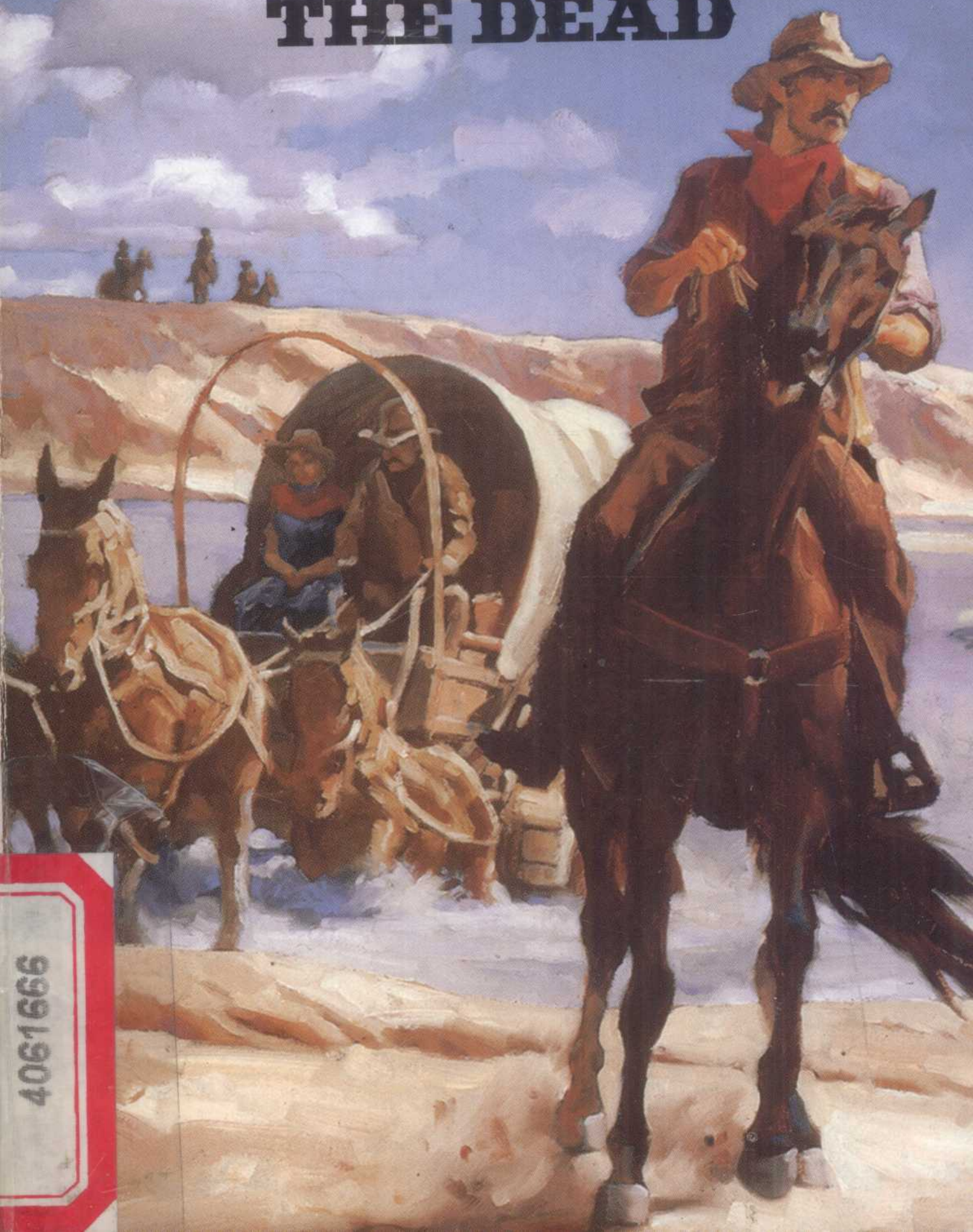


BANTAM BOOKS®

LOUIS L'AMOUR

AMERICA'S FAVORITE STORYTELLER

THE QUICK AND THE DEAD



4061666

Louis L'Amour

THE QUICK
&
AND
THE DEAD



Bantam Books

THE QUICK AND THE DEAD

A Bantam Book

PUBLISHING HISTORY

Bantam edition / November 1973

Revised Bantam edition / July 1979

Bantam reissue / June 1994

Bantam reissue / April 2002

Photograph of Louis L'Amour by John Hamilton—Globe Photos, Inc.

