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THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY

[Illustration by Robert Wesley Amick (1879-1969)]

“IF YOU WANT THE PARSON TO DIE, DON'T LOOK AT
ME WHEN HE STEPS IN.”

The Trail To Yesterday

By Charles Alden Seltzer

Author of
"The Two-Gun Man,"
"The Coming of the Law,"
Etc.



With Three Illustrations

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THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY

CHAPTER I

A WOMAN ON THE TRAIL

Many disquieting thoughts oppressed Miss Sheila Langford as she halted her pony on the crest of a slight rise and swept the desolate and slumberous world with an anxious glance. Quite the most appalling of these thoughts developed from a realization of the fact that she had lost the trail. The whole categorical array of inconveniences incidental to traveling in a new, unsettled country paled into insignificance when she considered this horrifying and entirely unromantic fact. She was lost; she had strayed from the trail, she was alone and night was coming.

She would not have cared so much about the darkness, for she had never been a coward, and had conditions been normal she would have asked nothing better than a rapid gallop over the dim plains. But as she drew her pony up on the crest of the rise a rumble of thunder reached her ears. Of course it would rain, now that she had lost the trail, she decided, yielding to a sudden, bitter anger. It usually did rain when one was abroad without prospect of shelter; it always rained when one was lost.

Well, there was no help for it, of course, and she had only herself to blame for the blunder. For the other—not unusual—irritating details that had combined to place her in this awkward position she could blame, first Duncan, the manager of the Double R—who should have sent someone to meet her at the station; the station agent—who had allowed her to set forth in search of the Double R without a guide,—though even now, considering this phase of the situation, she remembered that the agent had told her there was no one to send—and certainly the desolate appearance of Lazette had borne out this statement; and last, she could blame the country itself for being an unfeatured wilderness.

Something might be said in extenuation of the station agent's and the Double R manager's sins of omission, but without doubt the country was what she had termed it—an unfeatured wilderness. Her first sensation upon getting a view of the country had been one of deep disappointment. There was plenty of it, she had decided,—enough to make one shrink from its very bigness; yet because it was different from the land she had been accustomed to she felt that somehow it was inferior. Her father had assured her of its beauty, and she had come prepared to fall in love with it, but within the last half hour—when she had begun to realize that she had lost the trail—she had grown to hate it.

She hated the desolation, the space, the silence, the arid stretches; she had made grimaces at the “cactuses” with their forbidding pricklers—though she could not help admiring them, they seemed to be the only growing thing in the country capable of defying the heat and the sun. Most of all she hated the alkali dust. All afternoon she had kept brushing it off her clothing and clearing it out of her throat, and only within the last half hour she had begun to realize that her efforts had been without result—it lay thick all over her; her throat was dry and parched with it, and her eyes burned.

She sat erect, flushed and indignant, to look around at the country. A premonitory calm had succeeded the warning rumble. Ominous black clouds were scurrying, wind-whipped, spreading fan-like through the sky, blotting out the colors of the sunset, darkening the plains, creating weird shadows. Objects that Sheila had been able to see quite distinctly when she had reined in her pony were no longer visible. She stirred uneasily.

“We'll go somewhere,” she said aloud to the pony, as she urged the animal down the slope. “If it rains we'll get just as wet here as we would anywhere else.” She was surprised at the queer quiver in her voice. She was going to be brave, of course, but somehow there seemed to be little consolation in the logic of her remark.

The pony shambled forward, carefully picking its way, and Sheila mentally thanked the station agent for providing her with so reliable a beast. There was one consoling fact at any rate, and she retracted many hard things she had said in the early part of her ride about the agent.

Shuffling down the slope the pony struck a level. After traveling over this for a quarter of an hour Sheila became aware of an odd silence; looking upward she saw that the clouds were no longer in motion; that they were hovering, low and black, directly overhead. A flash of lightning suddenly illuminated the sky, showing Sheila a great waste of world that stretched to four horizons. It revealed, in the distance, the naked peaks of some hills; a few frowning buttes that seemed to fringe a river; some gullies in which lurked forbidding shadows; clumps of desert growth—the cactus—now seeming grotesque and mocking; the snaky octilla; the filmy, rustling mesquite; the dust-laden sage-brush; the soap weed; the sentinel lance of the yucca. Then the light was gone and darkness came again.

Sheila shuddered and vainly tried to force down a queer lump that had risen in her throat over the desolation of it all. It was not anything like her father had pictured it! Men had the silly habit of exaggerating in these things, she decided—they were rough themselves and they made the mistake of thinking that great, grim things were attractive. What beauty was there, for instance, in a country where there was nothing but space and silence and grotesque weeds—and rain? Before she could answer this question a sudden breeze swept over her; a few large drops of rain dashed into her face, and her thoughts returned to herself.

The pony broke into a sharp lope and she allowed it to hold the pace, wisely concluding that the animal was probably more familiar with the country than she. She found herself wondering why she had not thought of that before—when, for example, a few miles back she had deliberately guided it out of a beaten trail toward a section of country where, she had imagined, the traveling would be better. No doubt she had strayed from the trail just there.

The drops of rain grew more frequent; they splashed into her face; she could feel them striking her arms and shoulders. The pony's neck and mane became moist under her hand, the darkness increased for a time and the continuing rumble in the heavens presaged a steady downpour.

The pony moved faster now; it needed no urging, and Sheila held her breath for fear that it might fall, straining her eyes to watch its limbs as they moved with the sure regularity of an automaton. After a time they reached the end of the level; Sheila could tell that the pony was negotiating another rise, for it slackened speed appreciably and she felt herself settling back against the cantle of the saddle. A little later she realized that they were going down the opposite side of the rise, and a moment later they were again on a level. A deeper blackness than they had yet encountered rose on their right, and Sheila correctly decided it to be caused by a stretch of wood that she had observed from the crest of the rise where she had halted her pony for a view of the country. After an interval, during which she debated the wisdom of directing her pony into the wood for protection from the rain which was now coming against her face in vicious slants, her pony nickered shrilly!

A thrill of fear assailed Sheila. She knew horses and was certain that some living thing was on the trail in front of her. Halting the pony, she held tightly to the reins through a short, tense silence. Then presently, from a point just ahead on the trail, came an answering nicker in the horse language. Sheila's pony cavorted nervously and broke into a lope, sharper this time in spite of the tight rein she kept on it. Her fear grew, though mingling with it was a devout hope. If only the animal which had answered her own pony belonged to the Double R! She would take back many of the unkind and uncharitable things she had said about the country since she had lost the trail.

The pony's gait had quickened into a gallop—which she could not check. In the past few minutes the darkness had lifted a little; she saw that the pony was making a gradual turn, following a bend in the river. Then came a flash of lightning and she saw, a short distance ahead, a pony and rider, stationary, watching. With an effort she succeeded in reining in her own animal, and while she sat in the saddle, trembling and anxious, there came another flash of lightning and she saw the rider's face.

The rider was a cowboy. She had distinctly seen the leathern chaps on his legs; the broad hat, the scarf at his throat. Doubt and fear assailed her. What if the man did not belong to the Double R? What if he were a road agent—an outlaw? Immediately she heard an exclamation from him in which she detected much surprise and not a little amusement.

“Shucks!” he said. “It's a woman!”

There came a slow movement. In the lifting darkness Sheila saw the man return a pistol to the holster that swung at his right hip. He carelessly threw one leg over the pommel of his saddle and looked at her. She sat very rigid, debating a sudden impulse to urge her pony past him and escape the danger that seemed to threaten. While she watched he shoved the broad brimmed hat back from his forehead. He was not over five feet distant from her; she could feel her pony nuzzling his with an inquisitive muzzle, and she could dimly see the rider's face. It belonged to a man of probably twenty-eight or thirty; it had regular features, keen, level eyes and a firm mouth. There was a slight smile on his face and somehow the fear that had oppressed Sheila began to take flight. And while she sat awaiting the turn of events his voice again startled her:

“I reckon you've stampeded off your range, ma'am?”

A sigh of relief escaped Sheila. The voice was very gentle and friendly.

“I don't think that I have stampeded—whatever that means,” she returned, reassured now that the stranger gave promise of being none of the dire figures of her imagination; “I am lost merely. You see, I am looking for the Double R ranch.”

“Oh,” he said inexpressively; “the Double R.”

There ensued a short silence and she could not see his face for he had bowed his head a little and the broad brimmed hat intervened.

“Do you know where the Double R ranch is?” There was a slight impatience in her voice.

“Sure,” came his voice. “It’s up the crick a ways.”

“How far?”

“Twenty miles.”

“Oh!” This information was disheartening. Twenty miles! And the rain was coming steadily down; she could feel it soaking through her clothing. A bitter, unreasoning anger against nature, against the circumstances which had conspired to place her in this position; against the man for his apparent lack of interest in her welfare, moved her, though she might have left the man out of it, for certainly he could not be held responsible. Yet his nonchalance, his serenity—something about him—irritated her. Didn’t he know she was getting wet? Why didn’t he offer her shelter? It did not occur to her that perhaps he knew of no shelter. But while her indignation over his inaction grew she saw that he was doing something—fumbling at a bundle that seemed to be strapped to the cantle of his saddle. And then he leaned forward—very close to her—and she saw that he was offering her a tarpaulin.

“Wrap yourself in this,” he directed. “It ain’t pretty, of course, but it’ll keep you from getting drenched. Rain ain’t no respecter of persons.”

She detected a compliment in this but ignored it and placed the tarpaulin around her shoulders. Then it suddenly occurred to her that he was without protection. She hesitated.

“Thank you,” she said, “but I can’t take this. You haven’t anything for yourself.”

A careless laugh reached her. “That’s all right; I don’t need anything.”

There was silence again. He broke it with a question.

“What are you figuring to do now?”

What was she going to do? The prospect of a twenty-mile ride through a strange country in a drenching rain was far from appealing to her. Her hesitation was eloquent.

“I do not know,” she answered, no way of escape from the dilemma presenting itself.

“You can go on, of course,” he said, “and get lost, or hurt—or killed. It’s a bad trail. Or”—he continued, hesitating a little and appearing to speak with an effort—“there’s my shack. You can have that.”

Then he did have a dwelling place. This voluntary information removed another of the fearsome doubts that had beset her. She had been afraid that he might prove to be an irresponsible wanderer, but when a man kept a house it gave to his character a certain recommendation, it suggested stability, more, it indicated honesty.

Of course she would have to accept the shelter of his “shack.” There was no help for it, for it was impossible for her to entertain the idea of riding twenty miles over an unknown trail, through the rain and darkness. Moreover, she was not afraid of the stranger now, for in spite of his easy, serene movements, his quiet composure, his suppressed amusement, Sheila detected a note in his voice which told her that he was deeply concerned over her welfare—even though he seemed to be enjoying her. In any event she could not go forward, for the unknown terrified her and she felt that in accepting the proffered shelter of his “shack” she was choosing the lesser of two dangers. She decided quickly.

“I shall accept—I think. Will you please hurry? I am getting wet in spite of this—this covering.”

Wheeling without a word he proceeded down the trail, following the river. The darkness had abated somewhat, the low-hanging clouds had taken on a grayish-white hue, and the rain was coming down in torrents. Sheila pulled the tarpaulin tighter about her shoulders and clung desperately to the saddle, listening to the whining of the wind through the trees that flanked her, keeping a watchful eye on the tall, swaying, indistinct figure of her guide.

After riding for a quarter of an hour they reached a little clearing near the river and Sheila saw her guide halt his pony and dismount. A squat, black shape loomed out of the darkness near her and, riding closer, she saw a small cabin, of the lean-to type, constructed of adobe bricks. A dog barked in front of her and she heard the stranger speak sharply to it. He

silently approached and helped her down from the saddle. Then he led both horses away into the darkness on the other side of the cabin. During his absence she found time to glance about her. It was a desolate place. Did he live here alone?

The silence brought no answer to this question, and while she continued to search out objects in the darkness she saw the stranger reappear around the corner of the cabin and approach the door. He fumbled at it for a moment and threw it open. He disappeared within and an instant later Sheila heard the scratch of a match and saw a feeble glimmer of light shoot out through the doorway. Then the stranger's voice:

"Come in."

He had lighted a candle that stood on a table in the center of the room, and in its glaring flicker as she stepped inside Sheila caught her first good view of the stranger's face. She felt reassured instantly, for it was a good face, with lines denoting strength of character. The drooping mustache did not quite conceal his lips, which were straight and firm. Sheila was a little disturbed over the hard expression in them, however, though she had heard that the men of the West lived rather hazardous lives and she supposed that in time their faces showed it. It was his eyes, though, that gave her a fleeting glimpse of his character. They were blue—a steely, fathomless blue; baffling, mocking; swimming—as she looked into them now—with an expression that she could not attempt to analyze. One thing she saw in them only,—recklessness—and she drew a slow, deep breath.

They were standing very close together. He caught the deep-drawn breath and looked quickly at her, his eyes alight and narrowed with an expression which was a curious mingling of quizzical humor and grim enjoyment. Her own eyes did not waver, though his were boring into hers steadily, as though he were trying to read her thoughts.

"Afraid?" he questioned, with a suggestion of sarcasm in the curl of his lips.

Sheila stiffened, her eyes flashing defiance. She studied him steadily, her spirit battling his over the few feet that separated them. Then she spoke deliberately, evenly: "I am not afraid of you!"

"That's right." A gratified smile broke on the straight, hard lips. A new expression came into his eyes—admiration.

"You've got nerve, ma'am. I'm some pleased that you've got that much trust in me. You don't need to be scared. You're as safe here as you'd be out there." He nodded toward the open door. "Safer," he added with a grave smile; "you might get hurt out there."

He turned abruptly and went to the door, where he stood for a long time looking out into the darkness. She watched him for a moment and then removed the tarpaulin and hung it from a nail in the wall of the cabin. Standing near the table she glanced about her. There was only one room in the cabin, but it was large—about twenty by twenty, she estimated. Beside an open fireplace in a corner were several pots and pans—his cooking utensils. On a shelf were some dishes. A guitar swung from a gaudy string suspended from the wall. A tin of tobacco and a pipe reposed on another shelf beside a box of matches. A bunk filled a corner and she went over to it, fearing. But it was clean and the bed clothing fresh and she smiled a little as she continued her examination.

The latter finished she went to a small window above the bunk, looking out into the night. The rain came against the glass in stinging slants, and watching it she found herself feeling very grateful to the man who stood in the doorway. Turning abruptly, she caught him watching her, an appraising smile on his face.

"You ought to be hungry by now," he said. "There's a fireplace and some wood. Do you want a fire?"

In response to her nod he kindled a fire, she standing beside the window watching him, noting his lithe, easy movements. She could not mistake the strength and virility of his figure, even with his back turned to her, but it seemed to her that there was a certain recklessness in his actions—as though his every movement advertised a careless regard for consequences. She held her breath when he split a short log into slender splinters, for he swung the short-handled axe with a loose grasp, as though he cared very little where its sharp blade landed. But she noted that he struck with precision despite his apparent carelessness, every blow falling true. His manner of handling the axe reflected the spirit that shone in his eyes when, after kindling the fire, he stood up and looked at her.

"There's grub in the chuck box," he stated shortly. "There's some pans and things. It ain't what you might call elegant—not what you've been used to, I expect. But it's a heap better than nothing, and I reckon you'll be able to get along." He turned and walked to the doorway, standing in it for an instant, facing out. "Good-night," he added. The tarpaulin dangled from his arm.

Evidently he intended going away. A sudden dread of being alone filled her. "Wait!" she cried involuntarily. "Where are

you going?"

He halted and looked back at her, an odd smile on his face.

"To my bunk."

"Oh!" She could not analyze the smile on his face, but in it she thought she detected something subtle—untruthfulness perhaps. She glanced at the tarpaulin and from it to his eyes, holding her gaze steadily.

"You are going to sleep in the open," she said.

He caught the accusation in her eyes and his face reddened.

"Well," he admitted, "I've done it before."

"Perhaps," she said, a little doubtfully. "But I do not care to feel that I am driving you out into the storm. You might catch cold and die. And I should not want to think that I was responsible for your death."

"A little wetting wouldn't hurt me." He looked at her appraisingly, a glint of sympathy in his eyes. Standing there, framed in the darkness, the flickering light from the candle on his strong, grave face, he made a picture that, she felt, she would not soon forget.

"I reckon you ain't afraid to stay here alone, ma'am," he said.

"Yes," she returned frankly, "I am afraid. I do not want to stay here alone."

A pistol flashed in his hand, its butt toward her, and now for the first time she saw another at his hip. She repressed a desire to shudder and stared with dilated eyes at the extended weapon.

"Take this gun," he offered. "It ain't much for looks, but it'll go right handy. You can bar the door, too, and the window."

She refused to take the weapon. "I wouldn't know how to use it if I had occasion to. I prefer to have you remain in the cabin—for protection."

He bowed. "I thought you'd—" he began, and then smiled wryly. "It certainly would be some wet outside," he admitted. "It wouldn't be pleasant sleeping. I'll lay over here by the door when I get my blankets."

He went outside and in a few minutes reappeared with his blankets and saddle. Without speaking a word to Sheila he laid the saddle down, spread the blanket over it, and stretched himself out on his back.

"I don't know about the light," he said after an interval of silence, during which Sheila sat on the edge of the bunk and regarded his profile appraisingly. "You can blow it out if you like."

"I prefer to have it burning."

"Suit yourself."

Sheila got up and placed the candle in a tin dish as a precaution against fire. Then, when its position satisfied her she left the table and went to the bunk, stretching herself out on it, fully dressed.

For a long time she lay, listening to the soft patter of the rain on the roof, looking upward at the drops that splashed against the window, listening to the fitful whining of the wind through the trees near the cabin. Her eyes closed presently, sleep was fast claiming her. Then she heard her host's voice:

"You're from the East, I reckon."

"Yes."

"Where?"

"New York."

"City?"

"Albany."

