THE MAN WITH NO NAME

His partner is the desperado Tuco, who turns vengeance into a sadistic contest of endurance. His adversary is the ruthless Sentenza, a killer who long ago lost count of the lives he has ended. His goal is a $200,000 treasure in stolen Army gold for which many have died and more will be killed. But his secret is a dying man’s last words...
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CHAPTER 1

THE soldier in the Union blue uniform closed his telescope with a snap. He bellied carefully back from his high rocky perch, slid and scrambled down the sheer rock wall of the pass. In the deep shadows at its base he broke into a circle of lounging Union troops.

A bearded lieutenant rose to his feet.
“Company coming?”
“A detail of Johnny Rebs is beading for the pass—a troop of cavalry escorting a single open army wagon.”

The lieutenant stroked his beard thoughtfully.
“Sounds like a Confederate paywagon. Tomorrow being the fast of March and the Texans occupying Sante Fe—Fort Craig will be figuring on a payday.” He grinned.
“They’ll be a lot of mighty disappointed cantiña girls in Santa Fe tomorrow night. Take your places, men, and keep low. Let them get well inside the pass, then hit ’em from both sides hard.”

The Confederate detail had inched north and west-ward across the savage land for endless days. The men had been hammered by the relentless sun and strangled by the clouds of fine adobe dust that smoked up from the wagon wheels and from the hoofs of the mules that drew it. The vultures had followed the detail, wheeling in tireless circles against the brassy sky. They seemed to know that soon their patience would be rewarded.

The wagon was an open army buckboard. Stencilled on its side was the legend: 4TH CAVALRY—C.S.A.—Confederate States of America. The wagon bed was nearly filled by a rough pine chest, about the size and proportions of a military coffin. An older man named Baker sat on the chest, facing backward, a long rifle cradled in his arms.

The driver was a swarthy Texican named Mondrega. On the seat beside him sat a guard named Jackson, his rifle across his lap. The men’s Confederate grey uniforms were thick with dust and blotched with dark patches of sweat. Their cavalry escort rode in a wide circle, completely surrounding the wagon. Two more troopers rode a mile or no ahead as scouts.

The guard, Jackson, tilted his canteen, choked and cursed wrathfully as the sun-heated water burned his blistered lips.
“Damn the goddam sun and the goddam dust and the goddam army. As a kid I used to wonder what hell was like. Now that I’ve seen New Mexico, my curiosity’s satisfied.”

Mondrega grinned.
“If you think this is hot in February, you should ride across it in July, señor.”

The old man, Baker, growled over his shoulder, “I’m damned if I’d ride through it again, even if I was froze in a cake of ice. Nobody but a knot-head general or a politician would be dumb enough to fight over a hunk of desert and mountains.”

“AM but our General Sibley is not dumb, señor,” Mondrega said. “He knows that
under those mountains, and out west in California, lie the great fields of gold. The Yankees will have no more money to pay for the war if we can capture these.”

The cavalry escort had been closing in around the wagon, adding the dust from their mounts to the cloud that never lifted. Jackson was the first to become aware of the tightening circle.

He coughed and raised his voice. “Hey, dammit, Sarge. Wasn’t we choking to death fast enough on our own dust to suit you? Get back a ways with yours.”

The leather-faced sergeant reined his horse closer to the wagon.

“Which would you rather have in your face, soldier—a cloud of dust or a cloud of Minie balls from Yankee rifles?” He pointed ahead, “Them’s the Sangre de Cristo mountains. On the other side of ’em is Sante Fe. To get through, we got to take Glorieta Pass and Apache Canyon, the best spots in the Territory for a Yankee ambush.”

“Aw, hell,” Baker growled. “Why would Yankees waste good lead on a flea-bitten handful like us?”

The sergeant’s jaw dropped. “Hell, man—don’t you know what’s inside that chest your backside is planted on, soldier?”

“They never told us,” Baker said. “They never tell a foot soldier nothing except to do what he’s ordered on the double.”

“Man, that chest is full of gold dollars—two hundred thousand of ’em. That’s the whole pay and forage funds of the Fourth Cavalry, plus a sight more they aim to spread around to buy us some important friends. So you guard that chest, soldier. You guard it real damn good.”

