

IV. — TURN OF THE SCREW

V. — FIRST WARNING

VI. — DEATH AT NIGHT

VII. — THE WILLFUL WAY

VIII. — AT ROSELLE

IX. — TIME FOR WONDER

X. — WOMEN MEET

XI. — WRONG TURN

XII. — DEEP IN THE. OWLHORNS

XIII. — THE HAUNTS OF LITTLE. MEN

XIV. — THE TASTE OF A. WOMAN'S LIPS

XV. — ACTION AT ROSELLE

XVI. — THE LAST. DECISION

THE END

I. — THE OWLHORNS

[Table of Contents](#)

GOODNIGHT crossed the river at a ford whose bottom sands were scarcely covered by water and made noon camp under the shade of a lonely willow. Heat was a burning pressure upon the gray and burnt-brown desert and heat rolled back from the punished earth to make a thin, unseen turbulence all around him. The smell of the day was a rendered-out compound of baked grass and sage and bitter-strong dust.

He lay belly-flat and drank on the upstream side of his horse; he let the horse drift to graze while he built a smoke and stretched out in the willow's spotty shade with his hat drawn over his eyes. Suddenly the sun came around the willow and burned against his skin and he sat upright and knew he had been asleep. He rose up then, a limber man with gray eyes half-hidden behind the drop of his lids. He had a rider's looseness about him and the sun had scorched its layers of tan smoothly over his face. All his features were solid and his shape was the flat and angularly heavy shape of a man who made his living by horse and rope.

When he stepped to the saddle he turned east, as he had been doing for many days—all the way out of Oregon's high range. The Idaho desert lay behind him, and the black lava gorges of the Snake, and the Tetons, and Jackson Hole and the Absarokas. Looking rearward across the leagues of rolling grass and flinty soil, he saw the shadow of great hills lying vague behind the heat haze; forward stood the darker

and closer bulk of the Owlhorns. Sundown, he figured, ought to put him into Sherman City at the base of those hills.

Once during the last week he had met a rider and they had said six words apiece and departed on their separate ways. Otherwise travelers were to be seen only as fragments of dust-smoke in the great distance and ranch quarters were small-shaped blurs, like ships hull-down on the horizon. There was such a ranch headquarters now before him, directly upon his route to the Owlhorns; and there was also a pattern of dust on his right, signal of one or more riders moving. He watched that dust for half an hour before he decided it was a single rider heading for the same ranch toward which he pointed.

When a man had long distances to cover, the best way was the slow way; and therefore Goodnight let the horse pick its own gait. He sat easy in the saddle for his own comfort, and even- balanced to save the horse. As he rode, his eyes three quarters lidded to shield off the glare, he saw all there was to be seen and he speculated long upon the course of a creek or the shape of a vagrant track upon the earth, or the distance from point to point; and sometimes he whistled a little and sometimes he sang a song, and sometimes he rode many miles in steady silence—drawn inward to those strange thoughts which ride close to a man alone. At twenty-nine, these thoughts had tempered him, had fashioned a private world with its images and its long thoughts and its hopes of what might be.

The rider south of him made a sweep through the early afternoon, and curved in until he was directly ahead, two or three miles away. In another half hour the man had reached

the ranch house toward which Goodnight also moved at a steady pace. The middle-down sun burned like an open flame on his back and the horizons turned blue-yellow. He crossed the bottom of a bone-dry creek, he saw the flash of bright tin reaching out from the ranchhouse windmill. He thought of something funny Niles Brand had once said and he smiled; and he remembered a woman's voice he had heard at some strange place back in the mountains. He had never seen her face; it was only her voice coming out of a house—sleepy and low—and it stayed with him, like one short piece of music whose name he wished he knew.

House and barn and yard came into view and when he got nearer he spotted two men on the porch, face to face with ten feet between them. The nearest man was chalked with alkali dust and his florid face puffed with heat; therefore he was the rider who had just come off the desert. He was quite tall and had a heavy, high-bridged nose and sharp blue eyes which now came around and fastened a coolly inhospitable glance on Goodnight. The other man likewise turned his attention and for an instant Goodnight thought he noticed strain and the distant show of fear on that one's face. Meanwhile he waited for an invitation to dismount.