There was a silence. Sheila was thoroughly awake again, and once more her gaze went to the window, where unceasing streams trickled down the glass. Whatever fear she had had of the owner of the cabin had long ago been dispelled by his manner which, though puzzling, hinted of the gentleman. She would have liked him better were it not for the reckless

gleam in his eyes; that gleam, it seemed to her, indicated a trait of character which was not wholly admirable.

“What have you come out here for?”

Sheila smiled at the rain-spattered window, a flash of pleased vanity in her eyes. His voice had been low, but in it she detected much curiosity, even interest. It was not surprising, of course, that he should feel an interest in her; other men had been interested in her too, only they had not been men that lived in romantic wildernesses,—observe that she did not make use of the term “unfeatured,” which she had manufactured soon after realizing that she was lost—nor had they carried big revolvers, like this man, who seemed also to know very well how to use them.

Those other men who had been interested in her had had a way of looking at her; there had always been a significant boldness in their eyes which belied the gentleness of demeanor which, she had always been sure, merely masked their real characters. She had never been able to look squarely at any of those men, the men of her circle who had danced attendance upon her at the social functions that had formerly filled her existence—without a feeling of repugnance.

They had worn man-shapes, of course, but somehow they had seemed to lack something real and vital; seemed to have possessed nothing of that forceful, magnetic personality which was needed to arouse her sympathy and interest. Not that the man on the floor in front of the door interested her—she could not admit that! But she had felt a sympathy for him in his loneliness, and she had looked into his eyes—had been able to look steadily into them, and though she had seen expressions that had puzzled her, she had at least seen nothing to cause her to feel any uneasiness. She had seen manliness there, and indomitability, and force, and it had seemed to her to be sufficient. His would be an ideal face were it not for the expression that lingered about the lips, were it not for the reckless glint in his eyes—a glint that revealed an untamed spirit.

His question remained unanswered. He stirred impatiently, and glancing at him Sheila saw that he had raised himself so that his chin rested in his hand, his elbow supported by the saddle.

“You here for a visit?” he questioned.

“Perhaps,” she said. “I do not know how long I shall stay. My father has bought the Double R.”

For a long time it seemed that he would have no comment to make on this and Sheila’s lips took on a decidedly petulant expression. Apparently he was not interested in her after all.

“Then Duncan has sold out?” There was satisfaction in his voice.

“You are keen,” she mocked.

“And tickled,” he added.

His short laugh brought a sudden interest into her eyes. “Then you don’t like Duncan,” she said.

“I reckon you’re some keen too,” came the mocking response.

Sheila flushed, turned and looked defiantly at him. His hand still supported his head and there was an unmistakable interest in his eyes as he caught her glance at him and smiled.

“You got any objections to telling me your name? We ain’t been introduced, you know?” he said.

“It is Sheila Langford.”

She had turned her head and was giving her attention to the window above her. The fingers of the hand that had been supporting his head slowly clenched, he raised himself slightly, his body rigid, his chin thrusting, his face pale, his eyes burning with a sudden fierce fire. Once he opened his lips to speak, but instantly closed them again, and a smile wreathed them—a mirthless smile that had in it a certain cold caution and cunning. After a silence that lasted long his voice came again, drawling, well-controlled, revealing nothing of the emotion which had previously affected him.

“What is your father’s name?”

“David Dowd Langford. An uncommon middle name, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Uncommon,” came his reply. His face, with the light of the candle gleaming full upon it, bore a queer pallor—the white of cold ashes. His right hand, which had been resting carelessly on the blanket, was now gripping it, the muscles tense and knotted. Yet after another long silence his voice came again—drawling, well-controlled, as before:

“What is he coming out here for?”

“He has retired from business and is coming out here for his health.”

“What business was he in?”

“Wholesale hardware.”

He was silent again and presently, hearing him stir, Sheila looked covertly at him. He had turned, his back was toward her, and he was stretched out on the blanket as though, fully satisfied with the result of his questioning, he intended going to sleep. For several minutes Sheila watched him with a growing curiosity. It was like a man to ask all and give nothing. He had questioned her to his complete satisfaction but had told nothing of himself. She was determined to discover something about him.

“Who are you?” she questioned.

“Dakota,” he said shortly.

“Dakota?” she repeated, puzzled. “That isn’t a name; it’s a State—or a Territory.”

“I’m Dakota. Ask anybody.” There was a decided drawl in his voice.

This information was far from being satisfactory, but she supposed it must answer. Still, she persisted. “Where are you from?”

“Dakota.”

That seemed to end it. It had been a short quest and an unsatisfactory one. It was perfectly plain to her that he was some sort of a rancher—at the least a cowboy. It was also plain that he had been a cowboy before coming to this section of the country—probably in Dakota. She was perplexed and vexed and nibbled impatiently at her lips.

“Dakota isn’t your real name,” she declared sharply.

“Ain’t it?” There came the drawl again. It irritated her this time.

“No!” she snapped.

“Well, it’s as good as any other. Good-night.”

Sheila did not answer. Five minutes later she was asleep.

CHAPTER II

THE DIM TRAIL

Sheila had been dreaming of a world in which there was nothing but rain and mud and clouds and reckless-eyed individuals who conversed in irritating drawls when a sharp crash of thunder awakened her. During her sleep she had turned her face to the wall, and when her eyes opened the first thing that her gaze rested on was the small window above her head. She regarded it for some time, following with her eyes the erratic streams that trickled down the glass, stretching out wearily, listening to the wind. It was cold and bleak outside and she had much to be thankful for.

She was glad that she had not allowed the mysterious inhabitant of the cabin to sleep out in his tarpaulin, for the howling of the wind brought weird thoughts into her mind; she reflected upon her helplessness and it was extremely satisfying to know that within ten feet of her lay a man whose two big revolvers—even though she feared them—seemed to insure protection. It was odd, she told herself, that she should place so much confidence in Dakota, and her presence in the cabin with him was certainly a breach of propriety which—were her friends in the East to hear of it—would arouse much comment—entirely unfavorable to her. Yes, it was odd, yet considering Dakota, she was not in the least disturbed. So far his conduct toward her had been that of the perfect gentleman, and in spite of the recklessness that gleamed in his eyes whenever he looked at her she was certain that he would continue to be a gentleman.

It was restful to lie and listen to the rain splashing on the roof and against the window, but sleep, for some unaccountable reason, seemed to grow farther from her—the recollection of events during the past few hours left no room in her thoughts for sleep. Turning, after a while, to seek a more comfortable position, she saw Dakota sitting at the table, on the side opposite her, watching her intently.

“Can’t sleep, eh?” he said, when he saw her looking at him. “Storm bother you?”

“I think it was the thunder that awakened me,” she returned. “Thunder always does. Evidently it disturbs you too.”

“I haven’t been asleep,” he said in a curt tone.

He continued to watch her with a quiet, appraising gaze. It was evident that he had been thinking of her when she had turned to look at him. She flushed with embarrassment over the thought that while she had been asleep he must have been considering her, and yet, looking closely at him now, she decided that his expression was frankly impersonal.

He glanced at his watch. “You’ve been asleep two hours,” he said. “I’ve been watching you—and envying you.”

“Envy me? Why? Are you troubled with insomnia?”

He laughed. “Nothing so serious as that. It’s just thoughts.”

“Pleasant ones, of course.”

“You might call them pleasant. I’ve been thinking of you.”

Sheila found no reply to make to this, but blushed again.

“Thinking of you,” repeated Dakota. “Of the chance you took in coming out here alone—in coming into my shack. We’re twenty miles from town here—twenty miles from the Double R—the nearest ranch. It isn’t likely that a soul will pass here for a month. Suppose——”

“We won’t ‘suppose,’ if you please,” said Sheila. Her face had grown slowly pale, but there was a confident smile on her lips as she looked at him.

“No?” he said, watching her steadily. “Why? Isn’t it quite possible that you could have fallen in with a sort of man——”

“As it happens, I did not,” interrupted Sheila.

“How do you know?”

Sheila’s gaze met his unwaveringly. “Because you are the man,” she said slowly.

She thought she saw a glint of pleasure in his eyes, but was not quite certain, for his expression changed instantly.

“Fate, or Providence—or whatever you are pleased to call the power that shuffles us flesh and blood mannikins around

—has a way of putting us all in the right places. I expect that's one of the reasons why you didn't fall in with the sort of man I was going to tell you about," said Dakota.

"I don't see what Fate has to do—" began Sheila, wondering at his serious tone.

"Odd, isn't it?" he drawled.

"What is odd?"

"That you don't see. But lots of people don't see. They're chucked and shoved around like men on a chess board, and though they're always interested they don't usually know what it's all about. Just as well too—usually."

"I don't see——"

He smiled mysteriously. "Did I say that I expected you to see?" he said. "There isn't anything personal in this, aside from the fact that I was trying to show you that some one was foolish in sending you out here alone. Some day you'll look back on your visit here and then you'll understand."

He got up and walked to the door, opening it and standing there looking out into the darkness. Sheila watched him, puzzled by his mysterious manner, though not in the least afraid of him. Several times while he stood at the door he turned and looked at her and presently, when a gust of wind rushed in and Sheila shivered, he abruptly closed the door, barred it, and strode to the fireplace, throwing a fresh log into it. For a time he stood silently in front of the fire, his figure casting a long, gaunt shadow at Sheila's feet, his gaze on her, grim, somber lines in his face. Presently he cleared his throat.

"How old are you?" he said shortly.

"Twenty-two."

"And you've lived East all your life. Lived well, too, I suppose—plenty of money, luxuries, happiness?"

He caught her nod and continued, his lips curling a little. "Your father too, I reckon—has he been happy?"

"I think so."

"That's odd." He had spoken more to himself than to Sheila and he looked at her with narrowed eyes when she answered.

"What is odd? That my father should be happy—that I should?"

"Odd that anyone who is happy in one place should want to leave that place and go to another. Maybe the place he went to wouldn't be just right for him. What makes people want to move around like that?"

"Perhaps you could answer that yourself," suggested Sheila. "I am sure that you haven't lived here in this part of the country all your life."

"How do you know that?" His gaze was quizzical and mocking.

"I don't know. But you haven't."

"Well," he said, "we'll say I haven't. But I wasn't happy where I came from and I came here looking for happiness—and something else. That I didn't find what I was looking for isn't the question—mostly none of us find the things we're looking for. But if I had been happy where I was I wouldn't have come here. You say your father has been happy there; that he's got plenty of money and all that. Then why should he want to live here?"

"I believe I told you that he is coming here for his health."

His eyes lighted savagely. But Sheila did not catch their expression for at that moment she was looking at his shadow on the floor. How long, how grotesque, it seemed, and forbidding—like its owner.

"So he's got everything he wants but his health. What made him lose that?"

"How should I know?"

"Just lost it, I reckon," said Dakota subtly. "Cares and Worry?"

"I presume. His health has been failing for about ten years."

Sheila was looking straight at Dakota now and she saw his face whiten, his lips harden. And when he spoke again there

was a chill in his voice and a distinct pause between his words.

“Ten years,” he said. “That’s a long time, isn’t it? A long time for a man who has been losing his health. And yet——” There was a mirthless smile on Dakota’s face—“ten years is a longer time for a man in good health who hasn’t been happy. Couldn’t your father have doctored—gone abroad—to recover his health? Or was his a mental sickness?”

“Mental, I think. He worried quite a little.”

Dakota turned from her, but not quickly enough to conceal the light of savage joy that flashed suddenly into his eyes.

“Why!” exclaimed Sheila, voicing her surprise at the startling change in his manner; “that seems to please you!”

“It does.” He laughed oddly. “It pleases me to find that I’m to have a neighbor who is afflicted with the sort of sickness that has been bothering me for—for a good many years.”

There was a silence, during which Sheila yawned and Dakota stood motionless, looking straight ahead.

“You like your father, I reckon?” came his voice presently, as his gaze went to her again.

“Of course.” She looked up at him in surprise. “Why shouldn’t I like him?”

“Of course you like him. Mostly children like their fathers.”

“Children!” She glared scornfully at him. “I am twenty-two! I told you that before!”

“So you did,” he returned, unruffled. “When is he coming out here?”

“In a month—a month from to-day.” She regarded him with a sudden, new interest. “You are betraying a great deal of curiosity,” she accused. “Why?”

“Why,” he answered slowly, “I reckon that isn’t odd, is it? He’s going to be my neighbor, isn’t he?”

“Oh!” she said with emphasis of mockery which equalled his. “And you are gossiping about your neighbor even before he comes.”

“Like a woman,” he said with a smile.

“An impertinent one,” she retorted.

“Your father,” he said in accents of sarcasm, ignoring the jibe, “seems to think a heap of you—sending you all the way out here alone.”

“I came against his wish; he wanted me to wait and come with him.”

Her defense of her parent seemed to amuse him. He smiled mysteriously. “Then he likes you?”

“Is that strange? He hasn’t any one else—no relative. I am the only one.”

“You’re the only one.” He repeated her words slowly, regarding her narrowly. “And he likes you. I reckon he’d be hurt quite a little if you had fallen in with the sort of man I was going to tell you about.”

“Naturally.” Sheila was tapping with her booted foot on his shadow on the floor and did not look at him.

“It’s a curious thing,” he said slowly, after an interval, “that a man who has got a treasure grows careless of it in time. It’s natural, too. But I reckon fate has something to do with it. Ten chances to one if nothing happens to you your father will consider himself lucky. But suppose you had happened to fall in with a different man than me—we’ll say, for instance, a man who had a grudge against your father—and that man didn’t have that uncommon quality called ‘mercy.’ What then? Ten chances to one your father would say it was fate that had led you to him.”

“I think,” she said scornfully, “that you are talking silly! In the first place, I don’t believe my father thinks that I am a treasure, though he likes me very much. In the second place, if he does think that I am a treasure, he is very much mistaken, for I am not—I am a woman and quite able to take care of myself. You have exhibited a wonderful curiosity over my father and me, and though it has all been mystifying and entertaining, I don’t purpose to talk to you all night.”

“I didn’t waken you,” he mocked.

Sheila swung around on the bunk, her back to him. “You are keeping me awake,” she retorted.

“Well, good night then,” he laughed, “Miss Sheila.”

“Good night, Mr.—Mr. Dakota,” she returned.

Sheila did not hear him again. Her thoughts dwelt for a little time on him and his mysterious manner, then they strayed. They returned presently and she concentrated her attention on the rain; she could hear the soft, steady patter of it on the roof; she listened to it trickling from the eaves and striking the glass in the window above her head. Gradually the soft patter seemed to draw farther away, became faint, and more faint, and finally she heard it no more.

CHAPTER III

CONVERGING TRAILS

It was the barking of a dog that brought Sheila out of a sleep—dreamless this time—into a state of semi-consciousness. It was Dakota's dog surely, she decided sleepily. She sighed and twisted to a more comfortable position. The effort awakened her and she opened her eyes, her gaze resting immediately on Dakota. He still sat at the table, silent, immovable, as before. But now he was sitting erect, his muscles tensed, his chin thrust out aggressively, his gaze on the door—listening. He seemed to be unaware of Sheila's presence; the sound that she had made in turning he apparently had not heard.

There was an interval of silence and then came a knocking on the door—loud, unmistakable. Some one desired admittance. After the knock came a voice:

“Hello inside!”

“Hello yourself!” Dakota's voice came with a truculent snap. “What's up?”

“Lookin' for a dry place,” came the voice from without. “Mebbe you don't know it's wet out here!”

Sheila's gaze was riveted on Dakota. He arose and noiselessly moved his chair back from the table and she saw a saturnine smile on his face, yet in his eyes there shone a glint of intolerance that mingled oddly with his gravity.

“You alone?” he questioned, his gaze on the door.

“Yes.”

“Who are you?”

“Campbellite preacher.”

For the first time since she had been awake Dakota turned and looked at Sheila. The expression of his face puzzled her. “A parson!” he sneered in a low voice. “I reckon we'll have some praying now.” He took a step forward, hesitated, and looked back at Sheila. “Do you want him in here?”

Sheila's nod brought a whimsical, shallow smile to his face. “Of course you do—you're lonesome in here.” There was mockery in his voice. He deliberately drew out his two guns, examined them minutely, returned one to his holster, retaining the other in his right hand. With a cold grin at Sheila he snuffed out the candle between a finger and a thumb and strode to the door—Sheila could hear him fumbling at the fastenings. He spoke to the man outside sharply.

“Come in!”

There was a movement; a square of light appeared in the wall of darkness; there came a step on the threshold. Watching, Sheila saw, framed in the open doorway, the dim outlines of a figure—a man.

“Stand right there,” came Dakota's voice from somewhere in the impenetrable darkness of the interior, and Sheila wondered at the hospitality that greeted a stranger with total darkness and a revolver. “Light a match.”

After a short interval of silence there came the sound of a match scratching on the wall, and a light flared up, showing Sheila the face of a man of sixty, bronzed, bearded, with gentle, quizzical eyes.

The light died down, the man waited. Sheila had forgotten—in her desire to see the face of the visitor—to look for Dakota, but presently she heard his voice:

“I reckon you're a parson, all right. Close the door.”

The parson obeyed the command. “Light the candle on the table!” came the order from Dakota. “I'm not taking any chances until I get a better look at you.”

Another match flared up and the parson advanced to the table and lighted the candle. He smiled while applying the match to the wick. “Don't pay to take no chances—on anything,” he agreed. He stood erect, a tall man, rugged and active for his sixty years, and threw off a rain-soaked tarpaulin. Some traces of dampness were visible on his clothing, but in the circumstances he had not fared so badly.

“It’s a new trail to me—I don’t know the country,” he went on. “If I hadn’t seen your light I reckon I’d have been goin’ yet. I was thinkin’ that it was mighty queer that you’d have a light goin’ so——” He stopped short, seeing Sheila sitting on the bunk. “Shucks, ma’am,” he apologized, “I didn’t know you were there.” His hat came off and dangled in his left hand; with the other he brushed back the hair from his forehead, smiling meanwhile at Sheila.

“Why, ma’am,” he said apologetically, “if your husband had told me you was here I’d have gone right on an’ not bothered you.”