The abrupt transition from blazing sunlight to the deep gloom of the pass left the detail momentarily blinded. Jackson, who had been riding with his eyes squeezed to thin slits against the glare, was the first to recover his vision. His gaze roved across the forbidding rock walls and caught the barest flicker of movement. Brief as it was, he caught the unmistakable blue of a Yankee uniform sleeve.

He yelled in wordless alarm and flung himself back off the seat into the wagon bed. He was still falling when the walls erupted smoke and flame and the deafening thunder of gunfire. A searing pain streaked along his ribs. Above the racketing of guns rose wild yelling and the scream of a wounded horse.

Mondrega toppled, landed heavily on Jackson and lay still Baker rolled off the end of the chest and slammed down on the two of them, squirming and uttering liquid, choking sounds.

Jackson felt the wagon lurch and leap ahead as the terrified mules bolted. The echoing tumult fell away behind and rapidly faded. When he could no longer hear any sound of battle Jackson dragged himself out from under the inert figures of his comrades.

The mules, nearing exhaustion from their blind dash, were slowing down. He managed to catch the flying reins and whipsaw the team to a panting halt. He saw that the run had taken them out of the narrow pass and into a broad valley. For the moment he could detect no sound or sign of pursuit.

He scrambled back into the wagon bed to examine his companions. Mondrega was unconscious from a bullet crease across his skull and bled from a flesh wound in one arm. Baker was in bad shape. A rifle ball had gone through one lung and he was
coughing up a steady froth of blood. He needed medical aid—and fast.

Jackson’s own wound proved no more than a painful crease in which the blood was already congealing. He got to his feet, using the chest for support, and suddenly full awareness of its contents hit him. *Two hundred thousand dollars in gold...*

His mouth dried out and a choking sensation caught his throat. If no one else survived the ambush—no one else could know what became of that fortune. He began to shake.

Abruptly he became aware of the background. To the right the entire slope was covered by the most immense cemetery he had ever seen. The slope was crowded with graves as far as the eye could reach. Each grave was marked by a plain wooden headboard. This could only be Sad Hill Cemetery, the military burying ground begun during the Mexican War, augmented by the Indian troubles and now being swollen by the fruits of the War Between the States.

Partway up the slope gaped the raw scar of a newly dug grave, not yet occupied. Jackson lunged up to the wagon seat and used the ends of the reins to lash the mules into movement.

Beside the open grave he sprang down and lowered the tailgate of the wagon. He caught hold of the rope handle an the end of the chest and hauled with all his might, ignoring the pain that knifed along his ribs as his wound reopened. The massive chest moved slowly—but it moved.

In the wagon bed the wounded Baker opened shock-dimmed eyes. He stared at the empty space where the chest had rested. Then slowly, agonizingly, he rolled his head far enough to see past the back of the wagon to endless rows of marked graves.

He became dimly aware of the sound of frenzied scraping and the hollow thump of pebbles and earth on wood. It was coming from somewhere close by but the sideboard of the wagon blocked his line of sight. He tried to raise himself up enough to see but the effort proved too much. With a low, gurgling moan he fell back into unconsciousness.

Mondrega’s eyes flickered open at Baker’s movement, stared blankly around far a moment, then closed again.

The court martial, held in Santa Fe’s Palace of Governors was little more than a formality. A lieutenant testified to finding the entire cavalry escort dead in the pass and bringing in the bodies for identification and burial.

Jackson was next on the stand. His story was brief and convincing. He had been the first one hit and knocked from the seat. Then Mondrega and Baker, in succession, had taken bullets and fallen across him, drenching him with their blood.

“Pretty soon the shooting stopped and the Yankees came to the wagon. I kept still and they thought we were all corpses, I guess. They hauled out the chest and were starting to chop it open when something scared the mules and they bolted.”

“Was there no pursuit, Private Jackson?”

“No, sir. I guess they figured a wagonload of corpses wasn’t worth the trouble. After a while I got loose and got the wagon stopped. I did what I could for the others and found the trail to Santa Fe. That’s all I know, sir.”

Mondrega, one arm in a sling and his head swathed in a turban of bandages, had
listened intently to Jackson’s testimony. He had nothing to add on the stand.

“I saw Private Jackson falling. Then I was hit and fell on him. That’s all I remember until I awoke here in the infirmary.”

A surgeon followed him to the stand.

