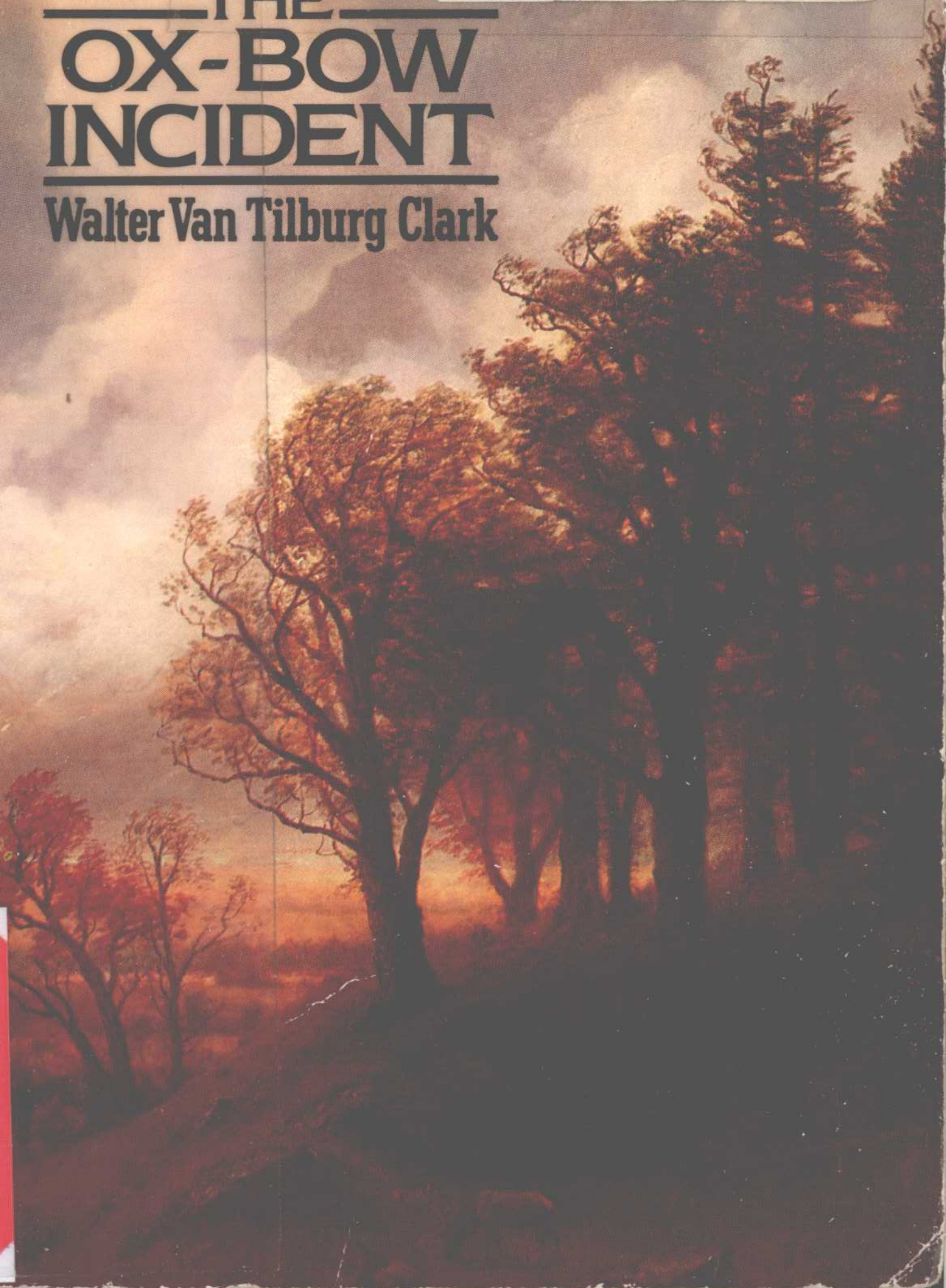


*Signet Classic*



# **THE OX-BOW INCIDENT**

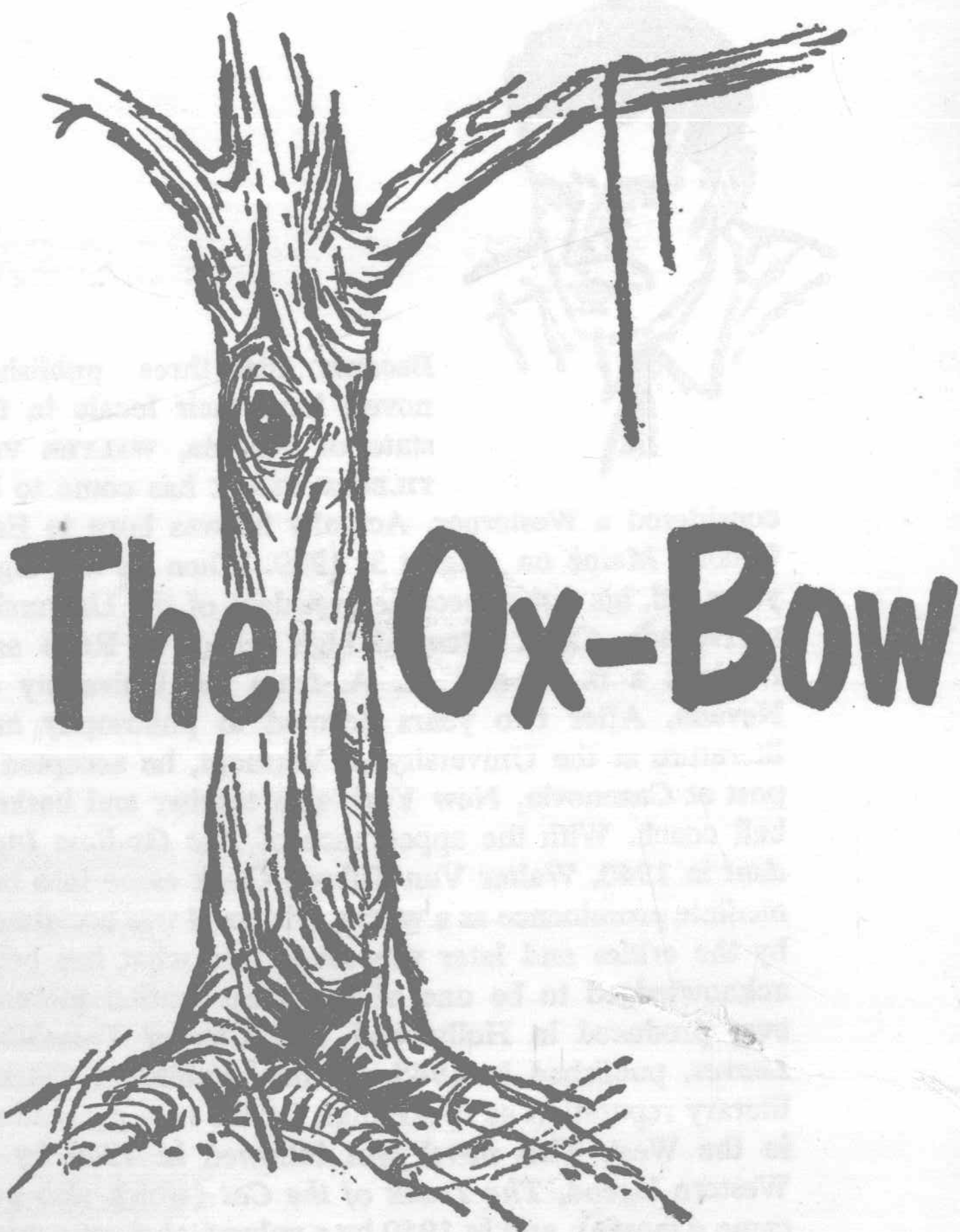
**Walter Van Tilburg Clark**







Because his three published novels have their locale in the state of Nevada, **WALTER VAN TILBURG CLARK** has come to be considered a Westerner. Actually he was born in East Orland, Maine on August 3, 1909. When he was eight years old, his father became president of the University of Nevada. Clark attended high school in Reno and received a B. A. and M. A. from the University of Nevada. After two years devoted to philosophy and literature at the University of Vermont, he accepted a post at Cazenovia, New York as a teacher and basketball coach. With the appearance of *The Ox-Bow Incident* in 1940, Walter Van Tilburg Clark came into immediate prominence as a writer. His novel was acclaimed by the critics and later was made into what has been acknowledged to be one of the finest motion pictures ever produced in Hollywood. *The City of Trembling Leaves*, published in 