All rights reserved.

Copyright © 1973 by Louis & Katherine L'Amour Trust.

Cover illustration copyright © 2002 by Gregory Manchess.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 74-005015.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

For information address: Bantam Books.

If you purchased this book without a cover you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed" to the publisher and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this "stripped book."

ISBN 0-553-28084-8

Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada

Bantam Books are published by Bantam Books, a division of Random House, Inc. Its trademark, consisting of the words "Bantam Books" and the portrayal of a rooster, is Registered in U.S. Patent and Trademark Office and in other countries. Marca Registrada. Bantam Books, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

OPM 54 53 52 51 50 49 48 47 46

chapter 1

When Susanna stepped down from the wagon Duncan had the fire going, but he sat staring into the flames, forearms resting on his knees, hands hanging loose.

"Duncan?" She was a slender, graceful and unusually pretty woman. "Duncan? What is it?"

"It's this . . . all of it." His gesture took in their surroundings. "I had no right to bring you and Tom into this, no right at all."

"We discussed it, Duncan. We all took part in the decision. We all decided it was the best thing."

"I know, Susanna, but that was back east. It was one thing to sit in a comfortable living room and talk about the west, but it's something else when you are face to face with it." He looked westward, toward the open plains. "What's out there, Susanna? What are we getting into?"

"Somebody's coming, Pa." Tom was twelve. If his father had doubts, he had none.

They looked where he pointed. A rider was coming through the scattered trees toward them. He was a tall, rough-looking man on a roan horse, and he carried his rifle as if born with it.

He pulled up some fifty yards off. His eyes swept the camp. "Howdy. All right if I come in?"

There was nothing about his looks to inspire confidence but Duncan McKaskel said, "Come on in. It's all right."

He rode up, stopping across the fire from their wagon, dismounting with his horse between himself and the fire.

"Seen your smoke. Figured you might have coffee."

Rifle in hand he walked to the fire, seeing Susanna he removed his hat. "Sorry, ma'am. Don't like to butt in like this but I been ridin' all night, an' no coffee for three, four days."

"Be seated. Breakfast will soon be ready."

"I am Duncan McKaskel. My wife, Susanna, my son, Tom."

"Howdy."

He added a stick to the fire, glancing at the wagon and the deep-cut tracks. "You got quite a load there. Ain't goin' far, I guess."

"We're going west," Duncan said.

"You ain't goin' far with that load." He accepted the cup Susanna poured for him and squatted on his heels. "You got four head of mules out there... good mules. But that's too much load."

"We will manage," Duncan's tone was cool.

The stranger was, Susanna decided, very good-looking in a rough way. He wore a mustache, was unshaved, and his boots were down at the heel. All his clothes were shabby, yet there was an animal strength about him and an almost feline grace.

"Good coffee." He reached for the pot and refilled his cup. "Ever driven on the prairie? I mean where there's no road?"

"No, I haven't."

"Had a sign of rain lately. The grass is good for the stock, but it makes the pullin' mighty hard. You ain't goin' far with just four mules an' a load that heavy. An' s'posin' your mules wander off? How'll you find 'em?"

"We have riding horses."

The stranger sipped his coffee. "Not no more, you don't. They've been took."

"What's that?"

"You had you a pair of sorrels? Big, handsome horses?"

"Yes."

"Then you don't have them no longer. They been stole."

"What's that?" McKaskel came to his feet. "What do you mean?"

"A couple of fellers drove them off just before full light. Fellers from the settlement, yonder."

"I don't believe—" McKaskel started to move off, then glanced from the stranger to Susanna. He stopped. "Tom, you run and check on the horses."