Sheila’s gaze went from the parson’s face and sought Dakota’s, a crimson flood spreading over her face and temples. A slow, amused gleam filled Dakota’s eyes. But plainly he did not intend to set the parson right—he was enjoying Sheila’s confusion. The color fled from her face as suddenly as it had come and was succeeded by the pallor of a cold indignation.

“I’m not married,” she said instantly to the parson; “this gentleman is not my husband.”

“Not?” questioned the parson. “Then how——” He hesitated and looked quickly at Dakota, but the latter was watching Sheila with an odd smile and the parson looked puzzled.

“This is my first day in this country,” explained Sheila.

The parson did not reply to this, though he continued to watch her intently. She met his gaze steadily and he smiled. “I reckon you’ve been caught on the trail too,” he said, “by the storm.”

Sheila nodded.

“Well, it’s been right wet to-night, an’ it ain’t no night to be galivantin’ around the country. Where you goin’ to?”

“To the Double R ranch.”

“Where’s the Double R?” asked the parson.

“West,” Dakota answered for Sheila; “twenty miles.”

“Off my trail,” said the parson. “I’m travelin’ to Lazette.” He laughed, shortly. “I’m askin’ your pardon, ma’am, for takin’ you to be married; you don’t look like you belonged here—I ought to have knowed that right off.”

Sheila told him that he was forgiven and he had no comment to make on this, but looked at her appraisingly. He drew a bench up near the fire and sat looking at the licking flames, the heat drawing the steam from his clothing as the latter dried. Dakota supplied him with soda biscuit and cold bacon, and these he munched in contentment, talking meanwhile of his travels. Several times while he sat before the fire Dakota spoke to him, and finally he pulled his chair over near the wall opposite the bunk on which Sheila sat, tilted it back, and dropped into it, stretching out comfortably.

After seating himself, Dakota’s gaze sought Sheila. It was evident to Sheila that he was thinking pleasant thoughts, for several times she looked quickly at him to catch him smiling. Once she met his gaze fairly and was certain that she saw a crafty, calculating gleam in his eyes. She was puzzled, though there was nothing of fear from Dakota now; the presence of the parson in the cabin assured her of safety.

A half hour dragged by. The parson did not appear to be sleepy. Sheila glanced at her watch and saw that it was midnight. She wondered much at the parson’s wakefulness and her own weariness. But she could safely go to sleep now, she told herself, and she stretched noiselessly out on the bunk and with one arm bent under her head listened to the parson.

Evidently the parson was itinerant; he spoke of many places—Wyoming, Colorado, Nevada, Arizona, Texas; of towns in New Mexico. To Sheila, her senses dulled by the drowsiness that was stealing over her, it appeared that the parson was a foe to Science. His volubility filled the cabin; he contended sonorously that the earth was not round. The Scriptures, he maintained, held otherwise. He called Dakota’s attention to the seventh chapter of Revelation, verse one:

“And after these things I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, nor on the sea, nor on any tree.”

Several times Sheila heard Dakota laugh, mockingly; he was skeptical, caustic even, and he took issue with the parson. Between them they managed to prevent her falling asleep; kept her in a semidoze which was very near to complete wakefulness.

After a time, though, the argument grew monotonous; the droning of their voices seemed gradually to grow distant; Sheila

lost interest in the conversation and sank deeper into her doze. How long she had been unconscious of them she did not know, but presently she was awake again and listening. Dakota's laugh had awakened her. Out of the corners of her eyes she saw that he was still seated in the chair beside the wall and that his eyes were alight with interest as he watched the parson.

"So you're going to Lazette, taking it on to him?"

The parson nodded, smiling. "When a man wants to get married he'll not care much about the arrangements—how it gets done. What he wants to do is to get married."

"That's a queer angle," Dakota observed. He laughed immoderately.

The parson laughed with him. It *was* an odd situation, he agreed. Never, in all his experience, had he heard of anything like it.

He had stopped for a few hours at Dry Bottom. While there a rider had passed through, carrying word that a certain man in Lazette, called "Baldy," desired to get married. There was no minister in Lazette, not even a justice of the peace. But Baldy wanted to be married, and his bride-to-be objected to making the trip to Dry Bottom, where there were both a parson and a justice of the peace. Therefore, failing to induce the lady to go to the parson, it followed that Baldy must contrive to have the parson come to the lady. He dispatched the rider to Dry Bottom on this quest.

The rider had found that there was no regular parson in Dry Bottom and that the justice of the peace had departed the day before to some distant town for a visit. Luckily for Baldy's matrimonial plans, the parson had been in Dry Bottom when the rider arrived, and he readily consented—as he intended to pass through Lazette anyway—to carry Baldy's license to him and perform the ceremony.

"Odd, ain't it?" remarked the parson, after he had concluded.

"That's a queer angle," repeated Dakota. "You got the license?" he inquired softly. "Mebbe you've lost it."

"I reckon not." The parson fumbled in a pocket, drawing out a folded paper. "I've got it, right enough."

"You've got no objections to me looking at it?" came Dakota's voice. Sheila saw him rise. There was a strange smile on his face.

"No objections. I reckon you'll be usin' one yourself one of these days."

"One of these days," echoed Dakota with a laugh as strange as his smile a moment before. "Yes—I'm thinking of using one one of these days."

The parson spread the paper out on the table. Together he and Dakota bent their heads over it. After reading the license Dakota stood erect. He laughed, looking at the parson.

"There ain't a name on it," he said, "not a name."

"They're reckonin' to fill in the names when they're married," explained the parson. "That there rider ought to have knowed the names, but he didn't. Only knowed that the man was called 'Baldy.' Didn't know the bride's name at all. But it don't make any difference; they wouldn't have had to have a license at all in this Territory. But it makes it look more regular when they've got one. All that's got to be done is for Baldy to go over to Dry Bottom an' have the names recorded. Bein' as I can't go, I'm to certify in the license."

"Sure," said Dakota slowly. "It makes things more regular to have a license—more regular to have you certify."

Looking at Dakota, Sheila thought she saw in his face a certain preoccupation; he was evidently not thinking of what he was saying at all; the words had come involuntarily, automatically almost, it seemed, so inexpressive were they. "Sure," he repeated, "you're to certify, in the license."

It was as though he were reading aloud from a printed page, his thoughts elsewhere, and seeing only the words and uttering them unconsciously. Some idea had formed in his brain, he meditated some surprising action. That she was concerned in his thoughts Sheila did not doubt, for he presently turned and looked straight at her and in his eyes she saw a new expression—a cold, designing gleam that frightened her.

Five minutes later, when the parson announced his intention to care for his horse before retiring and stood in the doorway preparatory to going out, Sheila restrained an impulse to call to him to remain. She succeeded in quieting her fears, however, by assuring herself that nothing could happen now, with the parson so near. Thus fortified, she smiled at

Dakota as the parson stepped down and closed the door.

She drew a startled breath in the next instant, though, for without noticing her smile Dakota stepped to the door and barred it. Turning, he stood with his back against it, his lips in straight, hard lines, his eyes steady and gleaming brightly. He caught Sheila's gaze and held it; she trembled and sat erect.

"It's odd, ain't it?" he said, in the mocking voice that he had used when using the same words earlier in the evening.

"What is odd?" Hers was the same answer that she had used before, too—she could think of nothing else to say.

"Odd that he should come along just at this time." He indicated the door through which the parson had disappeared.

"You and me are here, and he comes. Who sent him?"

"Chance, I suppose," Sheila answered, though she could feel that there was a subtle undercurrent in his speech, and she felt again the strange unrest that had affected her several times before.

"You think it was chance," he said, drawling his words. "Well, maybe that's just as good a name for it as any other. But we don't all see things the same way, do we? We couldn't, of course, because we've all got different things to do. We think this is a big world and that we play a big game. But it's a little world and a little game when Fate takes a hand in it. I told you a while ago that Fate had a queer way of shuffling us around. That's a fact. And Fate is running this game." His mocking laugh had a note of grimness in it, which brought a chill over Sheila. "Just now, Miss Sheila, Fate is playing with brides and bridegrooms and marriages and parsons. That's what is so odd. Fate has supplied the parson and the license; we'll supply the names. Look at the bridegroom, Sheila," he directed, tapping his breast with a finger; "this is your wedding day!"

"What do you mean?" Sheila was on her feet, trembling, her face white with fear and dread.

"That we're to be married," he said, smiling at her, and she noted with a qualm that there was no mirth in the smile, "you and me. The parson will tie the knot."

"This is a joke, I suppose?" she said scornfully, attempting a lightness that she did not feel; "a crude one, to be sure, for you certainly cannot be serious."

"I was never more serious in my life," he said slowly. "We are to be married when the parson comes in."

"How do you purpose to accomplish this?" she jeered. "The parson certainly will not perform a marriage ceremony without the consent of—without my consent."

"I think," he said coldly, "that you will consent. I am not in a trifling mood. Just now it pleases me to imagine that I am an instrument of Fate. Maybe that sounds mysterious to you, but some day you will be able to see just how logical it all seems to me now, that Fate has sent me a pawn—a subject, if you please—to sacrifice, that the game which I have been playing may be carried to its conclusion."

Outside they heard the dog bark, heard the parson speak to it.

"The parson is coming," said Sheila, her joy over the impending interruption showing in her eyes.

"Yes, he is coming." Still with his back to the door, Dakota deliberately drew out one of his heavy pistols and examined it minutely, paying no attention to Sheila. Her eyes widened with fear as the hand holding the weapon dropped to his side and he looked at her again.

"What are you doing to do?" she demanded, watching these forbidding preparations with dilated eyes.

"That depends," he returned with a chilling laugh. "Have you ever seen a man die? No?" he continued as she shuddered. "Well, if you don't consent to marry me you will see the parson die. I have decided to give you the choice, ma'am," he went on in a quiet, determined voice, entirely free from emotion. "Sacrifice yourself and the parson lives; refuse and I shoot the parson down the instant he steps inside the door."

"Oh!" she cried in horror, taking a step toward him and looking into his eyes for evidence of insincerity—for the slightest sign that would tell her that he was merely trying to scare her. "Oh! you—you coward!" she cried, for she saw nothing in his eyes but cold resolution.

He smiled with straight lips. "You see," he mocked, "how odd it is? Fate is shuffling us three in this game. You have your choice. Do you care to be responsible for the death of a fellow being?"

For a tense instant she looked at him, and seeing the hard, inexorable glitter in his eyes she cringed away from him and sank to the edge of the bunk, covering her face with her hands.

During the silence that followed she could hear the parson outside—his voice, and the yelping of the dog—evidently they had formed a friendship. The sounds came nearer; Sheila heard the parson try the door. She became aware that Dakota was standing over her and she looked up, shivering, to see his face, still hard and unyielding.

“I am going to open the door,” he said. “Is it you or the parson?”

At that word she was on her feet, standing before him, rigid with anger, her eyes flaming with scorn and hatred.

“You wouldn’t dare to do it!” she said hoarsely; “you—you——” She snatched suddenly for the butt of the weapon that swung at his left hip, but with a quick motion he evaded the hand and stepped back a pace, smiling coldly.

“I reckon it’s the parson,” he said in a low voice, which carried an air of finality. He started for the door, hesitated, and came back to the bunk, standing in front of Sheila, looking down into her eyes.

“I am giving you one last chance,” he told her. “I am going to open the door. If you want the parson to die, don’t look at me when he steps in. If you want him to live, turn your back to him and walk to the fireplace.”

He walked to the door, unlocked it, and stepped back, his gaze on Sheila. Then the door opened slowly and the parson stood on the threshold, smiling.

“It’s sure some wet outside,” he said.

Dakota was fingering the cylinder of his revolver, his gaze now riveted on the parson.

“Why,” said the latter, in surprise, seeing the attitudes of Dakota and his guest, “what in the name of——”

There came a movement, and Sheila stood in front of Dakota, between him and the parson. For an instant she stood, looking at Dakota with a scornful, loathing gaze. Then with a dry sob, which caught in her throat, she moved past him and went to the fireplace, where she stood looking down at the flames.

CHAPTER IV

THIS PICTURE AND THAT

It was a scene of wild, virgin beauty upon which Sheila Langford looked as she sat on the edge of a grassy butte overlooking the Ute River, with Duncan, the Double R manager stretched out, full length beside her, a gigantic picture on Nature's canvas, glowing with colors which the gods had spread with a generous touch.

A hundred feet below Sheila and Duncan the waters of the river swept around the base of the butte, racing over a rocky bed toward a deep, narrow canyon farther down. Directly opposite the butte rose a short slope, forming the other bank of the river. From the crest of the slope began a plain that stretched for many miles, merging at the horizon into some pine-clad foothills. Behind the foothills were the mountains, their snow peaks shimmering in a white sky—remote, mysterious, seeming like guardians of another world. The chill of the mountains contrasted sharply with the slumberous luxuriance and color of the plains.

Miles of grass, its green but slightly dulled with a thin covering of alkali dust, spread over the plain; here and there a grove of trees rose, it seemed, to break the monotony of space. To the right the river doubled sharply, the farther bank fringed with alder and aspen, their tall stalks nodding above the nondescript river weeds; the near bank a continuing wall of painted buttes—red, picturesque, ragged, thrusting upward and outward over the waters of the river. On the left was a stretch of broken country. Mammoth boulders were strewn here; weird rocks arose in inconceivably grotesque formations; lava beds, dull and gray, circled the bald knobs of some low hills. Above it all swam the sun, filling the world with a clear, white light. It made a picture whose beauty might have impressed the most unresponsive. Yet, though Sheila was looking upon the picture, her thoughts were dwelling upon another.

This other picture was not so beautiful, and a vague unrest gripped Sheila's heart as she reviewed it, carefully going over each gloomy detail. It was framed in the rain and the darkness of a yesterday. There was a small clearing there—a clearing in a dense wood beside a river—the same river which she could have seen below her now, had she looked. In the foreground was a cabin. She entered the cabin and stood beside a table upon which burned a candle. A man stood beside the table also—a reckless-eyed man, holding a heavy revolver. Another man stood there, too—a man of God. While Sheila watched the man's lips opened; she could hear the words that came through them—she would never forget them:

“To have and to hold from this day forth ... till death do you part...”

It was not a dream, it was the picture of an actual occurrence. She saw every detail of it. She could hear her own protests, her threats, her pleadings; she lived over again her terror as she had crouched in the bunk until the dawn.

The man had not molested her, had not even spoken to her after the ceremony; had ignored her entirely. When the dawn came she had heard him talking to the parson, but could not catch their words. Later she had mounted her pony and had ridden away through the sunshine of the morning. She had been married—it was her wedding day.

When she had reached the crest of a long rise after her departure from the cabin she had halted her pony to look back, hoping that it all might have been a dream. But it had not been a dream. There was the dense wood, the clearing, and the cabin. Beside them was the river. And there, riding slowly away over the narrow trail which she had traveled the night before, was the parson—she could see his gray beard in the white sunlight. Dry eyed, she had turned from the scene. A little later, turning again, she saw the parson fade into the horizon. That, she knew, was the last she would ever see of him. He had gone out of her life forever—the desert had swallowed him up.

But the picture was still vivid; she had seen it during every waking moment of the month that she had been at the Double R ranch; it was before her every night in her dreams. It would not fade.

She knew that the other picture was beautiful—the picture of this world into which she had ridden so confidently, yet she was afraid to dwell upon it for fear that its beauty would seem to mock her. For had not nature conspired against her? Yet she knew that she alone was to blame—she, obstinate, willful, heedless. Had not her father warned her? “Wait,” he had said, and the words flamed before her eyes—“wait until I go. Wait a month. The West is a new country; anything, everything, can happen to you out there—alone.”

“Nothing can happen,” had been her reply. “I will go straight from Lazette to the Double R. See that you telegraph

instructions to Duncan to meet me. It will be a change; I am tired of the East and impatient to be away from it.”

Well, she had found a change. What would her father say when he heard of it—of her marriage to a cowboy, an unprincipled scoundrel? What could he say? The marriage could be annulled, of course! it was not legal, could not be legal. No law could be drawn which would recognize a marriage of that character, and she knew that she had only to tell her father to have the machinery of the law set in motion. Could she tell him? Could she bear his reproaches, his pity, after her heedlessness?

What would her friends say when they heard of it—as they must hear if she went to the law for redress? Her friends in the East whose good wishes, whose respect, she desired? Mockers there would be among them, she was certain; there were mockers everywhere, and she feared their taunts, the shafts of sarcasm that would be launched at her—aye, that would strike her—when they heard that she had passed a night in a lone cabin with a strange cowboy—had been married to him!

A month had passed since the afternoon on which she had ridden up to the porch of the Double R ranchhouse to be greeted by Duncan with the information that he had that morning received a telegram from her father announcing her coming. It had been brought from Lazette by a puncher who had gone there for the mail, and Duncan was at that moment preparing to drive to Lazette to meet her, under the impression that she would arrive that day. There had been a mistake, of course, but what did it matter now? The damage had been wrought and she closed her lips. A month had passed and she had not told—she would never tell.

Conversations she had had with Duncan; he seemed a gentleman, living at the Double R ranchhouse with his sister, but in no conversation with anyone had Sheila even mentioned Dakota’s name, fearing that something in her manner might betray her secret. To everyone but herself the picture of her adventure that night on the trail must remain invisible.

She looked furtively at Duncan, stretched out beside her on the grass. What would he say if he knew? He would not be pleased, she was certain, for during the month that she had been at the Double R—riding out almost daily with him—he had forced her to see that he had taken a liking to her—more, she herself had observed the telltale signs of something deeper than mere liking.

She had not encouraged this, of course, for she was not certain that she liked Duncan, though he had treated her well—almost too well, in fact, for she had at times felt a certain reluctance in accepting his little attentions—such personal service as kept him almost constantly at her side. His manner, too, was ingratiating; he smiled too much to suit her; his presumption of proprietorship over her irritated her not a little.

As she sat beside him on the grass she found herself studying him, as she had done many times when he had not been conscious of her gaze.

