

For answer the robber unbuckled his belt and let it fall to the ground.

"Take my gun," he said; "do you suppose I daren't trust you seh?"

A servant had brought the brandy and McCalmont rubbed a little on his son's face, then poured a few drops between his teeth. Presently the lad stirred, moaning a little.

"Let's take him to the house," said I.

"No, Mistah Chalkeye Davies," answered the robber, "not until this gentleman knows who he's asking to dinner. Here Curly," he whispered, "wake up, bo!"

The lad opened his eyes, clear blue like the sky, and smiled at his father.

"Air you safe, dad?" he whispered.

"Sure safe."

Curly closed his eyes and lay peaceful. The hold-up was squatting back on his heels, looking out across the desert.

"Lord Balshannon," said he, "I had a warning sent to Sheriff Bryant that I was coming down to lift all yo' hawsses. My wolves tracked Bryant's rider to Lordsburgh, where he wired to you. You came running, and had all yo' hawsses rounded up convenient for me in the stable yard o' this house. I thank you seh."

"My good man, I'll bet you an even thousand dollars," said the Patrone, "that you don't lift a hoof of my—haw—remunda."

"It's a sporting offer, and tempts me hard," answered the outlaw. "Oblige me by taking my gun from the ground here, and firing three shots in the air."

The Patrone took the gun, and at his third shot I saw a man ride out from behind the bastion on our right. McCalmont waved to him, and he came, pulling his hat down over his face as he rode, then halted in front of us, shy as a wolf.

"Young man," said McCalmont, "please repeat to these gentlemen here the whole of yo' awdehs fo' the day. Leave out the names of the men."

"You're giving us dead away!" said the rider, threatening McCalmont with his revolver. "You mean that?"

"I mean what I say."

"Ah!—excuse me, McCalmont," said the Patrone, "your—er—pistol I think."

"Thanks, seh." McCalmont accepted the gun.

"Repeat the awdehs," he said. "These gentlemen are our friends."

"Well, you knows best," came the surly voice behind the hat. "Three men to cover your approach to Holy Cross, and if there's trouble to shoot Balsbannon and Chalkeye at sight. They're covered now. The wall of the stable court by the south-west bastion to be mined with dynamite, and touched off at 10 p.m. prompt. Ten riders to get in through the breach in the wall and drive out the bunch of horses. One man with an axe to split all the saddles in the harness room, then join the herders."

"Leave out," said McCalmont, "all detail for pointing, swinging, and driving the herd. Go on."

"At one minute to ten, before the wall is blown away, ten riders are to make a bluff at attacking the main gate, and keep on amusing the garrison until the men with the naphtha cans have fired the private house. Rendezvous for all hands at Laguna by midnight, where we catch remounts, and sleep until daybreak, with a night herd of two and one camp guard. At dawn we begin to gather cattle while the house wrangler and two men drive the remunda east. Rendezvous at Wolf Gap."

"And how about poor old Bryant's posse of men?" asked Balshannon.

"Sheriff Bryant" says the Captain "allows that he's to catch us in a fine trap five miles due west of Lordsburgh. And now" he called to the mounted robber "tell the boys that all awdehs are cancelled that I'm dining to night at Holy Crawss and that the boys will wait for me at the place fixed in case of accidents."

The man rode off, hostile and growling aloud while Balshannon stood watching to see which way he went.

"McCalmont" he said and I took note of just one small quiver in his voice "may I venture to ask one question? You seem to know the arrangement of my house—its military weakness. How did you learn that?"

The outlaw stood up facing him and took from the breast of his shirt a folded paper.