1945, further established Clark's literary reputation as spokesman for the new generation in the West. This novel was followed in 1949 by a Western legend, *The Track of the Cat* (which also became a movie), and in 1950 by a volume of short stories entitled *The Watchful Gods*. Mr. Clark died in 1971.



*With an Afterword by Walter Prescott Webb*

**WALTER VAN TILBURG CLARK**

# **Incident**



**A SIGNET CLASSIC**

## **SIGNET CLASSIC**

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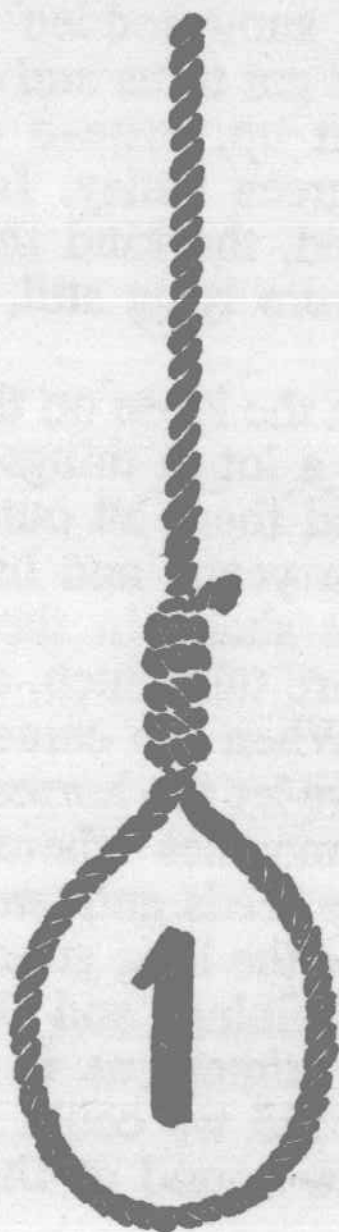
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Gil and I crossed the eastern divide about two by the sun. We pulled up for a look at the little town in the big valley and the mountains on the other side, with the crest of the Sierra showing faintly beyond like the rim of a day moon. We didn't look as long as we do sometimes; after winter range, we were excited about getting back to town. When the horses had stopped trembling from the last climb, Gil took off his sombrero, pushed his sweaty hair back with the same hand, and returned the sombrero, the way he did when something was going to happen. We reined to the right and went slowly down the steep stage road. It was a switch-back road, gutted by the run-off of the winter storms, and with brush beginning to grow up in it again since the stage had stopped running. In the pockets under the red earth banks, where the wind was cut off, the spring sun was hot as summer, and the air was full of a hot, melting pine smell. Rivulets of water trickled down shining on the sides of the cuts. The jays screeched in the trees

and flashed through the sunlight in the clearings in swift, long dips. Squirrels and chipmunks chattered in the brush and along the tops of snow-sodden logs. On the outside turns, though, the wind got to us and dried the sweat under our shirts and brought up, instead of the hot resin, the smell of the marshy green valley. In the west the heads of a few clouds showed, the kind that come up with the early heat, but they were lying still, and over us the sky was clear and deep.