“Private Baker is still in critical condition and unable to appear or testify. He is out of his head most of the time but in lucid moments he recalls only seeing the others go down and then receiving his own wound. In his delirium he appears to be obsessed with dying. He mumbles constantly of graves and graveyards.”

Mondrega started violently at the words. His eyes widened. He controlled himself with a visible effort and sat back, his expression carefully veiled.

The presiding officer struck the table with his gavel. “In the absence of evidence to the contrary, this court concludes that the two hundred thousand dollars fell into the hands of the enemy through no fault of Private Jackson. We hereby find him not guilty of any misconduct. Court dismissed.”

A short time later a sergeant appeared in the office of the colonel commanding. He saluted.

“Sir, it is my duty to report that Private Jackson is gone.”

“Gone? What do you mean—gone?”

“Right after the trial, sir, he gathered up all his personal belongings, stole the lieutenant’s horse and skedaddled.”
CHAPTER 2

HIS name—Sentenza—was known and feared from Texas to the Tetons. Some men crossed themselves at its mention. Others swung hastily to their horses and left the country. Still others reached for fat purses and smiled and prepared to pay off, thinking of enemies who would plague them no longer.

Sentenza was rangy, lean and hard. He possessed the lithe grace of a catamount. His wedge-shaped face was the colour of old saddle leather. His high cheekbones set off eyes of palest brown. In his long blue frock coat—his habitual costume—he could be mistaken for a circuit-riding preacher until the coat fell open to reveal the most notorious gun in the West. It rested above his left hip, the butt slanting to the right for a lightning-fast cross-draw that no man had ever matched. It featured a custom-made fourteen-inch barrel for balance and accuracy.

By profession Sentenza was a hired killer. His deadly skill was for sale to any man who could pay the price. It was said that he would gun down his own mother without a qualm if someone hired him for the task and Sentenza himself had never denied the charge. If he had ever known emotions they had long since burned to ashes. He neither loved nor hated. He only killed.

He smiled seldom. Sometimes, in fanciful moments he thought of himself as already dead. The thought sharpened his enjoyment of living.

He dismounted in front of the adobe ranch house. Leaving his handsome coal-black horse at the worn hitchrail, he stood for a moment, looking at the house.

The door was open. After a moment he walked in on silent feet.

A pretty Mexican woman was in the act of setting a wooden bowl of beans and a chunk of crusty bread before a young boy in his teens, obviously her son. She and the boy looked up, startled at the sudden appearance of Sentenza.

He stared at them, silent and unsmiling, until a look of fear came into the woman’s eyes. She caught the boy’s arm and drew him out of the chair. Watching the stranger from frightened eyes, she backed away, pulling the boy with her. She darted through an inner door.

A faint mutter of voices reached Sentenza. Then a swarthy man stepped into the room. He studied Sentenza, frowning faintly.

“What may I do for you, señor?”

“You’re Mondrega?”

The swarthy man nodded.

“And I know you, too, now. Yost are the gunman they call Sentenza.”

“My reputation has travelled far,” the killer said with a dead smile. “But for that matter, so have I—and without food. I thank you for your generous hospitality.”

He sat down at the boy’s place, broke off a piece of the bread and began to eat the beans with a wooden spoon. The other watched him steadily from wary eyes.

After a moment he said, “Baker sent you, didn’t he?”

Sentenza nodded, his mouth full of beans and bread.

Slowly Mondrega pulled back a chair and sat down opposite the visitor. He put both palms flat on the plank table and bent forward.
“Tell Baker I have already told him everything I know. Tell him all I want is to be left in peace, understand? It will do him no good to keep on bothering me. I don’t know anything more than I’ve already told him about that damned boxful of gold dollars.”

There was a barely perceptible break in the rhythm of Sentenza’s chewing. He swallowed heavily.

“How many gold dollars?”

“Two hundred thousand, they said.”

Sentenza’s pale eyes narrowed.

“No wonder Baker was close-mouthed about this business. Now I know why the names seemed familiar. The missing Confederate cavalry fund. Tell me more about the dollars, Mondrega”

“How can I?” the Mexican said, with a trace of irritation. “I was unconscious almost the entire time.”

“Almost?”