Susanna was slicing bacon into the frying-pan, her face flushed from the heat. "You're a mighty handsome woman, ma'am."

"Thank you."

"When you crossed the river, yonder? You come right up through the settlement?"

"We stopped there." McKaskel decided he did not like this man.

"Figured you had. They seen your stock, and they seen your woman."

"What do you mean by that?"

"That's a mean outfit. Small caliber, but mean. They seen that heavy-loaded wagon, your wife, an' your stock. They mean to have them."

Tom came running, his face white. "Pa! The horses are gone! There's tracks...right across that sandy place toward those shacks."

McKaskel felt sick. He had known there might be trouble in coming west, but felt sure that if he minded his own business he could stay out of it. He got up slowly, then went to the wagon for his rifle.

"Duncan . . . ?" Susanna was frightened.

"I must have those horses. I'll just walk over and see if I can find them."

The stranger picked two slices of bacon from the skillet. Without looking up he said, "You ever kill a man, McKaskel?"

"Kill a man?" McKaskel was startled. "Why, no. I haven't."

"You walk into that settlement with that gun an' you better figure on it."

"I don't think—"

"Mister, folks say this country is hell on horses an' women. Well, it's hell on tenderfeet, too. You walk into that place without bein' ready to kill an' your wife'll be a widow before the hour's gone."

"That's nonsense. I'll go to the law."

"Ain't none. Folks out here generally make their own."

"I can use this rifle. I've killed a dozen deer—"

"Was the deer shootin' back at you? Mister, that outfit figure on you comin' in. They want you to. Why do you s'pose they left all them tracks? They figure to kill you, Mister."

"What?"

"They seen your woman. That gang figures your stock and your wagonload are worth somethin'. They took your horses so you'll come lookin'. They want you to come armed. Nobody will ever ask questions, but if they do they'll just say you came in there a-frettin' and a-steamin' and made a fight, so they just had to kill you."

"So what am I to do? Let them steal my horses?"

"Uh-uh. You just go in there with your eyes open, figurin' you're goin' to have to kill somebody. You spot you a big fat man, an' when you start talkin' you just sort of careless-like get your rifle pointed at him. Then you tell them to trot out your horses."

"Duncan? Don't do it. It isn't worth it. Not for two horses."

"We raised those horses, Susanna, and they belong to us. I shall go after them."

"He's got to try, ma'am. If he don't go in they'll foller after an' steal your mules."

"How do you know so much about it?" Susanna demanded. "How do we know you are not one of them?"

His grin was sly, amused. "You don't, ma'am."

"I'm going in," McKaskel said, again.

"You better . . . while the notion's on you. You just go right on in, an' don't you worry none about your woman, here. Anything happens to you an' I'll take care of her. I'll do just that."

"Now, see here!"

"You got it to do, McKaskel. You better have at it."

McKaskel hesitated, glancing from one to the other.

"Duncan," Susanna said quietly, "if it must be done, do it, and do not worry about me. I will be all right."

"Pa? Can I go with you? I can shoot!"

"You stay with your mother."

He took up his rifle and strode out of camp. His mouth was dry and he was frightened. Only three hundred yards to the shacks, and he did not know whether he wished it were nearer or farther. He had seen the men sitting on the saloon porch as he and his family came through and he had been glad to leave them behind.

He thought of his rifle. It was a good one, and he could shoot straight, but he had never shot at a man. Could he do it now? And that stranger back there? He had left his wife and son with him, and how did he know that the stranger was not worse than any of those in the settlement?

The shacks were there, right in front of him. The horses were there, too, tied right to the rail in front of the saloon. No attempt had been made to conceal them. They were a challenge, an affront.

He remembered how they had looked at Susanna. He had

planned to drive right out on the prairie, but he had hesitated, for once they left the river and its rim of trees they had left all behind, they were committed to something he now began to see as sheer folly.

Back east, with the west far, far away, it had been a topic of conversation, but the talk had continued until they actually packed up and moved west.