It was good to be on the loose on that kind of a day, but winter range stores up a lot of things in a man, and spring roundup hadn't worked them all out. Gil and I had been riding together for five years, and had the habit, but just the two of us in that shack in the snow had made us cautious. We didn't dare talk much, and we wanted to feel easy together again. When we came onto the last gentle slope into the valley, we let the horses out and loped across the flat between the marshes where the red-wing black-birds were bobbing the reeds and twanging. Out in the big meadows on both sides the long grass was bending in rows under the wind and shining, and then being let upright again and darkening, almost as if a cloud shadow had crossed it. With the wind we could hear the cows lowing in the north, a mellow sound at that distance, like little horns.

It was about three when we rode into Bridger's Wells, past the boarded-up church on the right, with its white paint half cracked off, and the houses back under the cottonwoods, or between rows of flickering poplars, every third or fourth one dead and leafless. Most of the yards were just let run to long grass, and the buildings were log or unpainted board, but there were a few brick houses, and a few of painted clapboards with gimcracks around the veranda rails. Around them the grass was cut, and lilac bushes were planted in the shade. There were big purple cones of blossom on them. Already Bridger's Wells was losing its stage-stop look and beginning to settle into a half-empty village of the kind that hangs on sometimes where all the real work is spread out on the land around it, and most of the places take care of themselves.

Besides the houses on the main street and the cross street that ran out into a lane to the ranches at the north and south ends, there wasn't much to Bridger's Wells:



Arthur Davies' general store, the land and mining claims office, Canby's saloon, the long, sagging Bridger Inn, with its double-decker porch, and the Union Church, square and bare as a New England meeting house, and set out on the west edge of town, as if it wanted to get as far from the other church as it could without being left alone.

The street was nearly dried, though with wagon ruts hardened in it, so you could see how the teams had slithered and plowed in it. It drummed hard when we touched up to come in right. After all the thinking we'd done about it, the place looked dead as a Piute graveyard. There were a few horses switching at the tie rails in front of the inn and Canby's, but only one man in sight. That was Monty Smith, a big, soft-bellied, dirty fellow, with matted, gray streaked hair down to his shoulders and a gray, half-shaved beard with strawberry patches showing through, sore and itchy. Monty had been a kind of half-hearted rider once, but now he was the town bum, and kept balanced between begging and a conceited, nagging humor that made people afraid of him. Nobody liked him, but he was a tradition they'd have missed. Monty was leaning against a post of the arcade in front of Canby's, picking his teeth with a splinter and spitting. He looked us over out of his small, reddened eyes, nodded as if he was thinking of something else, and looked away again. We didn't see him. We knew that soon enough he'd be in to sponge on us. The notion made Gil sore, I guess, because he pulled in so sudden I had to rein Blue Boy around sharp to keep from climbing him.

"Take it easy," I told him.

He didn't say anything. We swung down, tied up, crossed the boardwalk, our boots knocking loudly, and went up the three steps to the high, narrow double door with the frosted glass panels that had Canby's name on them, inside two wreaths. Smith was watching us, and we went in without looking around.

It was dark and cool inside, and smelled of stale beer and tobacco. There was sawdust on the floor, the bar along one side and four green-covered tables down the other. There were the same old pictures on the wall too. Up back of the bar a big, grimy oil painting in a ponderous gilded frame of fruits and musical instruments showing



a woman who was no girl any longer, but had a heavy belly and thighs and breasts, stretched out on a couch pretending to play with an ugly bird on her wrist, but really encouraging a man who was sneaking up on her from a background so dark you could see only his little, white face. The woman had a fold of blue cloth between her legs and up over one hip. I'd been around back once, and knew the picture had a little brass plate which said, dryly, *Woman with Parrot*, but Canby called it "The Bitching Hour." On the other wall was a huge, yellowish print, like a map, of a reception at the Crystal in Virginia City. On it President Grant and a lot of senators, generals, editors and other celebrities were posed around so you could get a good, full-length view of each. The figures were numbered, and underneath was a list, telling you who they all were. Then there was a bright-colored print of a bleached Indian princess in front of a waterfall, a big painting of a stagecoach coming in, the horses all very smooth, round bellied and with little thin legs all in step and all off the ground, and an oval, black and white picture of the heads of three white horses, all wild eyed and their manes flying.