Mondrega spread his hands. “I must have come to for a moment once, in my mind is a picture of graves, thousands of them on a hillside. I thought it was only another of the crazy dreams until I learned at the hearing that Baker also had babbled of graves. But Baker already knows that because I told him. I swear I have told no one else until now, señor.”

“Baker knows something else, too. He knows that Jackson came to see you last week. Is it true Jackson came here? Or is Baker wrong about that?”

“He’s not wrong. Jackson did come here.”

“What name is he using now? What does he call himself?”

Mondrega’s eyes narrowed.

“What makes you think he has changed his name?”

“Because I haven’t found him. When I look for someone I always find him—eventually. That’s what I’m usually paid for. And Baker will also want to know why Jackson came here, what he wanted to know and what he said about that box.”

“He wanted the same thing Baker wants—to find out how much I know and to make sure I would not talk.”

The ghost of a smile touched the gunman’s lips.

“By some strange coincidence, Baker sent me to make sure of the same thing.”

The silence grew. Beads of perspiration began to dot Mondrega’s forehead. He asked hoarsely, “How much is Baker paying you to kill me?”

“Five hundred dollars.” Sentenza pursed a last bean around the bottom of the bowl. “It’s my standard price for easy jobs like this. But I’m waiting for that name you’re going to tell me fast—Jackson’s new name.”

“Carson. He calls himself Bill Carson now.” Mondrega rose, holding out his palms.

“But wait, señor.”

He went to a carved chest opened a drawer and brought out a heavy drawstring purse. It clinked dully as he thmw it on the table in front of Sentenza.

“Here is a thousand dollars—all the money I have. It is for you, señor. Take it.”

The gunman opened the purse and spilled a pile of coins.

“Half in gold, too,” he murmured. “Not bad at all. But this is double my fee, Mondrega.”
“For two jobs, señor. I know now that I will never live in peace while Baker is alive. That is your second job.”

“Fair enough,” Sentenza said briskly. He scooped the coins back into the purse and stowed it under the frock coat. Under cover of the table the long-barrelled pistol slid into his hand, tilting slightly upward. “Since you’re hiring me, Mondrega, there is something you should know about me. I have one rule I will never break. When anyone pays me to do a job—I always do that job.”

The gun slammed twice. Mondrega was hurled backward and down by the heavy slugs. Sentenza rose to his feet without haste and holstered his gun. He broke off a piece of bread and put it into his mouth, chewing with relish.

The young boy, Mondrega’s son, ran down a stairway, carrying a rifle taller than himself. He was trying to level and cock it when Sentenza shot him in the head.

The killer blew smoke from the long barrel, holstered the pistol and strolled out. The woman’s keening screams followed him out. He shook his head.

“Women,” he murmured aloud to some part of him that was not quite dead, although it felt nothing, “get too emotional over small change. She is still young. There must be hundreds of lusty men in the Territory who would be overjoyed to father more sons for her.”

The man, Baker, awoke sharply in the inky blackness of his room. His hand slid under the pillow to close on the butt of his pistol.

“Who is it? Who is in my room?”

The effort brought on a paroxysm of coughing, a legacy of his wound. A harsh, scraping sound came dose by. A marsh flared to light, glinting on high cheekbones and pale sorrel eyes.

“It’s you,” Baker struggled to lift himself upright. “Did you find him? Did he talk?”

Sentenza finished lighting an oil lamp. He replaced the chimney and stood looking down at Baker.

“Yes to both questions. He told me something that will interest you—and something else that interests me.”

“Get on with it,” Baker wheezed impatiently.

“The name Jackson is hiding under now is Carson—Bill Carson.”

“Ah. Go on. What else did you learn?”

“Something you forgot to mention. About a chest full of gold army dollars that somehow disappeared. That’s the part of his talk that interests me.”

“All right, all right. What more did he say?”

“Isn’t that enough? But you can stop worrying about his tongue. He will never wag it to anyone on this earth again.”

“Good, good”—Baker gasped. He fumbled under the pillow and tossed a heavy purse to the gunman. “Here is your five hundred dollars, Sentenza. You earned it.”

The killer tucked the purse away, turned as if to leave and then stopped.

“Oh, one thing you didn’t ask about. I’ll tell you anyway, so you’ll understand what happens next. Mondrega gave me a thousand dollars—to get you off his back.”