Those men were waiting. He could see two men seated on a rough bench, another standing in the door, and they had seen him coming. He could not turn back now. They would know he was afraid.

The stranger was right. They planned to kill him.

How? It was all so obvious. The horses were there, he had only to walk in, state his ownership and bring them away.

That was all . . . or was it?

Back at the fire the stranger emptied his cup. Susanna's features were white and strained. "Well," the stranger said, "you better make your plans. He went in an' I wouldn't give a busted trace-chain for his chances. You're goin' to be a widow, ma'am. Now I ain't much, but—"

"You're going to let him be killed?"

"None of my affair."

"Help him."

"You his woman?"

"We are married."

"Wasn't what I asked. I wanted to know if you was his woman? It ain't always the same thing."

"I am his woman and am proud to be so. He is a fine man. And I am a decent woman."

Lazily, he got to his feet and moved to his horse. "I'll just mosey on in an' see the fun." He swung into the saddle. "Of course, if he gets himself killed, you got you a choice . . . me or them."

"I shall go back home." Susanna replied. "I am sure Tom and I could get along."

He grinned at her and swung his horse. As soon as he emerged from the trees he could see McKaskel walking into the street. The stranger turned his horse to use the cover of the trees and came up to the town at an angle from which he could not be seen as he watched McKaskel. Drawing up in the shade of the trees, he drew his rifle from its scabbard.

There really was not much he could do. So much would depend on how the game was played.

He could hear McKaskel speaking. "I see you found my horses. Thank you for holding them for me."

The thin man who answered him seemed amused. "Your horses, you say? Now how would we know that? Those horses come driftin' in, an' my boys tied them up. We figure to keep them."

"They belong to me. I have their papers."

The man grinned lazily, a taunting grin. "Papers? Now, ain't that too bad? I cain't read, Mister. I just cain't make out them words . . . neither can my boy."

McKaskel remembered what the stranger had said. The fat man was lounging in the doorway. McKaskel shifted his feet slightly, and managed to turn the muzzle of his gun, an easy, natural movement, but suddenly it was there, covering the fat man.

"I shall take my horses. I am sure you will thank your son for me, but tell them we reared these horses and we must keep them. We intend to keep them."

He stepped toward the horses.

The thin man spat lazily. "Mister, was you to untie them horses somebody might get the idea you was tryin' to steal them. You ready to get yourself shot?"

McKaskel kept his eyes on the fat man as he spoke to the thin one. "Even if I was to get shot I'd still pull this trigger, and I couldn't miss that man standing in the door."

The rifle tilted ever so little, and he kept the fat man covered as he pulled the string to untie the knot.

"Don't nobody do nothin' foolish!" The fat man shouted the words. "Let 'im go!"

Holding the rifle ready, Duncan McKaskel put a foot in the stirrup and swung to the saddle. Turning his horse he untied the second horse, keeping his rifle in position as he did so.

He backed the horses into the street, keeping the rifle on the fat man, but as he turned the horses his rifle swung off target and on the instant the fat man disappeared into the saloon and the men on the porch threw themselves right and left, one of them scrambling toward the open door.

There were two shots.

Duncan McKaskel heard them both, and in an instant of stark panic he realized he had been perfectly set up, the horses and the men on the porch drawing his full attention while the real danger lay behind him.

He felt the *whift* of the bullet past his cheek at the instant he heard the ugly bark of two shots, the sound of one shot almost lost in the sound of the other.

Turning his horse sharply to face the street, his rifle up, he found the street empty. The men were gone from the porch, but from the loft door of the barn opposite the saloon hung the body of a man, his head and one arm visible.

In the dappled shadow of the trees near the entrance to the street was the stranger, holding a rifle in his hand.

"Just back off easy now, and if anything moves, shoot."

Rifle on the street, McKaskel rode diagonally away from town, keeping his rifle on target. Turning sharply then, he trotted his horse away under cover of the trees. Suddenly he was shaking all over, and his stomach felt empty and sick.