Four men were playing poker at a back table with a lamp over them. I didn't know any of the men. They looked as if they'd been playing a long time, hunched down to their work, with no life showing except in the slits of their eyes or a hand which one of them moved once in a while to pick up his glass or a silver dollar from his pile, or to throw out a card. They were quiet.

Canby was behind his bar, a tall, thin, take-your-time kind of man with seedy gray hair combed to cover a bald spot. All Canby's bones were big and heavy, and those in his wrists were knobby and red. His arms were so long that he could sit on the back counter, where his glasses and bottles were arranged, and mop the bar. It was clean and dry now, but he mopped it while he waited for us. He looked at us, first one and then the other of us, but didn't say anything. He had watery, pale blue eyes, such as alcoholic old men sometimes have, but not weak, but hard and uninterested. They suited the veined, pitted, but tight-to-the-bone look of his face, which always seemed too large, the nose too large, the mouth too large, the cheekbones and black eyebrows too prominent. I wondered

again where he'd come from. He looked like a man who knew he'd been somebody. Nobody ever found out, that I know of. He drank a lot, but he didn't talk except to pass the time of day, and he always kept that quiet, who-the-hell-are-you look.

"Well?" he said, when we just stood looking from the Bitch to the bottles.

Gil pushed his hat back so his red, curly hair showed, and folded his arms on the bar, and kept looking up at the Bitch. Gil has a big, pale, freckled face that won't darken and never shows any expression except in the eyes, and then only temper. His nose has been broken three times, and his mouth is thick and straight. He's a quick, but not a grudgy kind of fighter, and always talks as if he had a little edge, which is his kind of humor. It was Canby's kind too.

"That guy," said Gil, still looking at the picture, "is awful slow getting there."

Canby didn't look at the picture, but at Gil. "I feel sorry for him," he said. "Always in reach and never able to make it."

They said something like this every time we came in. It was a ritual, Gil always taking the side of the woman with the parrot, and Canby always defending the man. Canby could deliver quite a lecture on the mean nature of the woman with the parrot.

"I got a feeling she could do better," Gil said.

"You're boasting," Canby told him, and then said again, "Well?"

"Don't rush me," Gil said.

"Take your time," Canby said.

"It don't look to me," Gil said, "like you was so rushed you couldn't wait!"

"It's not that. I hate to see a man who can't make up his mind."

"What do you care?"

"I either have to put them to bed or listen to their troubles, depending on what they drink," Canby said. His mouth only opened a slit when he talked, and the words came out as if he enjoyed them, but had to lift a weight to get them started.

"I ain't lookin' for either sleep or comfortin'," Gil said. "And if I was, I wouldn't come here for it."



"I feel better," said Canby. "What'll you have? Whisky?"

"What have you got?"

"Whisky."

"Did you ever know such a guy?" Gil said to me. "All this time I'm thinkin', and all he's got's whisky."

"And that's rotten, ain't it?" he asked Canby.

"Rotten," Canby agreed.

"Two glasses and a bottle," Gil said.

Canby set them out in front of us and uncorked the bottle.

"I wouldn't have the heart to open any of this other stuff," Canby said, taking a bottle of wine down and polishing it with his cloth. "I've had it ever since I was a boy; same bottles."

We put our fingers around the tops of the glasses, and Gil poured us one apiece, and we took them down. It was raw, and made the eyes water after being dry so long. We hadn't had a drop since Christmas.

"First time in?" Canby asked.