It was a considerable time in coming. The second man looked back at the tall rider and seemed to speculate upon him. Afterwards he swung his glance to Goodnight again and said, "Get down, man, and come out of the sun."

Goodnight dismounted. He stood at the base of the porch and rolled himself a smoke and he thought: "The small fellow is glad I'm here—I wonder why." He had seen an

expression of relief noticeably show on the man's mouth. He finished his cigarette and licked it. But his mouth was dry and so he held the cigarette unlighted, watching the tall man with a greater degree of interest. He had, Goodnight thought, a maverick smell about him. He was painted the same dusty color as were all men in this country but the paint came from another brush. This was Goodnight's quick judgment. It was subject to revision, but he always placed weight on his first impressions.

The tall one said with unconscious arrogance: "If you've got business here, get it done with and be on your way."

The man's words were too sharp and distinct, the tone too clear. A Western man had a looser and easier way of speaking. Goodnight said: "Your outfit?"

"Hardly," said the big-nosed man. "But does that matter?"

"Always like to get my walking papers from the boss," said Goodnight.

The big man smiled in a wintery, indifferent way. He didn't bother to answer. It was the other one who said:—

"Water's in the back of the house."

Goodnight nodded. He led his horse around the house to a big trough in the rear. He let the horse drink a little. Then he pulled the horse back and himself drank the small trickle of water coming out of the pipe; then he gave the horse another short drink, and moved back to the front yard. It was not as much as he wanted and not as much as the horse wanted, but they still had the worst of the day to ride through and it was better to make a dry march than to sweat out a lot of water. He stopped at the porch steps,

before the two men. He still had his cigarette and now took time to light it. He thought he saw relief once more break over the small man's cheeks. He looked at the tall rider and met the steady onset of the latter's impatient glance.

"Now you can dust along," said the tall one.

The shorter man said: "Cut that out, Bill."

The big-nosed Bill showed an amused grin. "This man's no recruit for you, Harry. He's another bum, another fugitive in a land full of fugitives. There's probably a charge against him somewhere and he's running from it. Just one more crook trying to reach the shelter of the Owlhorns before a bullet catches up with him." He gave Goodnight a stiff jolt with his glance, now losing his idle amusement. "You can make timber by night. Go on, move."

Goodnight dragged in the cigarette's strong sweet smoke and blew it out. He dropped the cigarette and ground it under his boot. He lifted his head on Bill, meeting the man's pushing glance. He said to Bill in the softest voice: "You talk too much."

Bill gave him a prolonged study. The remark seemed to interest him more than to anger him; and that was a reaction to which Goodnight was not accustomed. It quickened his attention and he watched the tall man's face steadily for a sign of change.

Bill said in a half-interested manner: "Have I misjudged you, friend, or are you simply making a demonstration for the sake of your pride?"

"Put in your chips and find out," said Goodnight.

Suddenly the high-nosed Bill laughed. "That's typical," he commented, turning to the smaller man. "An arrival, a word,

a threat and a showdown. It never varies. There's damned little originality in this country."

"Is that another speech?" asked Goodnight.

"Don't be proud of your ultimatum," said Bill. "Now I shall surprise you very much. I am going to leave you standing right there, high and dry with your gallant attitude."

"That's one way of saying it," said Goodnight.

Bill left the porch and walked to his horse. He stepped to the saddle and laid his hands on the horn. He gave Goodnight a short smile. "Don't be proud. If I felt like fighting I should certainly fight you. But why should I spend that energy and take that risk on a man who means nothing to me, and probably means less to himself?"

"Let me give you some advice," said Goodnight. "Don't make statements you have to crawl out of."