He was thirty-two,—he had told her so himself in a burst of confidence—though she believed him to be much older. The sprinkling of gray hair at his temples had caused her to place his age at thirty-seven or eight. Besides, there were the lines of his face—the set lines of character—indicating established habits of thought which would not show so deeply in a younger face. His mouth, she thought, was a trifle weak, yet not exactly weak either, but full-lipped and sensual, with little curves at the corners which, she was sure, indicated either vindictiveness or cruelty, perhaps both.

Taken altogether his was not a face to trust fully; its owner might be too easily guided by selfish considerations. Duncan liked to talk about himself; he had been talking about himself all the time that Sheila had sat beside him reviewing the mental picture. But apparently he had about exhausted that subject now, and presently he looked up at her, his eyes narrowing quizzically.

“You have been here a month now,” he said. “How do you like the country?”

“I like it,” she returned.

She was looking now at the other picture, watching the shimmer of the sun on the distant mountain peaks.

“It improves,” he said, “on acquaintance—like the people.” He flashed a smile at her, showing his teeth.

“I haven’t seen very many people,” she returned, not looking at him, but determined to ignore the personal allusion, to which, plainly, he had meant to guide her.

“But those that you have seen?” he persisted.

“I have formed no opinions.”

She *had* formed an opinion, though, a conclusive one—concerning Dakota. But she had no idea of communicating it to Duncan. Until now, strangely enough, she had had no curiosity concerning him. Bitter hatred and resentment had been so active in her brain that the latter had held no place for curiosity. Or at least, if it had been there, it had been a subconscious emotion, entirely overshadowed by bitterness. Of late, though her resentment toward Dakota had not abated, she had been able to review the incident of her marriage to him with more composure, and therefore a growing curiosity toward the man seemed perfectly justifiable. Curiosity moved her now as she smiled deliberately at Duncan.

“I have seen no one except your sister, a few cowboys, and yourself. I haven’t paid much attention to the cowboys, I like your sister, and I am not in the habit of telling people to their faces what I think of them. The country does not appear to be densely populated. Are there no other ranches around here—no other cattlemen?”

“The Double R ranch covers an area of one hundred and sixty square miles,” said Duncan. “The ranchhouse is right near the center of it. For about twenty miles in every direction you won’t find anybody but Double R men. There are line-camps, of course—dugouts where the men hang out over night sometimes—but that’s all. To my knowledge there are only two men with shacks around here, and they’re mostly of no account. One of them is Doubler—Ben Doubler—who hangs out near Two Forks, and the other is a fellow who calls himself Dakota, who’s got a shack about twenty miles down the Ute, a little off the Lazette trail.”

“They are ranchers, I suppose?”

Sheila’s face was averted so that Duncan might not see the interest in her eyes, or the red which had suddenly come into her cheeks.

“Ranchers?” There was a sneer in Duncan’s laugh. “Well, you might call them that. But they’re only nesters. They’ve got a few head of cattle and a brand. It’s likely they’ve put their brands on quite a few of the Double R cattle.”

“You mean——” began Sheila in a low voice.

“I mean that I think they’re rustlers—cattle thieves!” said Duncan venomously.

The flush had gone from Sheila’s cheeks; she turned a pale face to the Double R manager.

“How long have these men lived in the vicinity of the Double R?”

“Doubler has been hanging around here for seven or eight years. He was here when I came and mebbe he’s been here longer. Dakota’s been here about five years. He bought his brand—the Star—from another nester—Texas Blanca.”

“They’ve been stealing the Double R cattle, you say?” questioned Sheila.

“That’s what I think.”

“Why don’t you have them arrested?”

Duncan laughed mockingly. “Arrested! That’s good. You’ve been living where there’s law. But there’s no law out here; no law to cover cattle stealing, except our own. And then we’ve got to have the goods. The sheriff won’t do anything when cattle are stolen, but he acts mighty sudden when a man’s hung for stealing cattle, if the man ain’t caught with the goods.”

“Caught with the goods?”

“Caught in the act of stealing. If we catch a man with the goods and hang him there ain’t usually anything said.”

“And you haven’t been able to catch these men, Dakota and Doubler, in the act of stealing.”

“They’re too foxy.”

“If I were manager of this ranch and suspected anyone of stealing any of its cattle, I would catch them!” There was a note of angry impatience in Sheila’s voice which caused Duncan to look sharply at her. He reddened, suspecting disparagement of his managerial ability in the speech.

“Mebbe,” he said, with an attempt at lightness. “But as a general thing nosing out a rustler is a pretty ticklish proposition. Nobody goes about that work with a whole lot of enthusiasm.”

“Why?” There was scorn in Sheila’s voice, scorn in her uplifted chin. But she did not look at Duncan.

“Why?” he repeated. “Well, because it’s perfectly natural for a man to want to live as long as he can. I don’t like them nesters—Dakota especially—and I’d like mighty well to get something on them. But I ain’t taking any chances on

Dakota.”

“Why?” Again the monosyllable was pregnant with scorn.

“I forgot that you ain’t acquainted out here,” laughed the manager. “No one is taking any chances with Dakota—not even the sheriff. There’s something about the cuss which seems to discourage a man when he’s close to him—close enough to do any shooting. I’ve seen Dakota throw down on a man so quick that it would make you dizzy.”

“Throw down?”

“Shoot at a man. There was a gambler over in Lazette thought to euchre Dakota. A gunman he was, from Texas, and—well, they carried the gambler out. It was done so sudden that nobody saw it.”

“Killed him?” There was repressed horror in Sheila’s voice.

“No, he wasn’t entirely put out of business. Dakota only made him feel cheap. Creased him.”

“Creased him?”

“Grazed his head with the bullet. Done it intentionally, they say. Told folks he didn’t have any desire to send the gambler over the divide; just wanted to show him that when he was playin’ with fire he ought to be careful. There ain’t no telling what Dakota’d do if he got riled, though.”

Sheila’s gaze was on Duncan fairly, her eyes alight with contempt. “So you are all afraid of him?” she said, with a bitterness that surprised the manager.

“Well, I reckon it would amount to about that, if you come right down to the truth,” he confessed, reddening a little.

“You are afraid of him, too I suppose?”

“I reckon it ain’t just that,” he parried, “but I ain’t taking any foolish risks.”

Sheila rose and walked to her pony, which was browsing the tops of some mesquite near by. She reached the animal, mounted, and then turned and looked at Duncan scornfully.

“A while ago you asked for my opinion of the people of this country,” she said. “I am going to express that opinion now. It is that, in spite of his unsavory reputation, Dakota appears to be the only *man* here!”

She took up the reins and urged her pony away from the butte and toward the level that stretched away to the Double R buildings in the distance. For an instant Duncan stood looking after her, his face red with embarrassment, and then with a puzzled frown he mounted and followed her.

Later he came up with her at the Double R corral gate and resumed the conversation.

“Then I reckon you ain’t got no use for rustlers?” he said.

“Meaning Dakota?” she questioned, a smoldering fire in her eyes.

“I reckon.”

“I wish,” she said, facing Duncan, her eyes flashing, “that you would kill him!”

“Why——” said Duncan, changing color.

But Sheila had dismounted and was walking rapidly toward the ranchhouse, leaving Duncan alone with his unfinished speech and his wonder.

CHAPTER V

DAKOTA EVENS A SCORE

With the thermometer at one hundred and five it was not to be expected that there would be much movement in Lazette. As a matter of fact, there was little movement anywhere. On the plains, which began at the edge of town, there was no movement, no life except when a lizard, seeking a retreat from the blistering sun, removed itself to a deeper shade under the leaves of the sage-brush, or a prairie-dog, popping its head above the surface of the sand, took a lightning survey of its surroundings, and apparently dissatisfied with the outlook whisked back into the bowels of the earth.

There was no wind, no motion; the little whirlwinds of dust that arose settled quickly down, the desultory breezes which had caused them departing as mysteriously as they had come. In the blighting heat the country lay, dead, spreading to the infinite horizons; in the sky no speck floated against the dome of blue. More desolate than a derelict on the calm surface of the trackless ocean Lazette lay, its huddled buildings dingy with the dust of a continuing dry season, squatting in their dismal lonesomeness in the shimmering, blinding sun.

In a strip of shade under the eaves of the station sat the station agent, gazing drowsily from under the wide brim of his hat at the two glistening lines of steel that stretched into the interminable distance. Some cowponies, hitched to rails in front of the saloons and the stores, stood with drooping heads, tormented by myriad flies; a wagon or two, minus horses, occupied a space in front of a blacksmith shop.

In the Red Dog saloon some punchers on a holiday played cards at various tables, quietly drinking. Behind the rough bar Pete Moulin, the proprietor stood, talking to his bartender, Blacky.

“So that Jasper’s back again,” commented the proprietor.

“Which?” The bartender followed the proprietor’s gaze, which was on a man seated at a card table, his profile toward them, playing cards with several other men. The bartender’s face showed perplexity.

Moulin laughed. “I forgot you ain’t been here that long,” he said. “That was before your time. That fellow settin’ sideways to us is Texas Blanca.”

“What’s he callin’ himself ‘Texas’ for?” queried the bartender. “He looks more like a greaser.”

“Breed, I reckon,” offered the proprietor. “Claims to have punched cows in Texas before he come here.”

“What’s he allowin’ to be now?”

“Nobody knows. Used to own the Star—Dakota’s brand. Sold out to Dakota five years ago. Country got too hot for him an’ he had to pull his freight.”

“Rustler?”

“You’ve said something. He’s been suspected of it. But nobody’s talkin’ very loud about it.”

“Not safe?”

“Not safe. He’s lightning with a six. Got his nerve to come back here, though.”

“How’s that?”

“Ain’t you heard about it? I thought everybody’d heard about that deal. Blanca sold Dakota the Star. Then he pulled his freight immediate. A week or so later Duncan, of the Double R, rides up to Dakota’s shack with a bunch of Double R boys an’ accuses Dakota of rustlin’ Double R cattle. Duncan had found twenty Double R calves runnin’ with the Star cattle which had been marked secret. Blanca had run his iron on them an’ sold them to Dakota for Star stock. Dakota showed Duncan his bill of sale, all regular, an’ of course Duncan couldn’t blame him. But there was some hard words passed between Duncan an’ Dakota, an’ Dakota ain’t allowin’ they’re particular friends since.

“Dakota had to give up the calves, sure enough, an’ he did. But sore! Dakota was sure some disturbed in his mind. He didn’t show it much, bein’ one of them quiet kind, but he says to me one day not long after Duncan had got the calves back: ‘I’ve been stung, Pete,’ he says, soft an’ even like; ‘I’ve been stung proper, by that damned oiler. Not that I’m carin’ for the money end of it; Duncan findin’ them calves with my stock has damaged my reputation.’ Then he laffed—

one of them little short laffs which he gets off sometimes when things don't just suit him—the way he's laffed a couple of times when someone's tried to run a cold lead proposition in on him. He fair freezes my blood when he gets it off.

“Well, he says to me: ‘Mebbe I'll be runnin' in with Blanca one of these days.’ An' that's all he ever says about it. Likely he expected Blanca to come back. An' sure enough he has. Reckon he thinks that mebbe Dakota didn't get wise to the calf deal.”

“In his place,” said Blacky, eyeing Blanca furtively, “I'd be makin' some inquiries. Dakota ain't no man to trifle with.”

“Trifle!” Moulin's voice was pregnant with awed admiration. “I reckon there ain't no one who knows Dakota's goin' to trifle with him—he's discouraged that long ago. Square, too, square as they make 'em.”

“The Lord knows the country needs square men,” observed Blacky.

He caught a sign from a man seated at a table and went over to him with a bottle and a glass. While Blacky was engaged in this task the door opened and Dakota came in.

Moulin's admiration and friendship for Dakota might have impelled him to warn Dakota of the presence of Blanca, and he did hold up a covert finger, but Dakota at that moment was looking in another direction and did not observe the signal.

He continued to approach the bar and Blacky, having a leisure moment, came forward and stood ready to serve him. A short nod of greeting passed between the three, and Blacky placed a bottle on the bar and reached for a glass. Dakota made a negative sign with his head—short and resolute.

“I'm in for supplies,” he laughed, “but not that.”

“Not drinkin'?” queried Moulin.

“I'm pure as the driven snow,” drawled Dakota.

“How long has that been goin' on?” Moulin's grin was skeptical.

“A month.”

Moulin looked searchingly at Dakota, saw that he was in earnest, and suddenly reached a hand over the bar.

“Shake!” he said. “I hate to knock my own business, an' you've been a pretty good customer, but if you mean it, it's the most sensible thing you ever done. Of course you didn't hit it regular, but there's been times when I've thought that if I could have three or four customers like you I'd retire in a year an' spend the rest of my life countin' my dust!” He was suddenly serious, catching Dakota's gaze and winking expressively.

“Friend of yourn here,” he said.

Dakota took a flashing glance at the men at the card tables and Moulin saw his lips straighten and harden. But in the next instant he was smiling gravely at the proprietor.

“Thanks, Pete,” he said quietly. “But you're some reckless with the English language when you're calling him my friend. Maybe he'll be proving that he didn't mean to skin me on that deal.”

He smiled again and then left the bar and strode toward Blanca. The latter continued his card playing, apparently unaware of Dakota's approach, but at the sound of his former victim's voice he turned and looked up slowly, his face wearing a bland smile.

It was plain to Moulin that Blanca had known all along of Dakota's presence in the saloon—perhaps he had seen him enter. The other card players ceased playing and leaned back in their chairs, watching, for some of them knew something of the calf deal, and there was that in Dakota's greeting to Blanca which warned them of impending trouble.

“Blanca,” said Dakota quietly, “you can pay for those calves now.”

It pleased Blanca to dissemble. But it was plain to Moulin—as it must have been plain to everybody who watched Blanca—that a shadow crossed his face at Dakota's words. Evidently he had entertained a hope that his duplicity had not been discovered.

“Calves?” he said. “What calves, my frien'?” He dropped his cards to the table and turned his chair around, leaning far back in it and hooking his right thumb in his cartridge belt, just above the holster of his pistol. “I theenk it mus' be mistak'.”

“Yes,” returned Dakota, a slow, grimly humorous smile reaching his face, “it was a mistake. You made it, Blanca. Duncan found it out. Duncan took the calves—they belonged to him. You’re going to pay for them.”

“I pay for heem?” The bland smile on Blanca’s face had slowly faded with the realization that his victim was not to be further misled by him. In place of the smile his face now wore an expression of sneering contempt, and his black eyes had taken on a watchful glitter. He spoke slowly: “I pay for no calves, my frien’.”

“You’ll pay,” said Dakota, an ominously quiet drawl in his voice, “or——”

“Or what?” Blanca showed his white teeth in a tigerish smirk.

“This town ain’t big enough for both of us,” said Dakota, his eyes cold and alert as they watched Blanca’s hand at his cartridge belt. “One of us will leave it by sundown. I reckon that’s all.”

He deliberately turned his back on Blanca and walked to the door, stepping down into the street. Blanca looked after him, sneering. An instant later Blanca turned and smiled at his companions at the table.

“It ain’t my funeral,” said one of the card players, “but if I was in your place I’d begin to think that me stayin’ here was crowdin’ the population of this town by one.”

Blanca’s teeth gleamed. “My frien’,” he said insinuatingly, “it’s your deal.” His smile grew. “Thees is a nize country,” he continued. “I like it ver’ much. I come back here to stay. Dakota—hees got the Star too cheap.” He tapped his gun holster significantly. “To-night Dakota hees go somewhere else. To-morrow who takes the Star? You?” He pointed to each of the card players in turn. “You?” he questioned. “You take it?” He smiled at their negative signs. “Well, then, Blanca take it. Peste! Dakota give himself till sundown!”

The six-o’clock was an hour and thirty minutes late. For two hours Sheila Langford had been on the station platform awaiting its coming. For a full half hour she had stood at one corner of the platform straining her eyes to watch a thin skein of smoke that trailed off down the horizon, but which told her that the train was coming. It crawled slowly—like a huge serpent—over the wilderness of space, growing always larger, steaming its way through the golden sunshine of the afternoon, and after a time, with a grinding of brakes and the shrill hiss of escaping air, it drew alongside the station platform.

A brakeman descended, the conductor strode stiffly to the telegrapher’s window, two trunks came out of the baggage car, and a tall man of fifty alighted and was folded into Sheila’s welcoming arms. For a moment the two stood thus, while the passengers smiled sympathetically. Then the man held Sheila off at arm’s length and looked searchingly at her.

“Crying?” he said. “What a welcome!”

“Oh, daddy!” said Sheila. In this moment she was very near to telling him what had happened to her on the day of her arrival at Lazette, but she felt that it was impossible with him looking at her; she could not at a blow cast a shadow over the joy of his first day in the country where, henceforth, he was to make his home. And so she stood sobbing softly on his shoulder while he, aware of his inability to cope with anything so mysterious as a woman’s tears, caressed her gently and waited patiently for her to regain her composure.

“Then nothing happened to you after all,” he laughed, patting her cheeks. “Nothing, in spite of my croaking.”

“Nothing,” she answered. The opportunity was gone now; she was committed irrevocably to her secret.

“You like it here? Duncan has made himself agreeable?”

“It is a beautiful country, though a little lonesome after—after Albany. I miss my friends, of course. But Duncan’s sister has done her best, and I have been able to get along.”

The engine bell clanged and they stood side by side as the train pulled slowly away from the platform. Langford solemnly waved a farewell to it.

“This is the moment for which I have been looking for months,” he said, with what, it seemed to Sheila, was almost a sigh of relief. He turned to her with a smile. “I will look after the baggage,” he said, and leaving her he approached the station agent and together they examined the trunks which had come out of the baggage car.

Sheila watched him while he engaged in this task. His face seemed a trifle drawn; he had aged much during the month that she had been separated from him. The lines of his face had grown deeper; he seemed, now that she saw him at a distance, to be care-worn—tired. She had heard people call him a hard man; she knew that business associates had

complained of what they were pleased to call his “sharp methods”; it had even been hinted that his “methods” were irregular.