“What? Oh, that’s a good one, eh? A thousand to kill me. Ho-ho, that’s a real good joke.”

“A rich one,” Sentenza agreed. He stood over the bed, looking dawn. “But the
funniest part of all is that when I accept a man’s money, I always go through with my job. I took Mondrega’s money, Baker.”

Baker had only time to scream, “No, Sentenza—” before the soft pillow closed down on his face, cutting off his breath and voice.

His body threshed feebly. His hands found a wrist like iron and clawed at it futilely. Muffled by the pillow, the sound of the shot was little more than a dull thud. The figure on the bed threshed for a moment, then went limp, stilled. Sentenza straightened and holstered the long-barrelled pistol

“A really funny joke,” he murmured softly.
CHAPTER 3

TUCO, the *bandido*, who yearned to become notorious as Tuco the Terrible, was in an ebullient mood. He had spent a most lively, though tiring, night with a lady of infinitely varied talents and insatiable ardour. Better still, her husband had not interrupted the fun by returning home early and getting himself killed. Such lighter moments were all too rare in the life of a hard-working bandit.

His pleasant musings were interrupted by the sudden violent shying of his horse. A man had stepped from behind a high rock and stoat blocking the narrow part of the trail. He was a stranger to Tuco, a thick-bodied, brutish figure with small, nervous eyes and a knife-scarred cheek. He wore his gun low, the holster tied down for a fast draw. His clawed hand hovered close to its worn butt.

Tuco’s hand started towards his own gun and from as the stranger growled, “Uh-uh. I wouldn’t try it if I was you, friend. It just so happens there’s three of us.”

Two more men stepped into view. One was young and lath-thin, the other an older man with an unkempt tangle of whiskers. The scarred man jerked his head.

“Light down and step up a little. I want a closer look at that ugly face.”

“You are no raving beauty yourself,” Tuco snarled. But he swung down and reluctantly stepped a few paces loser to the trio. “If it’s money you want, my saddlebags are empty.”

“It figures. I’ve seen your face before—on a sheriff’s poster. In fact, friend, it looks like the face of a man worth two thousand dollars in bounty.”

“You could be right, friend,” a new voice said from somewhere off to the side. “But yours doesn’t look like the face of a man who’s going to collect it.”

Tuco and his visitors whirled. A stranger to Tuco was framed in a narrow gap between rocks. He stood tall—inches above six feet—lean and hungry. A line of pale blond hair showed above the weathered bronze of his face. A stubby Mexican *cigarrillo* jutted from a corner of his wide, unsmiling mouth. His face was without expression. Except for narrowed, glittering eyes, there was nothing sinister in his appearance but Tuco felt a sudden coldness brush his spine.

The tall man jerked his head at Tuco.

“Step back a little, ugly one, out of line of fire.”

Tuco gulped and scrambled back to stand beside his horse. The scar-faced gunman cleared his throat noisily.

“I don’t know who you are, mister, but it’s plain you ain’t too bright in the head. Nobody in his right mind would butt into our private business the way you just done.”

“If I bother you,” the tall man said pleasantly, “butt me out.”

Everything happened so fast that Tuco was never afterward certain of the sequence. The three gunmen were no amateurs at their trade. Their hands slapped down in practised unison. The tall stranger’s gun simply appeared in his hand, pressed tight against his hip and spewing sound, smoke and bullets. After the first shot the heel of his left hand fanned the hammer, getting off two more shots so close together that the sound was continuous and single.

Only one of the trio managed to get his own iron clear of its leather before he died.
Tuco gaped at the sprawled figures and suddenly thrust his hands behind him to hide their trembling. He turned dazed eyes to his rescuer.

“Thanks, amigo. You saved me from a most unpleasant dance at the end of a rough rope.”

The thin stranger finished reloading without answering. He reached back among the rocks and led a saddled horse out to the trail. He swung into the saddle and sat looking down, studying Tuco without a trace of expression on his dark face.

“So you’re worth two thousand dollars,” he said thoughtfully. “Dead or alive.”

“True,” Tuco said sadly. “It is a disgrace—only two thousand for a man of my reputation. But out here the law is very tight-fisted with its bounties.” A look of sudden alarm came over his face. “Señor—you wouldn’t be thinking of turning me in yourself for such a miserable, stinking Judas price?”