But it didn't touch the tall man. The tall man's smile simply pushed it aside. He lifted his reins, and nodded at the smaller one on the porch. "He's no good for you as a recruit, Harry. None of these stray riders are. You'll hire him, but all he'll ever do is run for a hole when somebody strange comes up. I'll see you later."

By habit he set his horse into a run, through the blasting heat of this day; and kept up the run for a hundred yards or more. The arid dust boiled around him and hung motionless in the air and laid its suffocating smell across the yard. The sky was overcast with heat fog, like the smoke of a forest fire. Eastward, the Owlhorns showed dim. Goodnight turned his glance back to the man on the porch.

"What was his name again?"

"Bill—Boston Bill Royal."

"So," murmured Goodnight.

"Don't let the words fool you." The man on the porch rested back on his chair and let his arms hang loose across his thighs. He relaxed as though he had been under strain. He patted his shirt pocket and found a cigar. He lighted it and closed his eyes a moment; he was small and dark and his shoulders had begun to fatten up. He looked harmless in the chair and Goodnight turned half away to study Boston Bill, now in the distance. When he swung around again, the little man's eyes were open and watching him, keenly and sharply.

"You want a job?"

"Riding or fighting?"

"Less of one thing and more of the other."

"Where's Sherman City?"

"Over there," said the man, and waved a hand toward the Owlhorns. "My name's Harry Ide. I owe you a favor."

"Maybe I missed something," said Goodnight.

"He caught me alone," said Ide.

"He was gettin' set to talk you to death?" drawled Goodnight.

Harry Ide removed his hat and wiped its sweat band. A small bald spot showed at his scalp lock and the edges of his hair were turning from coal-black to gray. He had the beginnings of a bay window and he seemed to have no danger in him. Still, now and then something seemed to spring out of his eyes at Goodnight, very bright and very calculating. "I wouldn't jump at conclusions," Harry Ide said. "The man's better than he sounds."

"Thanks for the drink," said Goodnight and stepped to his saddle.

"About that job—"

"Maybe I'll be back," said Goodnight and rode off.

Boston Bill had reached Harry Ide's ranch house half an hour before Goodnight arrived. He stepped quickly to the ground and got to the porch and stood with a shoulder against the wall. He said, "Harry," and waited. Somebody moved from the back room slowly and came across the front room. Boston Bill held himself still, and so caught Ide by surprise as the latter stepped through the door. Ide saw him a little too late to put himself on the alert. Therefore he stopped still, facing Boston Bill. His face hardened as he waited and he held Bill's eyes with his own guarded glance.

"You see," said Bill, "I have you on the hip."

"So," said Harry Ide, very dry.

"This is just to show you that you can't always be surrounded and safe. If I want to reach you I can always do it. You didn't even see me coming. Or if you did see me, you never thought I'd be fool enough to walk straight at you."

"Was unexpected," agreed Ide. He was listening to Boston Bill with the gravest kind of care. He remained motionless.

"Your head is full of quick ideas," pointed out Bill, now amused. "You're trying to think of some way to protect yourself. You've got no gun. Very careless."

"That's right."

"It ought to occur to you," pointed out Boston Bill, "that no man is ever safe."

"It occurs to me now," said Ide.

"Then," said Boston Bill, "it should further occur to you that a bargain is better than a burial."

Harry Ide slowly reached up with a hand and scratched the end of his nose. He held Boston Bill's complete attention. Suddenly he turned and walked ten feet away, and turned back to face Bill again.

Bill said: "Why did you do that?"

Harry Ide shrugged his shoulders. He said, "What's this bargain or burial business?"

"You're doing no good fighting me. You may get killed at it. In any event you're getting poorer at it."

"You're a bright lad," said Harry Ide. "What's the idea you're bringin' me so kindly?"

"Why should we fight at all?"

Harry Ide gave out his dry answer. "I like to keep my beef. I guess I always will fight to keep it."

"I can raid you any time I please. I have done so. Fighting does you no good."

"Show me somethin' better," said Ide. He had been standing. Now he sat down, still making his motions slow.