It made no difference to her, however, what people thought of him, or what they said of him, he had been a kind and indulgent parent to her and she supposed that in business it was everybody’s business to look sharply after their own interests. For there were jealous people everywhere; envy stalks rampant through the world; failure cavils at mediocrity, mediocrity sneers at genius. And Sheila had always considered her father a genius, and the carping of those over whom her father had ridden roughshod had always sounded in her ears like tributes.

As quite unconsciously we are prone to place the interests of self above considerations for the comfort and the convenience of others, so Sheila had grown to judge her father through the medium of his treatment of her. Her own father—who had died during her infancy—could not have treated her better than had Langford. Since her mother’s death some years before, Langford had been both father and mother to her, and her affection for him had flourished in the sunshine of his. No matter what other people thought, she was satisfied with him.

As a matter of fact David Dowd Langford allowed no one—not even Sheila—to look into his soul. What emotions slumbered beneath the mask of his habitual imperturbability no one save Langford himself knew. During all his days he had successfully fought against betraying his emotions and now, at the age of fifty, there was nothing of his character revealed in his face except sternness. If addicted to sharp practice in business no one would be likely to suspect it, not even his victim. Could one have looked steadily into his eyes one might find there a certain gleam to warn one of trickery, only one would not be able to look steadily into them, for the reason that they would not allow you. They were shifty, crafty eyes that took one’s measure when one least expected them to do so.

Over the motive which had moved her father to retire from business while still in his prime Sheila did not speculate. Nor had she speculated when he had bought the Double R ranch and announced his intention to spend the remainder of his days on it. She supposed that he had grown tired of the unceasing bustle and activity of city life, as had she, and longed for something different, and she had been quite as eager as he to take up her residence here. This had been the limit of her conjecturing.

He had told her when she left Albany that he would follow her in a month. And therefore, in a month to the day, knowing his habit of punctuality, Sheila had come to Lazette for him, having been driven over from the Double R by one of the cowboys.

She saw the station agent now, beckoning to the driver of the wagon, and she went over to the edge of the station platform and watched while the trunks were tumbled into the wagon.

The driver was grumbling good naturedly to Langford.

“That darned six-o’clock train is always late,” he was saying. “It’s a quarter to eight now an’ the sun is goin’ down. If that train had been on time we could have made part of the trip in the daylight.”

The day had indeed gone. Sheila looked toward the mountains and saw that great long shadows were lengthening from their bases; the lower half of the sun had sunk behind a distant peak; the quiet colors of the sunset were streaking the sky and glowing over the plains.

The trunks were in; the station agent held the horses by the bridles, quieting them; the driver took up the reins; Sheila was helped to the seat by her father, he jumped in himself, and they were off down the street, toward a dim trail that led up a slope that began at the edge of town and melted into space.

The town seemed deserted. Sheila saw a man standing near the front door of a saloon, his hands on his hips. He did not appear interested in either the wagon or its occupants; his gaze roved up and down the street and he nervously fingered his cartridge belt. He was a brown-skinned man, almost olive, Sheila thought as her gaze rested on him, attired after the manner of the country, with leathern chaps, felt hat, boots, spurs, neckerchief.

“Why, it is sundown already!” Sheila heard her father say. “What a sudden change! A moment ago the light was perfect!”

A subconscious sense only permitted Sheila to hear her father’s voice, for her thoughts and eyes were just then riveted on another man who had come out of the door of another saloon a little way down the street. She recognized the man as Dakota and exclaimed sharply.

She felt her father turn; heard the driver declare, “It’s comin’ off,” though she had not the slightest idea of his meaning. Then she realized that he had halted the horses; saw that he had turned in his seat and was watching something to the rear

of them intently.

“We’re out of range,” she heard him say, speaking to her father.

“What’s wrong?” This was her father’s voice.

“Dakota an’ Blanca are havin’ a run-in,” announced the driver. “Dakota’s give Blanca till sundown to get out of town. It’s sundown now an’ Blanca ain’t pulled his freight, an’ it’s likely that hell will be a-poppin’ sorta sudden.”

Sheila cowered in her seat, half afraid to look at Dakota—who was walking slowly toward the man who still stood in front of the saloon—though in spite of her fears and misgivings the fascination of the scene held her gaze steadily on the chief actors.

Out of the corners of her eyes she could see that far down the street men were congregated; they stood in doorways, at convenient corners, their eyes directed toward Dakota and the other man. In the sepulchral calm which had fallen there came to Sheila’s ears sounds that in another time she would not have noticed. Somewhere a door slammed; there came to her ears the barking of a dog, the neigh of a horse—sharply the sounds smote the quiet atmosphere, they seemed odd to the point of unreality.

However, the sounds did not long distract her attention from the chief actors in the scene which was being worked out in front of her; the noises died away and she gave her entire attention to the men. She saw Dakota reach a point about thirty feet from the man in front of the saloon—Blanca. As Dakota continued to approach, Sheila observed an evil smile flash suddenly to Blanca’s face; saw a glint of metal in the faint light; heard the crash of his revolver; shuddered at the flame spurt. She expected to see Dakota fall—hoped that he might. Instead, she saw him smile—in much the fashion in which he had smiled that night in the cabin when he had threatened to shoot the parson if she did not consent to marry him. And then his hand dropped swiftly to the butt of the pistol at his right hip.

Sheila’s eyes closed; she swayed and felt her father’s arm come out and grasp her to keep her from falling. But she was not going to fall; she had merely closed her eyes to blot out the scene which she could not turn from. She held her breath in an agony of suspense, and it seemed an age until she heard a crashing report—and then another. Then silence.

Unable longer to resist looking, Sheila opened her eyes. She saw Dakota walk forward and stand over Blanca, looking down at him, his pistol still in hand. Blanca was face down in the dust of the street, and as Dakota stood over him Sheila saw the half-breed’s body move convulsively and then become still. Dakota sheathed his weapon and, without looking toward the wagon in which Sheila sat, turned and strode unconcernedly down the street. A man came out of the door of the saloon in front of which Blanca’s body lay, looking down at it curiously. Other men were running toward the spot; there were shouts, oaths.

For the first time in her life Sheila had seen a man killed—murdered—and there came to her a recollection of Dakota’s words that night in the cabin: “Have you ever seen a man die?” She had surmised from his manner that night that he would not hesitate to kill the parson, and now she knew that her sacrifice had not been made in vain. A sob shook her, the world reeled, blurred, and she covered her face with her hands.

“Oh!” she said in a strained, hoarse voice. “Oh! The brute!”

“Hey!” From a great distance the driver’s voice seemed to come. “Hey! What’s that? Well, mebbe. But I reckon Blanca won’t rustle any more cattle.” “God!” he added in an awed voice; “both of them hit him!”

Blanca was dead then, there could be no doubt of that. Sheila felt herself swaying and tried to grasp the end of the seat to steady herself. She heard her father’s voice raised in alarm, felt his arm come out again and grasp her, and then darkness settled around her.

When she recovered consciousness her father’s arms were still around her and the buckboard was in motion. Dusk had come; above her countless stars flickered in the deep blue of the sky.

“I reckon she’s plum shocked,” she heard the driver say.

“I don’t wonder,” returned Langford, and Sheila felt a shiver run over him. “Great guns!” Sheila wondered at the tone he used. “That man is a marvel with a pistol! Did you notice how cool he took it?”

“Cool!” The driver laughed. “If you get acquainted with Dakota you’ll find out that he’s cool. He’s an iceberg, that’s what he is!”

“They’ll arrest him, I suppose?” queried Langford.

“Arrest him! What for? Didn’t he give Blanca his chance? That’s why I’m tellin’ you he’s cool!”

It was past two o’clock when the buckboard pulled up at the Double R corral gates and Langford helped Sheila down. She was still pale and trembling and did not remain downstairs to witness her father’s introduction to Duncan’s sister, but went immediately to her room. Sleep was far from her, however, for she kept dwelling over and over on the odd fortune which had killed Blanca and allowed Dakota to live, when the latter’s death would have brought to an end the distasteful relationship which his freakish impulse had forced upon her.

She remembered Dakota’s words in the cabin. Was Fate indeed running this game—if game it might be called?

CHAPTER VI

KINDRED SPIRITS

Looking rather more rugged than when he had arrived at the station at Lazette two weeks before, his face tanned, but still retaining the smooth, sleek manner which he had brought with him from the East, David Dowd Langford sat in a big rocking chair on the lower gallery of the Double R ranchhouse, mentally appraising Duncan, who was seated near by, his profile toward Langford.

“So this Ben Doubler has been a thorn in your side?” questioned Langford softly.

“That’s just it,” returned Duncan, with an evil smile. “He has been and still is. And now I’m willing him to you. I don’t know when I’ve been more tickled over getting rid of a man.”

“Well,” said Langford, leaning farther back in his chair and clasping his hands, resting his chin on his thumbs, his lips curving with an ironic smile, “I suppose I ought to feel extremely grateful to you—especially since when I was negotiating the purchase of the ranch you didn’t hint of a nester being on the property.”

“I didn’t sell Doubler to you,” said Duncan.

Langford’s smile was shallow. “But I get him just the same,” he said. “As a usual thing it is pretty hard to get rid of a nester, isn’t it?”

“I haven’t been able to get rid of this one,” returned Duncan. “He don’t seem to be influenced by anything I say, or do. Some obstinate.”

“Tried everything?”

“Yes.”

“The law?”

Duncan made a gesture of disgust. “The law!” he said. “What for? I haven’t been such a fool. He’s got as much right to the open range as I have—as you will have. I bought a section, and he took up a quarter section. The only difference between us is that I own mine—or did own it until you bought it—and he ain’t proved on his. He is on the other side of the river and I’m on this. Or rather,” he added with a grin, “he’s on the other side and you are on this. He’s got the best grass land in the country—and plenty of water.”

“His rights, then,” remarked Langford slowly, “equal yours—or mine. That is,” he added, “he makes free use of the grass and water.”

“That’s so,” agreed Duncan.

“Which reduces the profits of the Double R,” pursued Langford.

“I reckon that’s right.”

“And you knew that when you sold me the Double R,” continued Langford, his voice smooth and silky.

Duncan flashed a grin at the imperturbable face of the new owner. “I reckon I wasn’t entirely ignorant of it,” he said.

“That’s bad business,” remarked Langford in a detached manner.

“What is?” Duncan’s face reddened slightly. “You mean that it was bad business for me to sell when I knowed Doubler owned land near the Double R?” There was a slight sneer in his voice as he looked at Langford. “You’ve never been stung before, eh? Well, there’s always a first time for everything, and I reckon—according to what I’ve heard—that you ain’t been exactly no Sunday school scholar yourself.”

Langford’s eyes were narrowed to slits. “I meant that it was bad business to allow Doubler’s presence on the Two Forks to affect the profits of the Double R. Perhaps I have been stung—as you call it—but if I have been I am not complaining.”

Duncan’s eyes glinted with satisfaction. He had expected a burst of anger from the new owner when he should discover that the value of his property was impaired by the presence of a nester near it, but the new owner apparently harbored no resentment over this unforeseen obstacle.

“I’m admitting,” said Duncan, “that Doubler being there is bad business. But how are you going to prevent him staying there?”

“Have you tried”—Langford looked obliquely at Duncan, drawling significantly—“force?”

“I have tried everything, I told you.”

Duncan gazed at Langford with a new interest. It was the first time since the new owner had come to the Double R that he had dropped the mask of sleek smoothness behind which he concealed his passions. Even now the significance was more in his voice than in his words, and Duncan began to comprehend that Langford was deeper than he had thought.

“I’m glad to see that you appreciate the situation,” he said, smiling craftily. “Some men are mighty careful not to do anything to hurt anybody else.”

Langford favored Duncan with a steady gaze, which the latter returned, and both smiled.

“Business,” presently said Langford with a quiet significance which was not lost on Duncan, “good business, demands the application of certain methods which are not always agreeable to the opposition.” He took another sly glance at Duncan. “There ought to be a good many ways of making it plain to Doubler that he isn’t wanted in this section of the country,” he insinuated.

“I’ve tried to make some of the ways plain,” said Duncan with a cold grin. “I got to the end of my string and hadn’t any more things to try. That’s why I decided to sell. I wanted to get away where I wouldn’t be bothered. But I reckon that you’ll be able to fix up something for him.”

During the two weeks that Langford had been at the Double R Duncan had studied him from many angles and this exchange of talk had convinced him that he had not erred in his estimate of the new owner’s character. As he had hinted to Langford, he had tried many plans to rid the country of the nester, and he remembered a time when Doubler had seen through one of his schemes to fasten the crime of rustling on him and had called him to account, and the recollection of what had happened at the interview between them was not pleasant. He had not bothered Doubler since that time, though there had lingered in his heart a desire for revenge. Many times, on some pretext or other, he had tried to induce his men to clash with Doubler, but without success. It had appeared to him that his men suspected his motives and deliberately avoided the nester.

With a secret satisfaction he had watched Langford’s face this morning when he had told him that Doubler had long been suspected of rustling; that the men of the Double R had never been able to catch him in the act, but that the number of cattle missing had seemed to indicate the nester’s guilt.

Doubler’s land was especially desirable, he had told Langford, and this was the truth. It was a quarter section lying adjacent to good water, and provided the best grass in the vicinity. Duncan had had trouble with Doubler over the water rights, too, but had been unsuccessful in ousting him because of the fact that since Doubler controlled the land he also controlled the water rights of the river adjoining it. The Two Forks was the only spot which could be used by thirsty cattle in the vicinity, for the river at other points was bordered with cliffs and hills and was inaccessible. And Doubler would not allow the Double R cattle to water at the Two Forks, though he had issued this edict after his trouble with the Double R owner. Duncan, however, did not explain this to Langford.

The latter looked at him with a smooth smile. “It is plain from what you have been telling me,” he said, “that there is no possibility of your succeeding in reaching a satisfactory agreement with Doubler, and therefore I expect that I will have to deal with him personally. I shall ride over some day and have a talk with him.”

The prospect of becoming involved with the nester gave Langford a throb of joy. All his life he had been engaged in the task of overcoming business obstacles and he had reached the conclusion that the situation which now confronted him was nothing more or less than business. Of course it was not the business to which he had been accustomed, but it offered the opportunity for cold-blooded, merciless planning for personal gain; there were the elements of profit and loss; it would give him an opportunity to apply his peculiar genius, to grapple, to battle, and finally overthrow the opposing force.

Though he had allowed Duncan to see nothing of the emotions that rioted within him over the discovery that he had been victimized by the latter—at least to the extent of misrepresentation in the matter of the nester—there was in his mind a feeling of deep resentment against the former owner; he felt that he could no longer trust him, but for the sake of learning all the details of the new business he felt that he would have to make the best of a bad bargain. He had already arranged

with Duncan to remain at the Double R throughout the season, but he purposed to leave him out of any dealings that he might have with Doubler. He smiled as he looked at Duncan.

“I like this country,” he said, leaning back in his chair and drawing a deep breath. “I was rather afraid at first that I would find it dull after the East. But this situation gives promise of action.”

Duncan was watching him with a crafty smile. “You reckon on running him off, or——” He leered at Langford significantly.

The latter’s face was impassive, his smile dry. “Eh?” he said, abstractedly, as though his thoughts had been wandering from the subject. “Why, I really haven’t given a thought to the method by which I ought to deal with Doubler. Perhaps,” he added with a genial smile, “I may make a friend of him.”

He observed Duncan’s scowl and his smile grew.

CHAPTER VII

BOGGED DOWN

Each day during the two weeks that her father had been at the Double R Sheila had accompanied him on his rides of exploration. She had grown tired of the continued companionship, and despite the novelty of the sight she had become decidedly wearied of looking at the cowboys in their native haunts. Not that they did not appeal to her, for on the contrary she had found them picturesque and had admired their manliness, but she longed to ride out alone where she could brood over her secret. The possession of it had taken the flavor out of the joys of this new life, had left it flat and filled with bitter memories.

She had detected a change in her father—he seemed coarse, domineering, entirely unlike his usual self. She attributed this change in him to the country—it was hard and rough, and of course it was to be expected that Langford—or any man, for that matter—taking an active interest in ranch life, must reflect the spirit of the country.

She had developed a positive dislike for Duncan, which she took no trouble to conceal. She had discovered that the suspicions she had formed of his character during the first days of their acquaintance were quite correct—he was selfish, narrow, and brutal. He had accompanied her and her father on all their trips and his manner toward her had grown to be one of easy familiarity. This was another reason why she wanted to ride alone.

The day before she had spoken to Langford concerning the continued presence of Duncan on their rides, and he had laughed at her, assuring her that Duncan was not a “bad fellow,” and though she had not taken issue with him on this point she had decided that hereafter, in self protection, she would discontinue her rides with her father as long as he was accompanied by the former owner.

Determined to carry out this decision, she was this morning saddling her pony at the corral gates when she observed Duncan standing near, watching her.

“You might have let me throw that saddle on,” he said.

She flushed, angered that he should have been watching her without making his presence known. “I prefer to put the saddle on myself,” she returned, busying herself with it after taking a flashing glance at him.

He laughed, pulled out a package of tobacco and some paper, and proceeded to roll a cigarette. When he had completed it he held a match to it and puffed slowly.

“Cross this morning,” he taunted.

There was no reply, though Duncan might have been warned by the dark red in her cheeks. She continued to work with the saddle, lacing the latigo strings and tightening the cinches.

“We’re riding down to the box canyon on the other side of the basin this morning,” said Duncan. “We’ve got some strays penned up there. But your dad won’t be ready for half an hour yet. You’re in something of a hurry, it seems.”

“You are going, I suppose?” questioned Sheila, pulling at the rear cinch, the pony displaying a disinclination to allow it to be buckled.

“I reckon.”

“I don’t see,” said Sheila, straightening and facing him, “why you have to go with father everywhere.”

Duncan flushed. “Your father’s aiming to learn the business,” he said. “I’m showing him, telling him what I know about it. There’s a chance that I won’t be with the Double R after the fall round-up, if a deal which I have got on goes through.”

“And I suppose you have a corner on all the knowledge of ranch life,” suggested Sheila sarcastically.

He flushed darkly, but did not answer.