“I haven’t decided,” the other said coldly. “We’ll ride on together while I make up my mind.”

Tuco shivered and swung into his saddle. He was tempted to dig in his spurs and try flight but from what he had witnessed he knew how hopeless his chances were.

He reined in beside the stranger. They jogged along side by side, while the miles crept by. At last the lengthening silence began to get on the bandit’s nerves.

He said, “Amigo, if you have faults, running off at the mouth is not one of them. Conversation makes a long trail seem shorter.”

The other glanced at him, looked away without replying. Tuco moistened dry lips and tried again.

“At least, señor, since we ride together we can at least introduce one another. I am Tuco, the Bandit. You have surely heard of me. Everybody has heard of Tuco the Terrible. Eh?”

The expressionless face turned toward him again.

“No.”

“No? Then one thing is sure. You are not from these parts if you have never heard of Tuco. From where do you hail, amigo?”

“Nowhere,” the stranger said.

“A Man from Nowhere, eh? Very well. Your business is your business. I do not pry. But at least you have a name to call you. Whether it is yours or not is of no matter to me.”

“I have no name.”

“Look, Man from Nowhere With No Name,” Tuco burst out with a touch of irritation. “Suppose I saw a cocked gun aimed at your back and you didn’t know it was there. By the time I yelled, ‘Man From Nowhere With No Name, look behind you—’ you would be stone dead. So I will give you a name. Because of your hair, I will call you Whitey. So if you hear me yell, ‘Whitey, behind you—’ you will know I am not talking to my horse.”

The other shrugged indifferently. Some miles farther Tuco made one last attempt to open communications. “You do not have the look of a cowman, farmer or an outlaw. What is your trade, amigo?”

The blond man turned and looked full into Tuco’s eyes. The ghost of a smile twitched his lips.

“Why,” he said softly, “I’m a bounty-killer. Let’s you and me make a deal.”
The yelling and swearing brought out most of the town to witness their arrival. The Man From Nowhere rode in front, leading Tuco’s horse. The bandit, bound hand and foot, was ignominiously draped across his saddle like a trussed chicken, head hanging down on one side, legs on the other. His private opinion of such treatment was clearly audible to anyone within miles.

“I’ll get you for this,” he howled. “I’ll see you dead of cholera, of rabies, of the black pox! Untie me! Untie me, you mangy son of a dog! Put me down! Listen, there’s still time. If you let me go I’ll forgive you. If you don’t—I’ll see that the worms eat your eyes out, you whore’s by-blow!”

The lean stranger ignored both the gaping, grinning crowd on the board sidewalk and the uproar at his back. Tuco’s voice fell to a shrill whine.

“Damn it, Whitey, I feel sick. Take me down. I can’t stand it any longer. My head’s bursting with blood. Water, Whitey—water, in the name of—”

The parade—though not the tumult—came to a halt at the hitchrail in front of a building bearing the sign: SHERIFF’S OFFICE. The tall man swung down, hoisted Tuco off his horse by his belt and dumped him unceremoniously on the board walk.

“Dog!” the bandit screeched. “Son of a saloon tramp. You’re real tough with a man who’s tied hand and foot, aren’t you? Let’s see you untie me if you’ve got the guts, you miserable seller of souls—”

His captor eluded a vicious kick with the bound feet and strode into the sheriff’s office.

On the sidewalk, still bound, Tuco raged: “So you’re afraid. Come back here, you stinking vulture—I’ll kick your guts out—”

The lean man came out, followed by a grizzled sheriff carrying a reward poster. The sheriff squatted, caught the bandit by the hair and twisted his head around, comparing his face with the picture on the poster.

“So one louse becomes two,” Tuco yelled. “Take your dirty paws off me, you polecat’s brother. Roll that thing up and I’ll tell you where you can stick it. To hell with sheriffs and those who give birth to them—”

The lawman nodded and stood up.

“It’s him, all right. Come along, mister. I’ll get the bounty money out of my safe.”

“Judas,” Tuco yowled. “Bastard offspring of a thousand bastards! If there’s any justice in this world you’ll never get to enjoy your blood money. The undertaker’ll get it all. Feel good, don’t you, sending a poor man who never hurt nobody to his death?”

The tall man came out, stuffing a wad of banknotes into his pocket. He mounted his horse, rode off.