"Why did you do that?" asked Boston Bill, again curious.

"I was tired of standin'," said Ide.

"No," said Bill, "you did it for another reason. You figure it would be harder for me to shoot a man sitting down."

"Wouldn't it?"

"No," said Boston Bill. "But I'm not thinking of that right now. Listen to me. I'll leave you alone. I'll never come near your range, if you'll stay out of my way."

"You're hurtin' a lot of my friends. I'll stick with them."

"Never mind your friends. Here's another idea. You want a chunk of the hills for summer grass. Go ahead and take it. Just tell me when and where you intend to move in and I'll stay out of your road."

"You are offerin' to sell out your friends if I sell out mine," said Harry Ide. "Now why?"

"Your friends expect you to hunt me down and get rid of me. My friends expect me to dispose of you. That's silly, isn't it? We can both do better."

"I see," said Ide. "You're wantin' more safety than you got."

"Exactly," said Bill.

"I will think of it," said Ide.

"Do so," said Bill. "It is always better to be reasonable. It is also much more profitable." He turned to meet Goodnight as the latter crossed the yard.

The afternoon was half gone and the heat had reached its piled-up intensity as Goodnight rode east. Nothing relieved it. Long as he had followed the trail in all its climates, this day was punishment to him, making breath a labor, turning him nervous. "Hundred and twenty out here," he thought. The edges of his saddle were too hot for comfort and the metal pieces of the bridle sent painful flashes against his eyes. Two miles ahead, Boston Bill kicked up a dust that clung to the air and got into Goodnight's nostrils. He reversed and raised his neckpiece over his nose.

At five o'clock the country lifted from its flatness into rolling dunes of sand and clay gulches; here and there a pine tree stood as advance sentinel to the hills. The hills

were before him, black and bulky and high, with the yellow streak of a road running upward in crisscross fashion and vanishing inside the timber. He crossed a shallow creek, pausing long enough to let his horse have a short drink; he reached the road and started the roundabout climb into the benchlands.

His shadow ran before him longer and longer as the sun dipped; five hundred feet from the desert floor he turned to catch the last great burst of flame as the sun dropped below the rim, like unto the explosion of a distant world. After that the land was another land, blue and still and a-brim with the smell of the hills. Coolness flowed against Goodnight, taking the sting of the day's heat from him, and he murmured, "Promised land," and whistled into the forming shadows. The horse increased its gait and at dusk Goodnight rounded a bend and came upon Sherman City, whose main street was this road running through.

The town sat upon a bench, facing the desert but facing the hills as well—a double row of buildings on either side of the road and other buildings scattered through the water-blue dusk. Beyond these buildings, the road met a canyon and vanished into the swift rise of the Owlhorns, the shadows of which lay hard upon the town. A plank bridge carried him over a creek. He rode beside single-story houses squatted side by side, their lights blooming through open doorways, through windows coated with dust. Half down the street another road cut out of the hills to form an intersection. On the four corners thus formed sat a hotel, a store, and two saloons diagonally facing each other. One

was "The Trail"; the other's faded sign said: "Texican." Beyond the Texican was a stable into which he rode.

A man drifted out of the stable's rear darkness and looked closely at him, and said, "Third stall back." Goodnight gave his horse a small drink at the street trough, removed his gear and hung it up. He stood a moment in the stall, his hand lying on the sweat-gummed back of the horse, and afterwards walked to the street. Here he paused, rolling up a cigarette. The smoke had no flavor in his parched mouth and suddenly he felt the rank need of his dried-out tissues, and bent down over the drinking trough's feed pipe and let the water roll into his throat and fill up his belly until it would hold no more. Presently he strolled to the Texican and went in.

This was supper hour and slack time. He stood at the bar with no company except the barkeep, and took his whisky quick and returned to the street; and once again he stopped and rolled a smoke. He had no need of the cigarette but it served to cover his idleness as he looked upon this small town crowded against the bulky, night-blackened Owlhorns. A cooler current flowed out of that darkness and the smell was a different smell, stiffening him and sharpening his senses. He thought: "This may be the end of the journey."