"I want to get out of here," he said aloud. "I want to get out right now."

The stranger was gone. It had been he who shot the man in the loft door.

chapter 2

Susanna was standing out from the trees, shading her eyes toward the town. When she saw him coming she walked back to the fire. She edged the coffee toward the flames, then turned toward Tom.

"Better bring up the mules, Tom. Water them and bring them up."

Reluctantly, the boy turned away. He had seen his father coming and longed to hear what happened.

Duncan McKaskel rode into the clearing leading the other sorrel. "We must go now."

"Tom's gone for the mules. You had better eat something."

"No . . . just coffee."

He accepted the cup, took a swallow, then looked at her, his face gray with shock. "Susanna, they were ready for me. I was thinking of the horses and the men on the porch, and there was a man in the loft behind me with a rifle."

"What happened?"

"That man . . . the one who had coffee here. He killed the man in the loft."

"You're alive, Duncan. It's all right."

"A man is dead. He was killed because of me."

"He was killed because he was a thief. When a man takes a gun in his hand against other men he must expect to be killed. He becomes the enemy of all men when he breaks the laws of society."

They were an hour out upon the plains and at least three miles on the road before the subject came up again. "We are not finished with them, Susanna. I believe they will follow us."

"All right." She feigned composure for she did not want him to see her fear. She must show her faith in him. "You know what to expect now."

"Yes... yes, I do. But I've never killed a man, Susanna, and I don't want to."

"Yet if that man had not been killed, they would have killed you. Tom and I would have been alone."

"Or with that man."

"I'd go home, Duncan. I'd go back and try to get a job teaching school. After all, I have much more education than most women."

"Education." He shook his head. "Susanna, I have always been proud of my education but I am beginning to wonder if we must not begin all over. It is a different time, a different world out here."

The river and the horizon seemed to melt into one. There was no line of demarkation anywhere, only the long grass bending in silver ripples like waves before the wind, and it was empty, like the sky.

The horses were tied behind the wagon and Tom rode at the tail-gate where he could watch them and the trail behind. The mules were in good shape but they seemed to be making harder work of it than they should. Several times he drew up to let them rest, worried at each stop for fear of pursuit. Horsemen could overtake them in no time, and he remembered what that rider had said about his wagon being loaded too heavily.

During one of the stops he walked behind the wagon and was shocked to see how deeply the wheels were cutting into the turf. It *was* a heavy load, and they had far to go.

Susanna's thoughts returned to that man. Ignorant obviously, and a brute...yet he had saved her husband's life at some risk to his own and with nothing to gain. She thought of it as a chivalrous act, something she found difficulty in associating with ignorance.

Suppose Duncan had been killed? What would she have done?

The thought frightened her. To return meant to go back through that town...no, not that. She would have to drive up river or down and try to find another crossing. But there might be other people like that back there.

She glanced curiously at her husband. He was staring at the empty plains, frowning slightly. Before they left the wagon train because of the outbreak of cholera she had heard stories of what the vast plains did to people. Men had gone insane from that appalling emptiness, unable to cope with such a change.

Duncan had been shaken by what had happened, finding it hard to believe there could not have been some other way, some better way. She knew how he felt, or thought she did.

Duncan was a gentleman, by breeding as well as education. His family was an old Scottish-English family as was her own. In America they had produced clergymen, physicians, teachers, and statesmen as well as planters. Some branches of the family had wealth, unfortunately, theirs did not.

Too proud to live in genteel poverty they had chosen to go west. They had no desire to seek gold, for to them wealth lay in the ownership of land and in its cultivation. They wished to find a green valley where they could sink roots and live out their lives.

Now they were alone, and until now she had not realized what loneliness meant, nor what it had meant to live in an

ordered, law-abiding community. There had been occasional thefts, and she could remember a murder once, some years before, but the law had been there, and public opinion, with its protective shield of what was accepted and what was not.

There had been so many restraints, legal and social, between them and the savagery that lay innate in so many people. Out here the bars were down. There was no such restraint... not yet.