"Yessir," Gil said with pleasure. Canby shook his head.

"What's the matter?" Gil asked him.

Canby looked at me. "Do you always have this much trouble with him?" You always felt Canby was grinning at you, though his face stayed as set as an old deacon's.

"More, mostly," I said, and told him about the fight we'd had, which Gil had finished by knocking me across the red-hot stove. We drank slowly while we talked, and Gil listened politely, as if I were telling a dull story about somebody else. "It was just being cooped up together so long," I finished, remembering the one-room shack with the snow piled up to the window ledge and more of it coming, blowing against the glass like sand; the lonely sound of the wind, and Gil and I at opposite ends of the room, with two lamps burning, except for a truce at meal times. "It got so he wouldn't even ride with me. We took turns tailing up and feeding."

"He's naturally mean," Canby said. "You can tell that."

"A man needs exercise," Gil said. "He's not much of a fighter, but there wasn't anything else handy." He poured us another. "Besides, he started them all."

"Like hell I did," I said. "Do we look like I'd start them?" I asked Canby. I'm as tall as Gil is, but flat and



thin, while Gil is built like a bull; his hands are twice as big as mine. Gil looks like a fighter too, with a long heavy chin and those angular eyes with a challenging stare in them. I could see myself in the mirror under the *Woman with a Parrot*. My face was burned dark as old leather already, but it's thin, with big eyes.

"You should have heard the things he said," Gil told Canby.

"By January," I put in, "he'd only talk about one thing, women. And even then he wouldn't be general. He kept telling the same stories about himself and the same women."

"Well, he wouldn't talk," Gil said, "and somebody had to. He'd sit there reading his old books like he had a lesson to learn, or writing all the time, scratch, scratch, scratch. It got on my nerves. Then I'd try to sing, and he'd get nasty. Once he went to the door, in the middle of a good song too, and stood there like he was listening for something, and all the time the wind blowing in, and thirty below outside. When I asked him what the matter was, he said nothing, he was just listening to the steers bawling; they sounded so good."

"Gil has a fine voice," I said, "but he only knows three songs, all with the same tune."

We kept on talking off our edge, Canby putting in a word now and then to keep us going, until Monty Smith came in. He started to say something to Gil, but Gil just looked at him, and Monty came over on my side and edged up to be friendly, with his back to the bar, as though it didn't mean a thing to him. I can't look a man down the way Gil can, so I just didn't look at him and didn't answer. I put a half dollar out on the bar, Canby poured out a couple of drinks, and Smith took them. He tried to be polite about it, saying, "Here's mud in your eye," and I felt mean to make him feel so much like a beggar. But Gil gave me the elbow, and I didn't say anything. Smith hung around for a minute or two, and then went out, hitching his belt in the doorway to get his conceit back.

When the door was closed Canby said, "Now that you two are peaceable again, what's on your mind?" He was talking to Gil.

"Does something have to be on my mind?" Gil asked.

"When you talk that long just being unsociable," said Canby, filling the glasses again, "yes." Gil turned his glass around and didn't say anything.

"What's he so bashful about?" Canby asked me.

"He wants to know if his girl is still in town," I told him.

"His girl?" said Canby, mopping a wet place and stooping to put the empty bottle under the bar.

"Take it easy," Gil said. He stopped turning his glass.

"If you mean Rose Mapen," Canby said, straightening up, "no. She went to Frisco the first stage out this spring."

Gil stood looking at him.

"It's a fact," Canby said.

"Hell," Gil said. He finished his drink in a toss. "Christ, what a town," he said furiously. His eyes were watering, he felt so bad about missing it.

"Have a drink," Canby said, opening another bottle, "but don't get drunk while you're feeling like that. The only unmarried woman I know of in town is eighty-two, blind and a Piute. She's got everything."