He caught a sudden odor of food from the hotel across the street, its effect on him so sharp that a pain started in the corners of his jaws. Men moved idly in and out of the hotel, bound to and from supper, and men strolled by him, each and all of them giving him a quick glance as they passed; it was a noticeable thing. Three men came from the second saloon diagonally over the four-cornered heart of the

town—from the Trail—and moved together toward the hotel. One of them was Boston Bill. Boston Bill saw him and Boston Bill's face showed a small grin as he went on into the hotel with his two partners.

One more man moved out of the upper darkness of the town, his body alternately clear and dull as he passed through the lamplight beams shining from the houses. He was a tall one with sharp edges to his shoulders and a hard-brimmed Stetson sitting aft on his head. When he reached the town's center he paused and looked idly around him and his glance moved to Goodnight, and moved away. He teetered on the edge of the walk, like a man undecided, and at last cut over the dust toward him. He had yellow hair and a light skin blistered by the sun and when he came by Goodnight the light of the saloon hit his eyes and showed the bright-green glint in them. He passed Goodnight within arm's reach. He murmured: "Eat your supper and meet me at the foot of this street."

Goodnight tarried until the other man had swung into the Texican; then he crossed the dust to the hotel and signed the register and climbed a set of squealing stairs to an upper room. He took off his shirt and filled the washbowl from the pitcher; when he washed he felt the sudden cracking of the mask of alkali dust on his face and tough as his skin was the soap burned its freshly scorched surface. It had been that hot a day.

He shook the dust from his shirt and put it on and he upended the water pitcher and drank all he could hold, still unable to slake the thirst in him; he was, he thought, like a board that had lain out in the sun too long, brittle and

warped. He passed the open door of another bedroom, inside which six men sat packed around a poker table, and saw Boston Bill there. He cruised down the stairs and found a place in the dining room and ordered his meal; he sat back with all his muscles loose, fully enjoying the laziness and the luxury that followed a long day's ride. He ate his meal when it came and afterwards he remained at the table, a strange thing for him, and built himself a cigarette. He had been tired. Now the energy of his supper was a stimulant that lifted him, and the goodness of being alive made him smile and brought his eyelids together until shrewd lines appeared below his temples. Restlessness bubbled up and little things out of the past weeks came into his mind, little pictures and little sounds, the feeling evoked by starlight, the smell of rain against the hot ashes of his campfire, the sing of wind through the high peaks of the continental divide—and the sound of that unseen woman's voice again.

Maybe the urges of a lone man always at last moved like the needle of a compass to the thought of a woman, or maybe it was because of the woman who came into the dining room at the moment he rose to leave; at any rate, all his attention closed upon her as she paused at the door and looked around her. She was still young, with black hair and a roundness to her upper body, with a filled-out completeness that sang over the room at him and excited all his male interests. Her lips lay together, almost willful, and her eyes were cool and her manner indifferent.

She had found a table when he went by. She was behind him, but the thought of her stopped him at the doorway and he swung to look at her, and he saw that her glance had

risen to him. She didn't look away; she caught his glance and held it, as direct as he had been, as though she challenged him to break that composure on her face, or as though, weary of indifference, she wanted to be lifted from it. Her eyes were black-gray and her hands small and square as they rested on the table. She knew she was beautiful and she knew she was a picture framed before his hungry glance. Her assurance said as much as she watched him. He was a man like other men, with all the old impulses. Her manner said that too, but she continued to watch him and he thought he saw a break of interest in her eyes as he turned away.

He returned to the stable to water his horse; then he went into the saloon and bought a cigar, and stood with an elbow hooked to the bar, watching the crowd drift in. Presently he left the saloon and walked idly past the lighted houses on into the darkness at the foot of the street. There was the sagged image of a shed before him.

He paused here and he turned as though to go back. Niles Brand's voice came out of the shed's shadows. "Been waiting a week for you."