After Sheila had completed the tightening of the cinches she led the pony beside the corral fence, mounted, and without looking at Duncan started to ride away.

“Wait!” he shouted, and she drew the pony to a halt and sat in the saddle, looking down at him with a contemptuous gaze

as he stood in front of her.

“I thought you was going with your father?” he said.

“You are mistaken.” She could not repress a smile over the expression of disappointment on his face. But without giving him any further satisfaction she urged her pony forward, leaving him standing beside the corral gates watching her with a frown.

She smiled many times while riding toward the river, thinking of his discomfiture, reveling in the thought that for once she had shown him that she resented the attitude of familiarity which he had adopted toward her.

She sat erect in the saddle, experiencing a feeling of elation which brought the color into her face and brightened her eyes. It was the first time since her arrival at the Double R that she had been able to ride out alone, and it was also the first time that she really appreciated the vastness and beauty of the country. For the trail to the river, which she had decided she would follow, led through a fertile country where the bunch grass grew long and green, the barren stretches of alkali were infrequent, and where the low wooded hills and the shallow gullies seemed to hint at the mystery. Before long the depression which had made her life miserable had fled and she was enjoying herself.

When she reached the river she crossed it at a shallow and urged her pony up a sloping bank and out upon a grass plain that spread away like the level of a great, green sea. Once into the plain, though, she discovered that its promise of continuing green was a mere illusion, for the grass grew here in bunches, the same as it grew on the Double R side of the river. Yet though she was slightly disappointed she found many things to interest her, and she lingered long over the odd rock formations that she encountered and spent much time peering down into gullies and exploring sand draws which seemed to be on every side.

About noon, when she became convinced that she had seen everything worth seeing in that section of the country, she wheeled her pony and headed it back toward the river. She reached it after a time and urged her beast along its banks, searching for the shallow which she had crossed some time before. A dim trail led along the river and she felt certain that if she followed it long enough it would lead her to the crossing, but after riding half an hour and encountering nothing but hills and rock cliffs she began to doubt. But she rode on for another half hour and then, slightly disturbed over her inability to find the shallow, she halted the pony and looked about her.

The country was strange and unfamiliar and a sudden misgiving assailed her. Had she lost her idea of direction? She looked up at the sun and saw that it was slightly past the zenith on its downward path. She smiled. Of course all she had to do was to follow the river and in time she would come in sight of the Double R buildings. Certain that she had missed the shallow because of her interest in other things, she urged her pony about and cantered it slowly over the back trail. A little later, seeing an arroyo which seemed to give promise of leading to the shallow she sought, she descended it and found that it led to a flat and thence to the river. The crossing seemed unfamiliar, and yet she supposed that one crossing would do quite as well as another, and so she smiled and continued on toward it.

There was a fringe of shrubbery at the edge of what appeared to have once been a swamp, though now it was dry and made fairly good footing for her pony. The animal acted strangely, however, when she tried to urge it through the fringing shrubbery, and she was compelled to use her quirt vigorously.

Once at the water's edge she halted the pony and viewed the crossing with satisfaction. She decided that it was a much better crossing than the one she had encountered on the trip out. It was very shallow, not over thirty feet wide, she estimated, and through the clear water she could easily see the hard, sandy bottom. It puzzled her slightly to observe that there were no wagon tracks or hoof prints in the sand anywhere around her, as there would be were the crossing used ever so little. It seemed to be an isolated section of the country though, and perhaps the cattlemen used the crossing little—there was even a chance that she was the first to discover its existence. She must remember to ask someone about it when she returned to the Double R.

She urged the pony gently with her booted heel and voice, but the little animal would not budge. Impatient over its obstinacy, she again applied the quirt vigorously. Stung to desperation the pony stood erect for an instant, pawing the air frantically with its fore hoofs, and then, as the quirt continued to lash its flanks, it lunged forward, snorting in apparent fright, made two or three eccentric leaps, splashing water high over Sheila's head, and then came to a sudden stop in the middle of the stream.

Sheila nibbled at her lips in vexation. Again, convinced that the pony was merely exhibiting obstinacy, she applied the quirt to its flanks. The animal floundered and struggled, but did not move out of its tracks.

Evidently something had gone wrong. Sheila peered over the pony's mane into the water, which was still clear in spite of the pony's struggling, and sat suddenly erect, stifling cry of amazement. The pony was mired fast! Its legs, to a point just above the knees, had disappeared into the river bottom!

As she straightened, a chilling fear clutching at her heart, she felt the cold water of the river splashing against her booted legs. And now knowledge came to her in a sudden, sickening flood. She had ridden her pony fairly into a bed of quicksand!

For some minutes she sat motionless in the saddle, stunned and nerveless. She saw now why there were no tracks or hoof prints leading down into the crossing. She remembered now that Duncan had warned her of the presence of quicksand in the river, but the chance of her riding into any of it had seemed to be so remote that she had paid very little attention to Duncan's warning. Much as she disliked the man she would have given much to have him close at hand now. If he had only followed her!

She was surprised at her coolness. She realized that the situation was precarious, for though she had never before experienced a quicksand, she had read much of them in books, and knew that the pony was hopelessly mired. But it seemed that there could be no immediate danger, for the river bottom looked smooth and hard; it was grayish-black, and she was so certain that the footing was good that she pulled her feet out of the stirrups, swung around, and stepped down into the water.

She had stepped lightly, bearing only a little of her weight on the foot while holding to the saddle, but the foot sank instantly into the sand and the water darkened around it. She tried again in another spot, putting a little more weight on her foot this time. She went in almost to the knee and was surprised to find that she had to exert some little strength to pull the foot out, there was so great a suction.

With the discovery that she was really in a dangerous predicament came a mental panic which threatened to take the form of hysteria. She held tightly to the pommel of the saddle, shutting her eyes on the desolate world around her, battling against the great fear that rose within her and choked her. When she opened her eyes again the world was reeling and objects around her were strangely blurred, but she held tightly to the saddle, telling herself that she must retain her composure, and after a time she regained the mastery over herself.

With the return of her mental faculties she began to give some thought to escape. But escape seemed to be impossible. Looking backward toward the bank she had left, she saw that the pony must have come fifteen or twenty feet in the two or three plunges it had made. She found herself wondering how it could have succeeded in coming that distance. Behind her the water had become perfectly clear, and the impressions left by the pony's hoofs had filled up and the river bottom looked as smooth and inviting as it had seemed when she had urged the pony into it.

In front of her was a stretch of water of nearly the same width as that which lay behind her. To the right and left the grayish-black sand spread far, but only a short distance beyond where she could discern the sand there were rocks that stuck above the water with little ripples around them.

The rocks were too far away to be of any assistance to her, however, and her heart sank when she realized that her only hope of escape lay directly ahead.

She leaned over and laid her head against the pony's neck, smoothing and patting its shoulders. The animal whinnied appealingly and she stifled a sob of remorse over her action in forcing it into the treacherous sand, for it had sensed the danger while obeying her blindly.

How long she lay with her head against the pony's neck she did not know, but when she finally sat erect again she found that the water was touching the hem of her riding skirt and that her feet, dangling at each side of the pony, were deep in the sand of the river bottom. With a cry of fright she drew them out and crossed them before her on the pommel of the saddle. With the movement the pony sank several inches, it seemed to her; she saw the water suddenly flow over its back; heard it neigh loudly, appealingly, with a note of anguish and terror which seemed almost human, and feeling a sudden, responsive emotion of horror and despair, Sheila bowed her head against the pony's mane and sobbed softly.

They would both die, she knew—horribly. They would presently sink beneath the surface of the sand, the water would flow over them and obliterate all traces of their graves, and no one would ever know what had become of them.

Some time later—it might have been five minutes or an hour—Sheila could not have told—she heard the pony neigh again, and this time it seemed there was a new note in the sound—a note of hope! She raised her head and looked up. And there on the bank before her, uncoiling his rope from the saddle horn and looking very white and grim, was Dakota!

Sheila sat motionless, not knowing whether to cry or laugh, finally compromising with the appeal, uttered with all the composure at her command:

“Won’t you please get us out of here?”

“That’s what I am aiming to do,” he said, and never did a voice sound sweeter in her ears; at that moment she almost forgave him for the great crime he had committed against her.

[Illustration by Robert Wesley Amick (1879-1969)]

“WON’T YOU PLEASE GET US OUT OF THIS?”

He seemed not in the least excited, continuing to uncoil his rope and recoil it again into larger loops. “Hold your hands over your head!” came his command.

She did as she was bidden. He had not dismounted from his pony, but had ridden up to the very edge of the quicksand, and as she raised her hands she saw him twirl the rope once, watched as it sailed out, settled down around her waist, and was drawn tight.

There was now a grim smile on his face. “You’re in for a wetting,” he said. “I’m sorry—but it can’t be helped. Get your feet off to one side so that you won’t get mixed up with the saddle. And keep your head above the water.”

“Ye-s,” she answered tremulously, dreading the ordeal, dreading still more the thought of her appearance when she would finally reach the bank.

His pony was in motion instantly, pulling strongly, following out its custom of dragging a roped steer, and Sheila slipped off the saddle and into the water, trying to keep her feet under her. But she overbalanced and fell with a splash, and in this manner was dragged, gasping, strangling, and dripping wet, to the bank.

Dakota was off his pony long before she had reached the solid ground and was at her side before she had cleared the water, helping her to her feet and loosening the noose about her waist.

“Don’t, please!” she said frigidly, as his hand touched her.

“Then I won’t.” He smiled and stepped back while she fumbled with the rope and finally threw it off. “What made you try that shallow?” he asked.

“I suppose I have a right to ride where I please?” He had saved her life, of course, and she was very grateful to him, but that was no reason why he should presume to speak familiarly to her. She really believed—in spite of the obligation under which he had placed her—that she hated him more than ever.

But he did not seem to be at all disturbed over her manner. On the contrary, looking at him and trying her best to be scornful, he seemed to be laboring heroically to stifle some emotion—amusement, she decided—and she tried to freeze him with an icy stare.

“Now, you don’t look dignified, for a fact,” he grinned, brazenly allowing his mirth to show in his eyes and in the sudden, curved lines that had come around his mouth. “Still, you couldn’t expect to look dignified, no matter how hard you tried, after being dragged through the water like that. Now could you?”

“It isn’t the first time that I have amused you!” she said with angry sarcasm.

A cloud passed over his face, but was instantly superseded by a smile.

“So you haven’t forgotten?” he said.

She did not deign to answer, but turned her back to him and looked at her partially submerged pony.

“Want to try it again?” he said mockingly.

She turned slowly and looked at him, her eyes flashing.

“Will you please stop being silly!” she said coldly. “If you were human you would be trying to get my pony out of that sand instead of standing there and trying to be smart!”

“Did you think that I was going to let him drown?” His smile had in it a quality of subtle mockery which made her eyes blaze with anger. Evidently he observed it for he smiled as he walked to his pony, coiling his rope and hanging it from

the pommel of the saddle. "I certainly am not going to let your horse drown," he assured her, "for in this country horses are sometimes more valuable than people."

"Then why didn't you save the pony first?" she demanded hotly.

"How could I," he returned, fixing her with an amused glance, "with you looking so appealingly at me?"

She turned abruptly and left him, walking to a flat rock and seating herself upon it, wringing the water from her skirts, trying to get her hair out of her eyes, feeling very miserable, and wishing devoutly that Dakota might drown himself—after he had succeeded in pulling the pony from the quicksand.

But Dakota did not drown himself. Nor did he pull the pony out of the quicksand. She watched him as he rode to the water's edge and looked at the animal. Her heart sank when he turned and looked gravely at her.

"I reckon your pony's done for, ma'am," he said. "There isn't anything of him above the sand but his head and a little of his neck. He's too far gone, ma'am. In half an hour he'll——"

Sheila stood up, wet and excited. "Can't you do something?" she pleaded. "Couldn't you pull him out with your lariat—like you did me?"

There was a grim humor in his smile. "What do you reckon would have happened to you if I had tried to pull you out by the neck?" he asked.

"But can't you do *something*?" she pleaded, her icy attitude toward him melting under the warmth of her affection and sympathy for the unfortunate pony. "Please do something!" she begged.

His face changed expression and he tapped one of his holsters significantly. "There's only this left, I reckon. Pulling him out by the neck would break it, sure. And it's never a nice thing to see—or hear—a horse or a cow sinking in quicksand. I've seen it once or twice and——"

Sheila shuddered and covered her face with her hands, for his words had set her imagination to working.

"Oh!" she said and became silent.

Dakota stood for a moment, watching her, his face grim with sympathy.

"It's too bad," he said finally. "I don't like to shoot him, any more than you want to see it done. I reckon, though, that the pony would thank me for doing it if he could have anything to say about it." He walked over close to her, speaking in a low voice. "You can't stay here, of course. You'll have to take my horse, and you'll have to go right now, if you don't want to be around when the pony——"

"Please don't," she said, interrupting him. He relapsed into silence, and stood gravely watching her as she resumed her toilet.

She disliked to accept his offer of the pony, but there seemed to be no other way. She certainly could not walk to the Double R ranchhouse, even to satisfy a desire to show him that she would not allow him to place her under any obligation to him.

"I've got to tell you one thing," he said presently, standing erect and looking earnestly at her. "If Duncan is responsible for your safety in this country he isn't showing very good judgment in letting you run around alone. There are dangers that you know nothing about, and you don't know a thing about the country. Someone ought to take care of you."

"As you did, for example," she retorted, filled with anger over his present solicitation for her welfare, as contrasted to his treatment of her on another occasion.

A slow red filled his cheeks. Evidently he did possess *some* self-respect, after all. Contrition, too, she thought she could detect in his manner and in his voice.

"But I didn't hurt you, anyway," he said, eyeing her steadily.

"Not if you call ruining a woman's name not 'hurting' her," she answered bitterly.

"I am sorry for that, Miss Sheila," he said earnestly. "I had an idea that night—and still have it, for that matter—that I was an instrument— Well, I had an idea, that's all. But I haven't told anybody about what happened—I haven't even hinted it to anybody. And I told the parson to get out of the country, so he wouldn't do any gassing about it. And I haven't been over to Dry Bottom to have the marriage recorded—and I am not going to go. So that you can have it set aside at

any time.”

Yes, she could have the marriage annulled, she knew that. But the contemplation of her release from the tie that bound her to him did not lessen the gravity of the offense in her eyes. She told herself that she hated him with a remorseless passion which would never cease until he ceased to live. No action of his could repair the damage he had done to her. She told him so, plainly.

“I didn’t know you were so blood-thirsty as that,” he laughed in quiet mockery. “Maybe it would be a good thing for you if I did die—or get killed. But I’m not allowing that I’m ready to die yet, and certainly am not going to let anybody kill me if I can prevent it. I reckon you’re not thinking of doing the killing yourself?”

“If I told my father—” she began, but hesitated when she saw his lips suddenly straighten and harden and his eyes light with a deep contempt.

“So you haven’t told your father?” he laughed. “I was sure you had taken him into your confidence by this time. But I reckon it’s a mighty good thing that you didn’t—for your father. Like as not if you’d tell him he’d get some riled and come right over to see me, yearning for my blood. And then I’d have to shoot him up some. And that would sure be too bad—you loving him as you do.”

“I suppose you would shoot him like you shot that poor fellow in Lazette,” she taunted, bitterly.

“Like I did that poor fellow in Lazette,” he said, with broad, ironic emphasis. “You saw me shoot Blanca, of course, for you were there. But you don’t know what made me shoot him, and I am not going to tell you—it’s none of your business.”

“Indeed!” Her voice was burdened with contempt. “I suppose you take a certain pride in your ability to murder people.” She placed a venomous accent on the “Murder.”

“Lots of people ought to be murdered,” he drawled, using the accent she had used.

Her contempt of him grew. “Then I presume you have others in mind—whom you will shoot when the mood strikes you?” she said.

“Perhaps.” His smile was mysterious and mocking, and she saw in his eyes the reckless gleam which she had noted that night while in the cabin with him. She shuddered and walked to the pony—his pony.

“If you have quite finished I believe I will be going,” she said, holding her chin high and averting her face. “I will have one of the men bring your horse to you.”

“I believe I have quite finished,” he returned, mimicking her cold, precise manner of speech.

She disdainfully refused his proffer of assistance and mounted the pony. He stood watching her with a smile, which she saw by glancing covertly at him while pretending to arrange the stirrup strap. When she started to ride away without even glancing at him, she heard his voice, with its absurd, hateful drawl:

“And she didn’t even thank me,” he said with mock bitterness and disappointment.

She turned and made a grimace at him. He bowed and smiled.

“You are entirely welcome,” she said.

He was standing on the edge of the quicksand, watching her, when she reached the long rise upon which she had sat on her pony on a day some weeks before, and when she turned he waved a hand to her. A little later she vanished over the rise, and she had not ridden very far when she heard the dull report of his pistol. She shivered, and rode on.

CHAPTER VIII

SHEILA FANS A FLAME

Sheila departed from the quicksand crossing nursing her wrath against the man who had rescued her, feeling bitterly vindictive against him, yet aware that the Dakota who had saved her life was not the Dakota whom she had feared during her adventure with him in his cabin on the night of her arrival in the country. He had changed, and though she assured herself that she despised him more than ever, she found a grim amusement in the recollection of his manner immediately following the rescue, and in a review of the verbal battle, in which she had been badly worsted.

His glances had had in them the quality of inward mirth and satisfaction which is most irritating, and behind his pretended remorse she could see a pleasure over her dilemma which made her yearn to inflict punishment upon him that would cause him to ask for mercy. His demeanor had said plainly that if she wished to have the marriage set aside all well and good—he would offer no objection. But neither would he take the initiative. Decidedly, it was a matter in which she should consult her own desires.

It was late in the afternoon when she rode up to the Double R corral gates and was met there by her father and Duncan. Langford had been worried, he said, and was much concerned over her appearance. In the presence of Duncan Sheila told him the story of her danger and subsequent rescue by Dakota and she saw his eyes narrow with a strange light.

“Dakota!” he said. “Isn’t that the chap who shot that half-breed over in Lazette the day I came?”