He poured another for each of us, and took one himself. You could see it tickled him that Gil had given himself away like that. But Gil was really feeling bad. All winter he'd talked about Rose Mapen, until I'd been sick of her. I thought she was a tart anyway. But Gil had dreamed out loud about buying a ranch and settling.

"It's my guess the married women ran her out," Canby said.

"Yeh?" Gil said.

"Oh, no tar and feathers; no rails. They just righteously made her uncomfortable. Not that she ever did anything; but they couldn't get over being afraid she would. Most of the men were afraid to be seen talking to her, even the unmarried ones. The place is too small."

Gil kept looking at him, but didn't say anything, and didn't look so personal. It's queer how deeply a careless guy like Gil can be cut when he does take anything seriously.

"Anything come of this gold they were talking about last fall?" I asked Canby.

"Do I look it?" he asked.

"No," he went on. "A couple of young fellows from Sacramento found loose gold in Belcher's Creek, up at



the north end, and traced it down to a pocket. They got several thousand, I guess, but there was no lode. A lot of claims were staked, but nobody found anything, and it was too near winter for a real boom to get started." He looked at me with that malicious grin in his eyes. "Not even enough to get more than two or three women in, and they left before the pass was closed."

"It's nothing to me," I lied.

"What is there to do in this town, anyway?" Gil demanded.

"Unless you aim to get in line and woo Drew's daughter," Canby began.

"We don't," I informed him.

"No," he agreed. "Well, then, you have five choices: eat, sleep, drink, play poker or fight. Or you can shoot some pool. There's a new table in the back room."

"That's just great," Gil said.

The door opened, and Moore, Drew's foreman, came in. Moore was past forty and getting fat so his belt hung under his belly. He looked even older than he was, his face being heavily lined and sallow and his hair streaked with gray, with one white patch, like ash, on the back of his head. Moore was really a sick man, though he wouldn't stand for having anybody ask how he felt. He was past any fancy riding now, and even an ordinary day's work in the saddle would tire him out so his face got pasty. He had a lot of pain, I guess; his insides were all shot from staying at broncho busting too long. But he'd been a great rider once, one of the best, and he was still worth his salt. He knew horses and cattle and country as he knew his own mind, which was thoroughly. His eyes were still quiet and sure, and he never blew off or got absent-minded, no matter how bad he felt. Only I suspected he hadn't saved any money, any more than the rest of us did, and was really scared he wouldn't be fit to work much longer. He was a way more than average short on those questions about how he felt.

He came over to the bar, said hello to us, and threw a silver dollar onto the bar, nodding at Canby. Canby poured him a glass, finger around, and he downed it. Canby filled him another, which he let sit while he rolled a cigarette and licked it into shape.

"I see Risley's still around," Canby said. Moore nodded.



Risley was the sheriff for this territory, but he wasn't often closer than Reno, except on special call. I could see Moore didn't want to talk about it, hadn't liked Canby's mentioning Risley in front of us. But I was curious.

"There was talk about rustling last fall, wasn't there?" I asked Moore.

"Some," he said. He sucked two little streams of smoke up his nostrils and drank half his whisky before he let the smoke out. When it came out there wasn't much of it, and that thin. He didn't look at me, but at the three rows of dark bottles behind Canby. Canby wiped the dry bar again. He was ashamed. It was all right for Moore, but I didn't like Canby acting at if we were outsiders. Neither did Gil.

"Do they know anything about it?" he asked Moore. "Is that why Risley's out here?"

Moore finished his whisky, and nodded at the glass, which Canby filled up a third time. "No, we don't know anything, and that's why he's here," he said. He put his change in his pocket, and took his whisky over to the table by the front window. He sat down with his back to us, so Canby could talk.

"It's getting touchy, huh?" Gil said.

"They don't like to talk about it," Canby said, "except with fellows they sleep with."

"It's a long way from any border," he said after a minute, "and everybody in the valley would know if there was a stranger around."

"And there isn't?" I asked.

"There hasn't been, that knew cattle," said Canby, sitting back up on the counter, "except you two."