"Any news?"

"Ain't picked up any trail of him yet."

"I'm guessin' he's here somewhere. These Owlhorns seem to be where they all hide."



II. — VOICE OF HATE

[Table of Contents](#)

GOODNIGHT made a slow swing to search the roundabout shadows. The nearest house was two hundred feet away, showing no light. Farther toward the center of town a pair of men stood momentarily on a corner and then walked into the Trail, leaving the street empty. Goodnight stepped behind the shed, coming close by Niles Brand. Starlight and a thin slice of a moon sent down a glow upon the sharp, small smile of his partner and the ruddy face with its pleasant irony.

"How long you been here, Niles?"

"A week. Just layin' around, watchin' men come and go. Keepin' my ears open. This is a hell of a town. Frank."

"He's around here somewhere," repeated Goodnight. "A man will only run so far. Then he stops runnin', like a stampeded steer with no more steam to run on. These Owlhorns have got a reputation for shelterin' wild ones. He's probably here."

"If he didn't stop somewhere else before he got here."

"I raised a smell of him back on the other edge of this desert. He had put up at a line camp, nursing a bad leg. Man described him—young and gray at the edges of his hair. He pulled out after two days, headed east across the desert."

"That sounds like him," said Niles.

"If he started over the desert," pointed out Goodnight, "he wouldn't stop until he got to the next set of mountains. That's here."

"These hills," said Niles, "are two hundred miles long and fifty miles deep. How you goin' to cover all that?"

"Pretty soon he'll get awful tired of living alone. Then he'll come into town for a bust. We'll stick around and wait."

Niles said again: "This is a hell of a town, Frank." He searched for his tobacco and he rolled a smoke blind, and struck and cupped a match to his face. His skin was of the florid kind, burned to a violent red. His eyebrows were bleached to the shade of sand. Momentarily the match light danced frosty and bright in his eyes. He breathed deeply on the cigarette. "Everybody walkin' around, watchin' for somebody else to make a false move. Never saw anything like it."

"Why?"

"The big outfits in the desert summer-graze their beef up in the hills. Last few years smaller outfits have started in the hills, cutting in on the range the desert bunch used to have. Been some battles on that. Then these hills are full of crooks hidin' out, and they been nibblin' away at the desert stuff, drivin' it into the timber and sellin' it to the hill people. As I get it there's a fellow named Boston Bill who's got a dozen wild ones together. They're in the business. Talk seems to be that this Bill delivers the desert beef to a hill ranch run by a man named Hugh Overman. There's a lot of these small hill ranches and they all stick tight, figurin' the desert crowd to be legal game."

"We'll just stay around here and wait," said Goodnight.

"Move easy," said Niles Brand. "All strangers cornin' in here are watched. A man's on one side or he's on the other and they'll peck at you and me until they find out. Every

time I walk down the road I wonder when somethin' is goin' to bust."

"If we have to meet to talk," said Goodnight, "make it here at night."

"I been offered a job," said Niles. "Chambermaid in the stable."

"Take it," said Goodnight. "That gives you a reason for staying here."

"Oh, my God," groaned Niles. "Me doin' that. What'll you do?"

"I'll find something."

"Be careful who you mix with," said Niles. "Awful easy to get with the wrong crowd."

"All we want is a man," said Goodnight.

"If I ever get a decent bead on him I'll shoot him—and that's the end of it."

"No," said Goodnight, soft and final. "Not that easy for him, Niles." He stepped aside from the shed and gave the street a careful study. A sudden shout came from the heart of town and two or three riders appeared, lifting the deep dust around them; they halted at the saloon on the far corner. Goodnight stepped forward, moving idly back toward the hotel. He passed two dark houses and he passed a third with a light shining out of an open door; he looked through the doorway and saw a woman inside, her back turned to him. Her dress was brown, edged with some kind of metal thread that struck up a sharp shining; and then he remembered the girl who had been in the hotel's dining room. It was the same dress, the same girl.