To Sheila’s nod he ejaculated: “He’s a trump!”

“He is a brute!” As the words escaped her lips—she had not meant to utter them—Sheila caught a glint in Duncan’s eyes which told her that she had echoed the latter’s sentiments, and she felt almost like retracting the charge. She had to bite her lips to resist the impulse.

“A brute, eh?” laughed Langford. “It strikes me that I wouldn’t so characterize a man who had saved my life. The chances are that after saving you he didn’t seem delighted enough, or he didn’t smile to suit you, or——”

“He ain’t so awful much of a man,” remarked Duncan disparagingly.

Langford turned and looked at Duncan with a comprehending smile. “Evidently you owe Dakota nothing, my dear Duncan,” he said.

The latter’s face darkened, and with Sheila listening he told the story of the calf deal, which had indirectly brought about the death of Blanca.

“For a long time we had suspected Texas Blanca of rustling,” said Duncan, “but we couldn’t catch him with the goods. Five years ago, after the spring round-up, I branded a bunch of calves with a secret mark, and then we rode sign on Blanca.

“We had him then, for the calves disappeared and some of the boys found some of them in Blanca’s corral, but we delayed, hoping he would run off more, and while we were waiting he sold out to Dakota. We didn’t know that at the time; didn’t find it out until we went over to take Blanca and found Dakota living in his cabin. He had a bill of sale from Blanca all right, showing that he’d bought the calves from him. It looked regular, but we had our doubts, and Dakota and me came pretty near having a run-in. If the boys hadn’t interfered——”

He hesitated and looked at Sheila, and as her gaze met his steadily his eyes wavered and a slow red came into his face, for the recollection of what had actually occurred at the meeting between him and Dakota was not pleasant, and since that day Duncan had many times heard the word “Yellow” spoken in connection with his name—which meant that he lacked courage.

“So he wasn’t a rustler, after all?” said Sheila pleasantly. For some reason which she could not entirely explain, she suspected that Duncan had left many things out of his story of his clash with Dakota.

“Well, no,” admitted Duncan grudgingly.

Sheila was surprised at the satisfaction she felt over this admission. Perhaps Duncan read her face as she had read his, for he frowned.

“Him and Blanca framed up—making believe that Blanca had sold him the Star brand,” he said venomously.

“I don’t believe it!” Sheila’s eyes met Duncan’s and the latter’s wavered. She was not certain which gave her the thrill she felt—her defense of Dakota or Duncan’s bitter rage over the exhibition of that defense.

“He doesn’t appear to me to be the sort of man who would steal cows,” she said with a smile which made Duncan’s teeth show. “Although,” she continued significantly, “it does seem that he is the sort of man I would not care to trifle with—if I were a man. You told me yourself, if you remember, that you were not taking any chances with him. And now you accuse him. If I were you,” she warned, “I would be more careful—I would keep from saying things which I could not prove.”

“Meaning that I’m afraid of him, I reckon?” sneered Duncan.

Sheila looked at him, her eyes alight with mischief. That day on the edge of the butte overlooking the river, when Duncan had talked about Dakota, she had detected in his manner an inclination to belittle the latter; several times since then she had heard him speak venomously of him, and she had suspected that all was not smooth between them. And now since Duncan had related the story of the calf incident she was certain that the relations between the two men were strained to the point of open rupture. Duncan had bothered her, had annoyed her with his attentions, had adopted toward her an air of easy familiarity, which she had deeply resented, and she yearned to humiliate him deeply.

“Afraid?” She appeared to hesitate. “Well, no,” she said, surveying him with an appraising eye in which the mischief was partly concealed, “I do not believe that you are afraid. Perhaps you are merely careful where he is concerned. But I am certain that even if you were afraid of him you would not refuse to take his pony back. I promised to send it back, you know.”

A deep red suddenly suffused Duncan’s face. A sharp, savage gleam in his eyes—which Sheila met with a disarming smile—convinced her that he was aware of her object. She saw also that he did not intend to allow her to force him to perform the service.

He bowed and regarded her with a shallow smile.

“I will have one of the boys take the pony over to him the first thing in the morning,” he said.

Sheila smiled sweetly. “Please don’t bother,” she said. “I wouldn’t think of allowing one of the men to take the pony back. Perhaps I shall decide to ride over that way myself. I should not care to have you meet Dakota if you are afraid of him.”

Her rippling laugh caused the red in Duncan’s face to deepen, but she gave him no time to reply, for directly she had spoken she turned and walked toward the ranchhouse. Both Duncan and Langford watched her until she had vanished, and then Langford turned to Duncan.

“What on earth have you done to her?” he questioned.

But Duncan was savagely pulling the saddle from Dakota’s pony and did not answer.

Sheila really had no expectation of prevailing upon Duncan to return Dakota’s horse, and had she anticipated that the manager would accept her challenge she would not have given it, for after thinking over the incident of her rescue she had come to the conclusion that she had not treated Dakota fairly, and by personally taking his horse to him she would have an opportunity to proffer her tardy thanks for his service. She did not revert to the subject of the animal’s return during the evening meal, however, nor after it when she and her father and Duncan sat on the gallery of the ranchhouse enjoying the cool of the night breezes.

After breakfast on the following morning she was standing near the windmill, watching the long arms travel lazily in their wide circles, when she saw Duncan riding away from the ranchhouse, leading Dakota’s pony. She started toward the corral gates, intending to call to him to return, but thought better of the impulse and hailed him tauntingly instead:

“Please tell him to accept my thanks,” she said, and Duncan turned his head, bowed mockingly, and continued on his way.

Half an hour after the departure of Duncan Sheila pressed a loafing puncher into service and directed him to rope a gentle pony for her. After the puncher had secured a suitable appearing animal and had placed a saddle and bridle on it, she compelled him to ride it several times around the confines of the pasture to make certain that it would not “buck.” Then she mounted and rode up the river.

Duncan was not particularly pleased over his errand, and many times while he rode the trail toward Dakota's cabin his lips moved from his teeth in a snarl. Following the incident of the theft of the calves by Blanca, Duncan had taken pains to insinuate publicly that Dakota's purchase of the Star from the half-breed had been a clever ruse to avert suspicion, intimating that a partnership existed between Dakota and Blanca. The shooting of Blanca by Dakota, however, had exploded this charge, and until now Duncan had been very careful to avoid a meeting with the man whom he had maligned.

During the night he had given much thought to the circumstance which was sending him to meet his enemy. He had a suspicion that Sheila had purposely taunted him with cowardice—that in all probability Dakota himself had suggested the plan in order to force a meeting with him. This thought suggested another. Sheila's defense of Dakota seemed to indicate that a certain intimacy existed between them. He considered this carefully, and with a throb of jealousy concluded that Dakota's action in saving Sheila's life would very likely pave the way for a closer acquaintance.

Certainly, in spite of Sheila's remark about Dakota being a "brute," she had betrayed evidence of admiration for the man. In that case her veiled allusions to his own fear of meeting Dakota were very likely founded on something which Dakota had told her, and certainly anything which Dakota might have said about him would not be complimentary. Therefore his rage against both Sheila and his enemy was bitter when he finally rode up to the door of the latter's cabin.

There was hope in his heart that Dakota might prove to be absent, and when, after calling once and receiving no answer, he dismounted and hitched Dakota's pony to a rail of the corral fence, there was a smile of satisfaction on his face.

He took plenty of time to hitch the pony; he even lingered at the corral bars, leaning on them to watch several steers which were inside the enclosure. He found time, too, in spite of his fear of his enemy, to sneer over the evidences of prosperity which were on every hand. He was congratulating himself on his good fortune in reaching Dakota's cabin during a time when the latter was absent, when he heard a slight sound behind him. He turned rapidly, to see Dakota standing in the doorway of the cabin, watching him with cold, level eyes, one of his heavy six-shooters in hand.

Duncan's face went slowly pale. He did not speak at once and when he did he was surprised at his hoarseness.

"I've brought your cayuse back," he said finally.

"So I see," returned Dakota. His eyes glinted with a cold humor, though they were still regarding Duncan with an alertness which the other could not mistake.

"So I see," repeated Dakota. His slow drawl was in evidence again. "I don't recollect, though, that I sent word to have *you* bring him back."

"I wasn't tickled to death over the job," returned Duncan.

Now that his first surprise was over and Dakota had betrayed no sign of resenting his visit, Duncan felt easier. There had been a slight sneer in his voice when he answered.

"That isn't surprising," returned Dakota. "There never was a time when you were tickled a heap to stick your nose into my affairs." His smile froze Duncan.

"I ain't looking for trouble," said the latter, with a perfect knowledge of Dakota's peculiar expression.

"Then why did you come over here? I reckon there wasn't anyone else to send my horse over by?" said Dakota, his voice coming with a truculent snap.

Duncan flushed. "Sheila Langford sent me," he admitted reluctantly.

Dakota's eyes lighted with incredulity. "I reckon you're a liar," he said with cold emphasis.

Duncan's gaze went to the pistol in Dakota's hand and his lips curled. He knew that he was perfectly safe so long as he made no hostile move, for in spite of his derogatory remarks about the man he was aware that he never used his weapons without provocation.

Therefore he forced a smile. "You ain't running no Blanca deal on me," he said. "Calling me a liar ain't going to get no rise out of me. But she sent me, just the same. I reckon, liking you as I do, that I ought to be glad she gave me the chance to come over and see you, but I ain't. We was gassing about you and she told me I was scared to bring your cayuse back." He laughed mirthlessly. "I reckon I've proved that I ain't any scared."

"No," said Dakota with a cold grin, "you ain't scared. You know that there won't be any shooting done unless you get

careless with that gun you carry.” His eyes were filled with a whimsical humor, but they were still alert, as he watched Duncan’s face for signs of insincerity. He saw no such signs and his expression became mocking. “So she sent you over here?” he said, and his was the voice of one enemy enjoying some subtle advantage over another. “Why, I reckon you’re a kind of handy man to have around—sort of ladies’ man—running errands and such.”

Duncan’s face bloated with anger, but he dared not show open resentment. For behind Dakota’s soft voice and gentle, over-polite manner, he felt the deep rancor for whose existence he alone was responsible. So, trying to hold his passions in check, he grinned at Dakota, significantly, insinuatingly, unable finally to keep the bitter hatred and jealousy out of his voice. For in the evilness of his mind he had drawn many imaginary pictures of what had occurred between Dakota and Sheila immediately after her rescue by the latter.

“I reckon,” he said hoarsely, “that you take a heap of interest in Sheila.”

“That’s part of your business, I suppose?” Dakota’s voice was suddenly hard.

Duncan had decided to steer carefully away from any trouble with Dakota; he had even decided that as a measure for his own safety he must say nothing which would be likely to arouse Dakota’s anger, but the jealous thoughts in his mind had finally gotten the better of prudence, and the menace in Dakota’s voice angered him.

“I reckon,” he said with a sneer, “that I ain’t as much interested in her as you are.”

He started back, his lips tightening over his teeth in a snarl of alarm and fear, for Dakota had stepped down from the doorway and was at his side, his eyes narrowed with cold wrath.

“Meaning what?” he demanded harshly, sharply, for he imagined that perhaps Sheila had told of her marriage to him, and the thought that Duncan should have been selected by her to share the secret maddened him.

“Meaning what, you damned coyote?” he insisted, stepping closer to Duncan.

“Meaning that she ain’t admiring you for nothing,” flared Duncan incautiously, his jealousy overcoming his better judgment. “Meaning that any woman which has been pulled out of a quicksand like you pulled her out might be expected to favor you with——”

The sunlight flashed on Dakota’s pistol as it leaped from his right hand to his left and was bolstered with a jerk. And with the same motion his clenched fist was jammed with savage force against Duncan’s lips, cutting short the slanderous words and sending him in a heap to the dust of the corral yard.

With a cry of rage Duncan grasped for his pistol and drew it out, but the hand holding it was stamped violently into the earth, the arm bent and twisted until the fingers released the weapon. And then Dakota stood over him, looking down at him with narrowed, chilling eyes, his face white and hard, his anger gone as quickly as it had come. He said no word while Duncan clambered awkwardly to his feet and mounted his horse.

[Illustration by Robert Wesley Amick (1879-1969)]

DUNCAN GRASPED FOR HIS PISTOL, BUT THE HAND
HOLDING IT WAS STAMPED VIOLENTLY INTO THE
EARTH.

“I’m telling you something,” he said quietly, as Duncan lifted the reins with his uninjured hand, turning his horse to depart. “You and me have never hitched very well and there isn’t any chance of us ever falling on each other’s necks. I think what I’ve done to you about squares us for that calf deal. I’ve been yearning to hand you something before you left the country, but I didn’t expect you’d give me the chance in just this way. I’m warning you that the next time you shove your coyote nose into my business I’ll muss it up some. That applies to Miss Sheila. If I ever hear of you getting her name on your dirty tongue again I’ll tear you apart. I reckon that’s all.” He drew his pistol and balanced it in his right hand. “It makes me feel some reckless to be talking to you,” he added, a glint of intolerance in his eyes. “You’d better travel before I change my mind.

“You don’t need to mention this to Miss Sheila,” he said mockingly, as Duncan urged his horse away from the corral gate; “just let her go on—thinking you’re a man.”

CHAPTER IX

STRICTLY BUSINESS

For two or three quiet weeks Sheila did not see much of Duncan, and her father bothered her very little. Several nights on the gallery of the ranchhouse she had seen the two men sitting very close together, and on one or two occasions she had overheard scraps of conversation carried on between them in which Doubler's name was mentioned.

She remembered Doubler as one of the nesters whom Duncan had mentioned that day on the butte overlooking the river, and though her father and Duncan had a perfect right to discuss him, it seemed to Sheila that there had been a serious note in their voices when they had mentioned his name.

She had become acquainted with Doubler. Since discontinuing her rides with her father and Duncan she had gone out every day alone, though she was careful to avoid any crossing in the river which looked the least suspicious. Such crossings as she could ford were few, and for that reason she was forced to ride most of the time to the Two Forks, where there was an excellent shallow, with long slopes sweeping up to the plains on both sides.

The first time that she crossed at the Two Forks she had come upon a small adobe cabin situated a few hundred yards back from the water's edge.

Sheila would have fled from the vicinity, for there was still fresh in her mind a recollection of another cabin in which she had once passed many fearsome hours, but while she hesitated, on the verge of flight, Doubler came to the door, and when she saw that he was an old man with a kindly face, much of her perturbation vanished, and she remained to talk.

Doubler was hospitable and solicitous and supplied her with some soda biscuit and fresh beef and a tin cup full of delicious coffee. She refused to enter the cabin, and so he brought the food out to her and sat on the step beside her while she ate, betraying much interest in her.

Doubler asked no questions regarding her identity, and Sheila marveled much over this. But when she prepared to depart she understood why he had betrayed no curiosity concerning her.

"I reckon you're that Langford girl?" he said.

"Yes," returned Sheila, wondering. "I am Sheila Langford. But who told you? I was not aware that anyone around here knew me—except the people at the Double R."

"Dakota told me."

"Oh!" A chill came into her voice which instantly attracted Doubler's attention. He looked at her with an odd smile.

"You know Dakota?"

"I have met him."

"You don't like him, I reckon?"

"No."

"Well, now," commented Doubler, "I reckon I've got things mixed. But from Dakota's talk I took it that you an' him was pretty thick."

"His talk?" Sheila remembered Dakota's statement that he had told no one of their relations. So he *had* been talking, after all! She was not surprised, but she was undeniably angry and embarrassed to think that perhaps all the time she had been talking to Doubler he might have been appraising her on the basis of her adventure with Dakota.

"What has he been saying?" she demanded coldly.

"Nothing, ma'am. That is, nothin' which any man wouldn't say about you, once he'd seen you an' talked some to you." Doubler surveyed her with sparkling, appreciative eyes.

"As a rule it don't pay to go to gossipin' with anyone—least of all with a woman. But I reckon I can tell you what he said, ma'am, without you gettin' awful mad. He didn't say nothin' except that he'd taken an awful shine to you. An' he'd likely make things mighty unpleasant for me if he'd find that I'd told you that."

“Shine?” There was a world of scornful wonder in Sheila’s voice. “Would you mind telling me what ‘taking a shine’ to anyone means?”

“Why, no, I reckon I don’t mind, ma’am, seein’ that it’s you. ‘Takin’ a shine’ to you means that he’s some stuck on you—likes you, that is. An’ I reckon you can’t blame him much for doin’ that.”

Sheila did not answer, though a sudden flood of red to her face made the use of mere words entirely unnecessary so far as Doubler was concerned, for he smiled wisely.

Sheila fled down the trail toward the crossing without a parting word to Doubler, leaving him standing at the door squinting with amusement at her. But on the morrow she had returned, determined to discover something of Dakota, to learn something of his history since coming into the country, or at the least to see if she could not induce Doubler to disclose his real name.

She was unsuccessful. Dakota had never taken Doubler into his confidence, and the information that she succeeded in worming from the nester was not more than he had already volunteered, or than Duncan had given her that day when they were seated on the edge of the butte overlooking the river.

She was convinced that Doubler had told her all he knew, and she wondered at the custom which permitted friendship on the basis of such meager knowledge.

She quickly grew to like Doubler. He showed a fatherly interest in her and always greeted her with a smile when during her rides she came to his cabin, or when she met him, as she did frequently, on the open range. His manner toward her was always cordial, and he seemed not to have a care. One morning, however, she rode up to the door of the cabin and Doubler’s face was serious. He stood quietly in the doorway, watching her as she sat on her pony, not offering to assist her down as he usually did, and she knew instantly that something had happened to disturb his peace of mind. He did not invite her into the cabin.

“Ma’am,” he said, and Sheila detected regret in his voice, “I’m a heap sorry, but of course you won’t be comin’ here any more.”

“I don’t see why!” returned Sheila in surprise. “I like to come here. But, of course, if you don’t want me——”

“It ain’t that,” he interrupted quickly. “I thought you knowed. But you don’t, of course, or you wouldn’t have come just now. Your dad an’ Duncan was over to see me yesterday.”