"That's not funny," Gil told him, and set his glass down very quietly.

"Now who's touchy?" Canby asked him. He was really grinning.

"You're talking about my business," Gil said. "Stick to my pleasures."

"Sure," Canby said. "I just thought I'd let you know how you stand."

"Listen," Gil said, taking his hands down from the bar.

"Take a drink of water, Gil," I said. And to Canby, "He's had five whiskies, and he's sore about Rose." I

didn't really believe Gil would fight Canby, but I wasn't sure after his disappointment. Whenever Gil gets low in spirit, or confused in his mind, he doesn't feel right again until he's had a fight. It doesn't matter whether he wins or not, if it's a good fight he feels fine again afterward. But he usually wins.

"And you keep your mouth shut about Rose, see?" Gil told me. He had turned around so he was facing right at me, and I could tell by his eyes he was a little drunk already.

"All right, Gil," I reassured him. "All right. But you don't want to go pitching into your best friends on account of a little joke, do you? You can take a joke, can't you, Gil?"

"Sure I can take a joke," he argued. "Who says I can't take a joke?" He stared at us. We kept quiet. "Sure I can take a joke," he said again, but then turned back to his drink. "Some jokes though," he said, after a swallow, but then took another swallow, and let it go at that. I looked at Canby and bent my head a little toward Gil. Canby nodded.

"No offense meant, Carter," he said, and filled Gil's glass again, pouring slowly, as if he were doing it very carefully for somebody he thought a lot of.

"It's all right, it's all right," Gil said; "forget it."

Canby put two plates on the bar, and then got some hard bread and dried beef from under the counter and put them on the plates. Gil looked at them.

"And I don't need any of your leftovers to sober me up, either," he said.

"Just as you like," Canby said. "It's a long time since lunch. I just thought you might be hungry." He put some strong cheese on the plates too, and then took some cheese and a bottle over to Moore at the table. He stood by Moore, talking to him for a while. I was glad neither of them laughed.

I ate some of the dry food and cheese. It tasted good, now that I was wet down. We'd had a long ride, and nothing to eat since before daybreak. Finally Gil began to eat too, at first as though he weren't thinking about it, but just picking at it absent-mindedly, then without pretense.



"Are they sure about this rustling?" I asked Canby when he came back.

"Sure enough," he said. "They thought they'd lost some last fall, but with this range shut in the way it is by the mountains, they'd been kind of careless in the tally, and couldn't be too sure. Only Bartlett was sure. He doesn't run so many anyway, and his count was over a hundred short. He started some talk that might have made trouble at home, but Drew got that straightened out, and had them take another tally, a close one. During the winter they even checked by the head on the cows that were expected to calve this spring. Then, it was about three weeks ago now, more than that, a month, I guess, Kinkaid, who was doing the snow riding for Drew, got suspicious. He thought one of the bunches that had wintered mostly at the south end was thinning out more than the thaw explained. He and Farnley kept an eye out. They even rode nights some. Just before roundup they found a small herd trail, and signs of shod horses, in the south draw. They lost them over in the Antelope, where there'd been a new fall of snow. But in the Antelope, in a ravine west of the draw, they found a kind of lean-to shelter, and the ashes of several fires that had been built under a ledge to keep the smoke down. They figured about thirty head, and four riders."

"And the count came short this spring?"

"Way short," Canby said. "Nearly six hundred head, counting calves."

"Six hundred?" I said, only half believing it.

"That's right," Canby said. "They tallied twice, and with everybody there."

"God," Gil said.

"So they're touchy," said Canby.

"Did everybody lose?" I asked after a minute.

"Drew was heaviest, but everybody lost."

"But they would, wouldn't they, with that kind of a job," Gil said angrily.

"The way you say," Canby agreed.

We could see how it was, now, and we didn't feel too good being off our range. Not when they'd been thinking about it all year.

"What's Risley doing here? Have they got a lead?" Gil asked.