Beyond her house stood the back side of the hotel, with a narrow alley between. A man sat on a box in the alley's mouth, an old man with white whiskers short-cropped and a narrow goatee. He had his legs crossed, one leg swinging on the other with a quick up-and-down rhythm, and his glance slanted up at Goodnight from beneath the tilted brim of his hat. Goodnight went by him, but a sharp warning struck through him and he turned back to face the old man. He watched the old fellow and wondered how much the latter had seen.

The old man's head came up. He had a sly humor on his face, a bright and beady wisdom in his eyes. He said: "You know why I sit here in the alley? There's always more wind comin' down an alley on a hot night. That's why I sit here."

"Good place to see a lot," said Goodnight.

"I see a lot and I know a lot," said the old one. "I know more'n I ever tell. If I told what I knew I wouldn't be an old man. I'd be a dead one. I guess I'm the only one in town that ain't lined up."

"Lined up how?"

"Lined up," said the old one with a touch of impatience. "On one side or the other side. I'm so old nobody cares where I am. But if they knew how much I knew, they'd care. So I keep still. You ain't lined up, either?"

He made it as a hopeful question, a magpie curiosity glittering in his eyes. His leg stopped teetering and he bent forward and waited for the answer.

"No," said Goodnight. "I'm not lined up," and moved away. He heard the old one's odd chuckle, half wise and half foolish, and he thought: "He saw Niles and me." That was

something to remember. He reached the hotel and put his back to its corner and rolled a smoke to demonstrate his idleness. The Trail saloon was before him. The other saloon, the Texican, stood over the dust to his right; before it the newly arrived riders now stood. He lighted the smoke, his interest lifting little by little, prompted by things which he could feel but could not see; and he noticed a man ride out of the hills on a huge bay horse—a little man with a pock-marked face and a set of elbows flopping up and down to the horse's gait. The little man reached the hotel and dropped off, and then he looked around him in all four directions and his glance stopped longest on the men posted in front of the Texican. They were watching him with an equal interest and after he vanished through the hotel's doorway they disappeared into the Texican. In a few moments they returned with three others and all of them stood in a close group; softly speaking; then the group broke and the various men spread into the shadows, one man remaining in front of the saloon.

He had about finished his smoke. He dropped it and ground it out, hearing quick steps behind him. The girl who had been in the hotel's restaurant passed him and looked at him, and went on. He crossed the dust to the Trail, feeling the effect of her nearness, and looked around as he shoved the saloon's door before him; she had reached the front of a store and she had stopped, her glance on him.

He stepped into the Trail. He lifted one finger and laid his elbows on the bar and put his weight on them; and suddenly he felt fine, with a fresh current of interest running through him as he thought of the girl's face and the steady

expression in her eyes. The barkeep was a little slow in the way he brought the bottle and glass. The barkeep gave him a head-on glance. "You drank your last drink at the Texican, didn't you?"

"That's right."

"Bob," said the barkeep, calling down the room. "He drank his last drink at the Texican."

Four other men were in this saloon. One of them stood at a small window and looked out toward the Texican; the other three stood by, silent and attentive. The man at the window turned about, solid of shoulder and wearing a bristle-sharp mustache. He came forward, the other three immediately following him. He got directly in front of Goodnight, who had made a turn-about from the bar. Suspicion lay in the room. Tension held the men tight.

Bob said: "Don't you know enough to keep in your own back yard?"

"Whose yard is this?"

One of the others said: "He rode into town before supper."

"Maybe you're strange," said Bob. "Where you from?"

"That's my business, Bob."

"Is it?" said Bob, very soft. "Now maybe." He searched Goodnight with a glance that believed nothing. "And maybe you're not strange. Maybe you know what you're doin'."

"Let's all have a drink and find out what I'm doing," suggested Goodnight.

"Easy won't do it," said Bob. "If you've come over from the Texican to pull a stunt . . ." He stopped and he gave that idea some thought. He walked to the door and slightly

opened it, looking toward the Texican. He came back. "You go back there and say we'll meet anything they start."