The sheriff came out and cupped hands to his mouth to bawl, “All right, folks, let’s get a jury together here—on the double. Alex, you to the noose and get the rope up on the hangin’ tree while we’re givin’ this son of a bitch a fair trial.”
CHAPTER 4

AT the end of the street the Man With No Name reined in. He turned in the saddle to watch the eager crowd converge in front of the sheriff’s office. Two men came out of the saloon, supporting a third who was having difficulty with his equilibrium. The bartender in a white apron followed them out, slamming the saloon door before galloping past to join the excitement. The rest of the street was deserted except for two horses drooping at the saloon hitch-rail.

The tall man reined around to the rail and leaned down to untie the two horses. He slapped their rumps with his hat.

“Get going, you jugheads. Clear out.”

He watched them vanish beyond the last shanty, galloping wildly.

The livery stable was behind the row of false-fronts. Wagons and buggies were lined up before it and the corral at one side held a dozen or more unsaddled horses. A pimply attendant popped into sight as he rode up. The bounty-hunter scowled at him.

“How come you’re not over at the sheriff’s office with everybody else, watching the trial and hanging?”

“Hell and Maria, mister, nobody told me about no hangin’. Is that what all the yellin’ was about? I’d sure hate to miss it but—”

“Go along,” the hunter said, swinging down. “I’ll put up my own horse and be there in a minute.”

“Gees, thanks, mister.”

He took off at a gallop, arms flapping.

The hunter unbarred the corral gate and drove the penned horses out. A few well-aimed rocks sent them stampeding out into the bleak desert. He grinned faintly and led his own mount into a gap between buildings, dismounted and ground-reined the animal. He took his rifle from its scabbard and moved up to a point where he could see the street.

The trial was in its final stage. Tuco, mounted on his horse, his hands tied behind him, was the centre of the mob’s attention. A gaunt man in a black hat, obviously the judge, stood on a barrel, facing him. The sheriff held the bridle of Tuco’s horse.

The judge held up his hands to quiet the crowd.

“All right, you’ve heard all the crimes this no-good bastard’s committed. What’s your verdict—guilty or not guilty? And don’t no more than twelve of you answer. The law says a jury can’t have no more than twelve men and we got to keep this trial legal.”

A score of voices bellowed, “Guilty—hang the son—”

“So be it,” the judge shouted above the uproar. “Let justice be done.”

Tuco slumped in his saddle, dazed and silent as the sheriff led the horse to an ancient cottonwood. A noose dangled from a lower limb. A gaunt man wearing a deputy’s badge rolled up another barrel and climbed on it to fit the noose over Tuco’s head. The bandit began to whimper wordlessly while tears rolled down his swarthy cheeks. The watching hunter chuckled softly and cocked his rifle.

The judge unfolded a long sheet of paper and perched steel-rimmed spectacles on
his nose. “This here de-fendant, previously wanted in fourteen counties of this Territory, has been found guilty of the crimes of murder, armed robbery of individuals, banks and post offices, the theft of sacred objects, arson of a Territorial prison, perjury, bigamy, desertion of family, incitement to prostitution, kidnapping, extortion, receiving stolen goods, passing counterfeit money, using marked cards and loaded dice, assault and battery against individuals, justices of the peace county, district and Territorial officials. Have you any last word, you skunk?”

Tuco turned his head as far as the taut rope would permit.

“You left out rustling cattle.”

The judge reddened. He waved his arms violently for silence.

“Uphold the dignity of this here court, dammit.” He peered at his paper. “Therefore, accordin’ to the powers vested in us, we sentence the accused here before us, Tuco Benedicto Pacifico Juan Maria Ramirez, to hang by the neck until dead, and may God have mercy on his soul—if any. Sheriff, proceed with your duty.”

The sheriff raised his whip. At its stinging lash the horse would lunge from under Tuco, leaving him to dance at the end of the rope.

The hunter in the alley settled his left hand on the wall and rested the rifle across his arm. He sighted carefully.

The crack of the sheriff’s whip was lost in the thunder of the shot. The rope parted with a twang a foot above Tuco’s head as the horse lunged forward, scattering the yelling crowd. The animal pounded down the street and out of town at a dead run before anyone could recover his wits and open fire on the bandit crouched over its neck.