Duncan drew up again. "Got to rest the mules again. It's hard on them, with no proper trail."

"Do you think that man was right? Are we loaded too heavily?"

Duncan shook his head, but his eyes did not meet hers. "What could we get rid of? Some of those things belonged to your family."

"Yes, yes, I know." The thought stayed with her. Did she really need them? Yet the thought of leaving her things behind gave her a pang. She would need furniture when they made a new home and it would be nice to have them then.

If they ever got there.

"I wonder where he is?" she asked suddenly.

"Who?" he asked, but he knew the answer.

He was thinking that a blind man could follow their deep-cut tracks, and it was now two hours until noon and they had come nine miles. It was good time... or would have been had they not been so eager to put distance between them and the river.

His eyes swept the country... vast, empty, still. Above them a buzzard soared. How like a speck they must seem to him, a speck in this tremendous ocean of grass. He started the team again but he did not ride the wagon. He walked beside it.

Noon came and passed, but nobody mentioned hunger. Nor was there any place to stop. It was all the same, only the grass, the sky, and the soft wind.

At mid-afternoon they came up to a buffalo wallow. There was water in it, collected from the rains. He unharnessed the team and led them to water, then let them graze for an hour before hitching up again.

The sun was down before they reached Black Jack Creek, and he drove the team through and up the other side, then along the creek for a short distance before stopping.

Duncan found a flat place and started to gather wood. When he put the wood down to start a fire, a voice said, "Don't do that. There's a better place down here."

He turned sharply, realizing he had left his gun in the wagon, and cursing himself for a fool.

The stranger was standing under the edge of the trees, watching him.

"Where'd you come from?" he demanded.

"Been waitin' for you all. I got no coffee, and after that shootin' I didn't figure to ride into town and buy none."

There was a fold in the ground where a trickle of a spring ran down to the creek. On a flat bench beside the spring he had built a small fire. "Can't see it until you're close up," he explained. "No use showin' 'em where you are."

"Do you think they'll come?"

"Uh-huh... couple, maybe three hours from now. They'll ride out, scout around, locate your wagon. Maybe they'll run off your stock."

"You don't seem very worried about it."

"Ain't my stock."

"We haven't thanked you." Susanna had come up behind them. "You saved my husband's life."

"It wasn't nothing. I never liked that Ike Mantle, no way."

She was shocked. "You *knew* him?"

"Oh, sure! He was meaner'n all get-out. His brother Purdy ... now he's a different kind. He'll shoot you face to face."

He glanced at her. "If'n you're figurin' on eatin', you better get at it. Cook what you got to, then dowse the fire an' set back."

She glanced at him, irritated by his manner.

"Don't take no offense at me, ma'am. I can chew on some jerky an' make out, but that man of yours and the boy, they'll need some cookin', an' you, too, for that matter."

He looked her up and down. "Although you surely do shape up, ma'am. You shape up mighty purty."

"Sir," McKaskel spoke coolly, "you saved my life and you have been very helpful, but I do not like your comments to my wife."

"Well, now." He looked astonished. "You mean you don't think she's got a nice shape? Look at her agin that light. Now—"

"The lady is my wife. I do think her beautiful, but I do not think it is the proper thing to—"

"Think she'll get big headed? Well, maybe so. But she is surely purty. I always did figure it was the right thing to tell either a horse or a woman when they shape up fine. And atop of that she makes good coffee."

Duncan was exasperated, and Susanna had to turn her back so that he could not see her smiling. It was amusing. After all, in his own way he was being complimentary.

When they had eaten, the fire was put out by pulling back the unburned ends of the sticks and thrusting them into the earth to smother the few sparks. The coals that remained would soon die down.

"Take those horses over there behind that fallen tree," he suggested, "an' bed down back yonder. You'll have to keep watch, because sure as shootin', they'll find you."

When Duncan McKaskel led the mules toward the hollow behind the tree, Susanna took the stranger's cup and filled it again. "There's no use throwing the coffee out," she said.

She stopped, holding the pot and looking down at him as he