"You go tell them," said Goodnight. He had this Bob in front of him, with the three others on his flank; they boxed him in and he saw the growing thought of action in Bob's eyes. He made a quarter turn toward the others and he noticed the instant hardening of Bob's face. "Bob," he said, "back up . . ."

A man outside yelled, long and full, and immediately afterwards a gun shouted. Bob dropped his hand toward his gun and made half a pull before Goodnight's right hand came off the bar with the whisky bottle standing there. He aimed it high, grazing it across the top of Bob's skull Bob's knees buckled and he dropped on his hands. Goodnight jumped past him, to face the others.

But the others were rushing for the street, no longer thinking of him. He gave a quick look at Bob, who rested on his hands and knees and tried to shake the fog out of his head. He reached down and seized Bob's gun lying near the bar; he bent and hooked an arm under Bob and hauled him to his feet. Sense came swiftly back to Bob. He battled down Goodnight's arm and stepped away. "Hell with you."

"If you want a fight there's one on the street. Let's both go look at it." He returned Bob's gun muzzle first and ran for the door, Bob behind him. He pushed through and stopped on the edge of the walk so abruptly that Bob ran into him and pushed him aside. Then Bob's voice called over the dust to a man—to the pock-marked man who had recently arrived in town—now slowly backing away from the Texican and away from a little group of men standing hard by the

Texican. "Come here, Slab." Bob ran past Goodnight into the dust, reached Slab and took stand with him, backing away as Slab backed away.

The old ways of violence, never changing, never different, slowly worked through this town and this little stretch of time. The group now forming at the Texican had been patiently building a trap for Slab and now were about to spring it. He saw two other men deep down the north end of the street sitting a-saddle, as though waiting a signal; he discovered Niles Brand posted at the hotel corner, looking on at all of this with his half-smiling interest, and he saw the girl come out of the store which adjoined the hotel. She walked forward to the hotel corner, glanced quickly at the men face to face over the dust, and deliberately cut between them on her way to the diagonal corner.

Bob and Slab had retreated very slowly, one reluctant pace at a time, until they were within twenty feet of the Trail. There had been three others waiting here, but now, out of one dark corner and another of this town, more men had come to place themselves in support of Bob and Slab until there were half a dozen waiting. A voice anonymous and unlocated, yelled "Hep," and suddenly the two horsemen far down the street shot forward on the dead run, headed for the intersection.

Goodnight shouldered through the men grouped together and ran for the girl who still was in the street. The pair of horsemen rushed forward. Bob's voice cut cold and confident through the night: "Run us down and you'll never live!" The sound of those two riders was dull and heavy and seemed to grow out of all proportion, and then Goodnight

lifted his glance beyond the girl, to the black end of the cross street, and saw a line of men spill out of the timbered canyon into town. He thought: "Somebody laid this trap—and somebody's going to get fooled."

He reached the girl and seized her arm and hurried her on, across the dust to the far walk. He pushed her against the wall of a building and held her there, feeling the even strike of her heart against his arm. She looked up at him and her lips drew back from her teeth in a smile. "Ah," she murmured, "nothing will happen to me. But it is nice to have your concern."

The group from the hill rushed full into the heart of the town. He heard Bob crying out, now lost somewhere in the rush of horses. A great figure of a man, blackly whiskered, led this bunch and his voice was a hammer blow against iron. "Knock them down—knock them down!" The quick, lean report of a rifle followed on his words and one rider gave a great cry and rolled like a drunk on the leather. Lifting his eyes, Goodnight saw a man in the window of the hotel's corner second-story room, both elbows on the window sill, his face hidden as he snuggled against the rifle stock and took aim.

The big bearded one shouted and pointed, and fired at the window. The horses milled, swung wildly around and came onto the walks. A horse backed full into Goodnight and lashed out with its feet and broke a board beside him, and swung again, pinning the girl against the wall. Goodnight reached up, caught the rider at the elbow and hauled him from the saddle.