The hunter ran to his own mount and set off, following the dwindling dust cloud of the bandit’s horse. He rode at a leisurely gallop, unworried at the possibility of pursuit. It would take the sheriff and his posse at least the rest of the day to find and round up their own horses on foot.

At sundown they sat in a rendezvous, high in the mountains, dividing the stack of hundred-dollar bills. “Here’s five for you and one, two, three, four, five for me. Another five for you and the rest for me makes it even shares.”

Tuco pressed the banknotes to his cheek.

“You know, friend, for the first time in my life I could get to like a bounty-hunter.”

“Your price should go up to at least three thousand after this stunt. We’d better skip a couple of counties and hit a sheriff who hasn’t had time to hear about it yet. Our game’ll get too risky when the news gets around.”

“The world—” Tuco chuckled—is divided in two. Some wear ropes around their necks and others cut them down.” He rubbed his throat gingerly. “But do not forget, señor, that the neck inside the rope is mine. You speak of risk—but it is I who take that risk. You do nothing but shoot and ride away. That is why the next time I want a bigger share.”

The hunter fixed Tuco with a cold, unwinking stare while he took out a stubby cigarro and struck a match. He took a long time about firing his smoke.

At last he said softly, “Raising your share means lowering mine, friend, and that could have unpleasant results. It could make me nervous and spoil my alto. I’m sure you would find that most uncomfortable, friend.”
Tuco’s eyes narrowed.

“Let me give you one warning. If you were to miss the rope you’d better be sure not to miss my head. I might still beat the noose. And any man who thinks to double-cross Tuco Ramirez and leave him alive understands nothing about Tuco—nothing at all.”
SENTENZA leaned against the corner of a harness shop and boredly watched the preparations for the hanging. He had seen—and meted out—violent death in too many forms to be thrilled by the sight of some poor devil kicking away his life at the end of a rope. He took out a yellow meerschaum pipe and packed it with exaggerated care.

Across the street a crowd of townspeople milled excitedly around the makeshift gallows hastily erected in front of the sheriff’s office that morning. The condemned man, his hands tied behind him, had been hoisted on to his horse. He slumped dejectedly in the saddle while a sour-faced judge droned through an endless list of charges.

“...previously wanted in fourteen counties of this Territory... the accused here present, Tuco Benedicto Pacifico Juan Maria Ramirez...”

Sentenza had been lounging in the same place some two hours earlier when the outlaw was brought into town, kicking and cursing, flung across his saddle like a sack of grain. His captor, a tall, pale-haired bounty-hunter, had collected a three-thousand-dollar reward and departed without a word or a nod to anyone.

As he had ridden away he had glanced towards Sentenza. The hunter had carefully taken in the frock coat, looked up and for a moment the two men’s glances had met and locked. To Sentenza the hunter’s eyes had carried the impact of a physical blow.

Watching the tall, lean figure ride on he had thought, There goes probably the most dangerous man I have ever encountered...

The observation left him without emotion. Dead men knew no challenges. Still without emotion, Sentenza smiled.

He stiffened suddenly at the rhythmic clatter of wood on wood and a voice calling his name. A grotesque travesty of a man was hurrying toward him along the board walk.

Both of the newcomer’s legs had been amputated at the hips so that he was all torso and head and long arms He gripped two blocks of wood which he used as crutches, slapping them on to the plank walk and swinging his abbreviated body between them. Awkward as his means of locomotion seemed, he dexterously threaded his way through the crowd of onlookers,and approached Sentenza with remarkable speed.

“I’ve been waiting for you, Half-soldier,” Sentenza said. “Did you get a line on Carson?”

“Enough,” the cripple said, “to know why you’re looking for him and to be glad I’m not in his boots.” He shook his head. “It’s like something out of one of those dime novels, Sentenza.” He peered around and lowered his voice. “A Confederate escort unit was caught in an ambush by Yankees and practically wiped out. Only three men got through alive—Mondrega, Baker and Jackson. What didn’t get through was a chest full of gold dollars they were taking to Santa Fe. There was a hearing and Jackson claimed the Yankees got the gold. With nobody to contradict him, Jackson was acquitted of stealing it. But get this—Jackson disappeared right after the hearing and turned up around here, calling himself Bill Carson.”

“Yes,” Sentenza said with a touch of impatience. “I know that much. What else did