“I didn’t know that,” returned Sheila. “But I can’t see why a visit from father should——”

“He’s wantin’ me to pull my freight out of the country,” said Doubler “An’ of course I ain’t doin’ it. Therefore I’m severin’ diplomatic relations with your family.”

“I don’t see why——” began Sheila, puzzled to understand why a mere visit on her father’s part should have the result Doubler had announced.

“Of course you don’t,” Doubler told her. “You’re a woman an’ don’t understand such things. But in this country when a little owner has got some land which a big owner wants—an’ can’t buy—there’s likely to be trouble. I ain’t proved on my land yet, an’ if your dad can run me off he’ll be pretty apt to grab it somehow or other. But he ain’t runnin’ me off an’ so there’s a heap of trouble comin’. An’ of course while there’s trouble you won’t be comin’ here any more after this. Likely your dad wouldn’t have it. I’m sorry, too. I like you a lot.”

“I don’t see why father should want your land,” Sheila told him gravely, much disturbed at this unexpected development. “There is plenty of land here.” She swept a hand toward the plains.

“There ain’t enough for some people,” grimly laughed Doubler. “Some people is hawgs—askin’ your pardon, ma’am. I wasn’t expectin’ your father to be like that, after seein’ you. I was hopin’ that we’d be able to get along. I’ve had some trouble with Duncan—not very long ago. Once I had to speak pretty plain to him. I expect he’s been fillin’ your dad up.”

“I’ll see father about it.” Sheila’s face was red with a pained embarrassment. “I am sure that father will not make any trouble for you—he isn’t that kind of man.”

“He’s that kind of a man, sure enough,” said Doubler gravely. “I reckon I’ve got him sized up right. He ain’t in no way like you, ma’am. If you hadn’t told me I reckon I wouldn’t have knowed he is your father.”

“He is my stepfather,” admitted Sheila.

"I knowed it!" declared Doubler. "I'm too old to be fooled by what I see in a man's face—or in a woman's face either. Don't you go to say anything about this business to him. He's bound to try to run me off. He done said so. I don't know when I ever heard a man talk any meaner than he did. Said that if I didn't sell he'd make things mighty unpleasant for me. An' so I reckon there's goin' to be some fun."

Sheila did not remain long at Doubler's cabin, for her mind was in a riot of rage and resentment against her father for his attitude toward Doubler, and she cut short her ride in the hope of being able to have a talk with him before he left the ranchhouse. But when she returned she was told by Duncan's sister that Langford had departed some hours before—alone. He had not mentioned his destination.

Ben Doubler had omitted an important detail from his story of Langford's visit to his cabin, for he had not cared to frighten Sheila unnecessarily. But as Langford rode toward Doubler's cabin this morning his thoughts persisted in dwelling on Doubler's final words to him, spoken as he and Duncan had turned their horses to leave the nester's cabin the day before:

"If it's goin' to be war, Langford, it ain't goin' to be no pussy-kitten affair. I'm warnin' you to stay away from the Two Forks. If I ketch you or any of your men nosin' around there I'm goin' to bore you some rapid."

Langford had sneered then, and he sneered now as he rode toward the river, for he had no doubt that Doubler had uttered the threat in a spirit of bravado. Of course, he told himself as he rode, the man was forced to say something, but the idea of him being serious in the threat to shoot any one who came to the Two Forks was ridiculous.

All his life Langford had heard threats from the lips of his victims, and thus far they had remained only threats. He had determined to see Doubler this morning, for he had noticed that the nester had appeared ill at ease in the presence of Duncan, and he anticipated that alone he could force him to accept terms. When he reached the crossing at Two Forks he urged his pony through its waters, his face wearing a confident smile.

There was an open stretch of grass land between the crossing and Doubler's cabin, and when Langford urged his pony up the sloping bank of the river he saw the nester standing near the door of the cabin, watching. Langford was about to force his pony to a faster pace, when he saw Doubler raise a rifle to his shoulder. Still, he continued to ride forward, but he pulled the pony up shortly when he saw the flame spurt from the muzzle of the rifle and heard the shrill hiss of the bullet as it passed dangerously near to him.

No words were needed, and neither man spoke any. Without stopping to give Doubler an opportunity to speak, Langford wheeled his pony, and with a white, scared face, bending low over the animal's mane to escape any bullets which might follow the first, rapidly recrossed the river. Once on the crest of the hill on the opposite side he turned, and trembling with rage and fear, shook a clenched hand at Doubler. The latter's reply was a strident laugh.

Langford returned to the ranchhouse, riding slowly, though in his heart was a riot of rage and hatred against the nester. It was war, to be sure. But now that Doubler had shown in no unmistakable manner that he had not been trifling the day before, Langford was no longer in doubt as to the method he would have to employ in his attempt to gain possession of his land. Doubler, he felt, had made the choice.

The ride to the ranchhouse took long, but by the time Langford arrived there he had regained his composure, saying nothing to anyone concerning his adventure.

For three days he kept his own counsel, riding out alone, taciturn, giving much thought to the situation. Sheila had intended to speak to him regarding the trouble with Doubler, but his manner repulsed her and she kept silent, hoping that the mood would pass. However, the mood did not pass. Langford continued to ride out alone, maintaining a moody silence, sitting alone much with his own thoughts and allowing no one to break down the barrier of taciturnity which he had erected.

On the morning of the fifth day after his adventure with Doubler he was sitting on the ranchhouse gallery with Duncan, enjoying an after-breakfast cigar, when he said casually to the latter:

"I take it that folks in this country are mighty careless with their weapons."

Duncan grinned. "You might call it careless," he returned. "No doubt there are people—people who come out here from the East—who think that a man who carries a gun out here is careless with it. But I reckon that when a man draws a gun here he draws it with a pretty definite purpose."

"I have heard," continued Langford slowly, "that there are men in this country who do not hesitate to kill other people for money."

"Meaning that there are road agents and such?" questioned Duncan.

"Naturally, that particular kind would be included. I meant, however another kind—I believe they are called 'bad men,' are they not? Men who kill for hire?"

Duncan cast a furtive glance at Langford out of the corners of his eyes, but could draw no conclusions concerning the latter's motive in asking the question from the expression of his face.

"Such men drift in occasionally," he returned, convinced that Langford's curiosity was merely casual—as Langford desired him to consider it. "Usually, though, they don't stay long."

"I suppose there are none of that breed around here—in Lazette, for instance. It struck me that Dakota was extraordinarily handy with a gun."

He puffed long at his cigar and saw that, though Duncan did not answer, his face had grown suddenly dark with passion, as it always did when Dakota's name was mentioned. Langford smiled subtly. "I suppose," he said, "that Dakota might be called a bad man."

Duncan's eyes flashed with venom. "I reckon Dakota's nothing but a damned sneak!" he said, not being able to conceal the bitterness in his voice.

Langford did not allow his smile to be seen; he had not forgotten the incident of the returning of Dakota's horse by Duncan.

"He's a dead shot, though," he suggested.

"I'm allowing that," grudgingly returned Duncan. "And," he added, "it's been hinted that all his shooting scrapes haven't been on the level."

"He is not straight, then?" said Langford, his eyes gleaming. "Not 'square,' as you say in this country?"

"I reckon there ain't nothing square about him," returned Duncan, glad of an opportunity to defame his enemy.

Again Langford did not allow Duncan to see his smile, and he deftly directed the current of the conversation into other channels.

He rode out again that day, taking the river trail and passing Dakota's cabin, but Dakota himself was nowhere to be seen and at dusk Langford returned to the Double R. During the evening meal he enveloped himself with a silence which proved impenetrable. He retired early, to Duncan's surprise, and the next morning, without announcing his plans to anyone, saddled his pony and rode away toward the river trail.

He took a circuitous route to reach it, riding slowly, with the air and manner of a man who is thinking deep thoughts, smiling much, though many times grimly.

"Dakota isn't square," he said once aloud during one of his grim smiles.

When he came to the quicksand crossing he halted and examined the earth in the vicinity, smiling more broadly at the marks and hoof prints in the hard sand near the water's edge. Then he rode on.

Two or three miles from the quicksand crossing he came suddenly upon Dakota's cabin. Dakota himself was repairing a saddle in the shade of the cabin wall, and for all that Langford could see he was entirely unaware of his approach. He saw Dakota look up when he passed the corral gate, and when he reached a point about twenty feet distant he observed a faint smile on Dakota's face.

"Howdy, stranger," came the latter's voice.

"How are you, my friend?" greeted Langford easily.

It was not hard for Langford to adopt an air of familiarity toward the man who had figured prominently in his thoughts during a great many of the previous twenty-four hours. He dismounted from his pony, hitched the animal to a rail of the corral fence, and approached Dakota, standing in front of him and looking down at him with a smile.

Dakota apparently took little interest in his visitor, for keeping his seat on the box upon which he had been sitting when Langford had first caught sight of him, he continued to give his attention to the saddle.

"I'm from the Double R," offered Langford, feeling slightly less important, conscious that somehow the familiarity that he had felt existed between them a moment before was a singularly fleeting thing.

"I noticed that," responded Dakota, still busy with his saddle.

"How?"

"I reckon that you've forgot that your horse has got a brand on him?"

"You've got keen eyes, my friend," laughed Langford.

"Have I?" Dakota had not looked at Langford until now, and as he spoke he raised his head and gazed fairly into the latter's eyes.

For a moment neither man moved or spoke. It seemed to Langford, as he gazed into the steely, fathomless blue of the eyes which held his—held them, for now as he looked it was the first time in his life that his gaze had met a fellow being's steadily—that he could see there an unmistakable, grim mockery. And that was all, for whatever other emotions Dakota felt, they were invisible to Langford. He drew a deep breath, suddenly aware that before him was a man exactly like himself in one respect—skilled in the art of keeping his emotions to himself. Langford had not met many such men; usually he was able to see clear through a man—able to read him. But this man he could not read. He was puzzled and embarrassed over the discovery. His gaze finally wavered; he looked away.

"A man don't have to have such terribly keen eyes to be able to see a brand," observed Dakota, drawling; "especially when he's passed a whole lot of his time looking at brands."

"That's so," agreed Langford. "I suppose you have been a cowboy a long time."

"Longer than you've been a ranch owner."

Langford looked quickly at Dakota, for now the latter was again busy with his saddle, but he could detect no sarcasm in his face, though plainly there had been a subtle quality of it in his voice.

"Then you know me?" he said.

"No. I don't know you. I've put two and two together. I heard that Duncan was selling the Double R. I've seen your daughter. And you ride up here on a Double R horse. There ain't no other strangers in the country. Then, of course, you're the new owner of the Double R."

Langford looked again at the inscrutable face of the man beside him and felt a sudden deep respect for him. Even if he had not witnessed the killing of Texas Blanca that day in Lazette he would have known the man before him for what he was—a quiet, cool, self-possessed man of much experience, who could not be trifled with.

"That's right," he admitted; "I am the new owner of the Double R. And I have come, my friend, to thank you for what you did for my daughter."

"She told you, then?" Dakota's gaze was again on Langford, an odd light in his eyes.

"Certainly."

"She's told you what?"

"How you rescued her from the quicksand."

Dakota's gaze was still on his visitor, quiet, intent. "She tell you anything else?" he questioned slowly.

"Why, what else is there to tell?" There was sincere curiosity in Langford's voice, for Sheila had always told him everything that happened to her. It was not like her to keep anything secret from him.

"Did she tell you that she forgot to thank me for saving her?" There was a queer smile on Dakota's lips, a peculiar, pleased glint in his eyes.

"No, she neglected to relate that," returned Langford.

"Forgot it. That's what I thought. Do you think she forgot it intentionally?"

"It wouldn't be like her."

"Of course not. And so she's sent *you* over to thank me! Tell her no thanks are due. And if she inquires, tell her that the

pony didn't make a sound or a struggle when I shot him."

"As it happens, she didn't send me," smiled Langford. "There was the excitement, of course, and I presume she forgot to thank you—possibly will ride over herself some day to thank you personally. But she didn't send me—I came without her knowledge."

"To thank me—for her?"

"No."

"You're visiting then. Or maybe just riding around to look at your range. Sit down." He motioned to another box that stood near the door of the cabin.

Once Langford became seated Dakota again busied himself with the saddle, ignoring his visitor. Langford shifted uneasily on the box, for the seat was not to his liking and the attitude of his host was most peculiar. He fell silent also and kicked gravely and absently into a hummock with the toe of his boot.

Singularly enough, a plan which had taken form in his mind since Doubler had shot at him seemed suddenly to have many defects, though until now it had seemed complete enough. Out of the jumble of thoughts that had rioted in his brain after his departure from Two Forks crossing had risen a conviction. Doubler was a danger and a menace and must be removed. And there was no legal way to remove him, for though he had not proved on his land he was entitled to it to the limit set by the law, or until his death.

Langford's purpose in questioning Duncan had been to learn of the presence of someone in the country who would not be averse to removing Doubler. The possibility of disposing of the nester in this manner had been before him ever since he had learned of his presence on the Two Forks. He had not been surprised when Duncan had mentioned Dakota as being a probable tool, for he had thought over the occurrence of the shooting in Lazette many times, and had been much impressed with Dakota's coolness and his satanic cleverness with a six-shooter, and it seemed that it would be a simple matter to arrange with him for the removal of Doubler. Yes, it had seemed simple enough when he had planned it, and when Duncan had told him that Dakota was not on the "square."

But now, looking covertly at the man, he found that he was not quite certain in spite of what Duncan had said. He had mentally worked out his plan of approaching Dakota many times. But now the defect in the plan seemed to be that he had misjudged his man—that Duncan had misjudged him. Plainly he would make a mistake were he to approach Dakota with a bold request for the removing of the nester—he must clothe it. Thus, after a long silence, he started obliquely.

"My friend," he said, "it must be lonesome out here for you."

"Not so lonesome."

"It's a big country, though—lots of land. There seems to be no end to it."

"That's right, there's plenty of it. I reckon the Lord wasn't in a stingy mood when he made it."

"Yet there seem to be restrictions even here."

"Restrictions?"

"Yes," laughed Langford; "restrictions on a man's desires."

Dakota looked at him with a saturnine smile. "Restrictions on a man's desires," he repeated slowly. Then he laughed mirthlessly. "Some people wouldn't be satisfied if they owned the whole earth. They'd be wanting the sun, moon, and stars thrown in for good measure."

Langford laughed again. "That's human nature, my friend," he contended, determined not to be forced to digress from the main subject. "Have you got everything you want? Isn't there anything besides what you already have that appeals to you? Have you no ambition?"

"There are plenty of things I want. Maybe I'd be modest, though, if I had ambition. We all want a lot of things which we can't get."

"Correct, my friend. Some of us want money, others desire happiness, still others are after something else. As you say, some of use are never satisfied—the ambitious ones."

"Then you are ambitious?"

“You’ve struck it,” smiled Langford.

Dakota caught his gaze, and there was a smile of derision on his lips. “What particular thing are *you* looking for?” he questioned.

“Land.”

“Mine?” Dakota’s lips curled a little. “Doubler’s, then,” he added as Langford shook his head with an emphatic, negative motion. “He’s the only man who’s got land near yours.”

“That’s correct,” admitted Langford; “I want Doubler’s land.”

There was a silence for a few minutes, while Langford watched Dakota furtively as the latter gave his entire attention to his saddle.

“You’ve got all the rest of those things you spoke about, then—happiness, money, and such?” said Dakota presently, in a low voice.

“Yes. I am pretty well off there.”

“All you want is Doubler’s land?” He stopped working with the saddle and looked at Langford. “I reckon, if you’ve got all those things, that you ought to be satisfied. But of course you ain’t satisfied, or you wouldn’t want Doubler’s land. Did you offer to buy it?”

“I asked him to name his own figure, and he wouldn’t sell—wouldn’t even consider selling, though I offered him what I considered a fair price.”

“That’s odd, isn’t it? You’d naturally think that money could buy everything. But maybe Doubler has found happiness on his land. You couldn’t buy that from a man, you know. I suppose you care a lot about Doubler’s happiness—you wouldn’t want to take his land if you knew he was happy on it? Or don’t it make any difference to you?” There was faint sarcasm in his voice.

“As it happens,” said Langford, reddening a little, “this isn’t a question of happiness—it is merely business. Doubler’s land adjoins mine. I want to extend my holdings. I can’t extend in Doubler’s direction because Doubler controls the water rights. Therefore it is my business to see that Doubler gets out.”

“And sentiment has got no place in business. That right? It doesn’t make any difference to you that Doubler doesn’t want to sell; you want his land, and that settles it—so far as you are concerned. You don’t consider Doubler’s feelings. Well, I don’t know but that’s the way things are run—one man keeps what he can and another gets what he is able to get. What are you figuring to do about Doubler?”

Langford glanced at Dakota with an oily, significant smile. “I am new to the country, my friend,” he said. “I don’t know anything about the usual custom employed to force a man to give up his land. Could you suggest anything?”

Dakota deliberately took up a wax-end, rolled it, and squinted his eyes as he forced the end of the thread through the eye of the needle which he held in the other hand. So far as Langford could see he exhibited no emotion whatever; his face was inscrutable; he might not have heard.

Yet Langford knew that he had heard; was certain that he grasped the full meaning of the question; probably felt some emotion over it, and was masking it by appearing to busy himself with the saddle. Langford’s respect for him grew and he wisely kept silent, knowing that in time Dakota would answer. But when the answer did come it was not the one that Langford expected. Dakota’s eyes met his in a level gaze.

“Why don’t you shoot him yourself?” he said, drawling his words a little.

“Not taking any chances?” Dakota’s voice was filled with a cold sarcasm as he continued, after an interval during which Langford kept a discreetly still tongue. “Your business principles don’t take you quite that far, eh? And so you’ve come over to get me to shoot him? Why didn’t you say so in the beginning—it would have saved all this time.” He laughed coldly.

“What makes you think that you could hire me to put Doubler out of business?”

“I saw you shoot Blanca,” said Langford. “And I sounded Duncan.” It did not disturb him to discover that Dakota had all along been aware of the object of his visit. It rather pleased him, in fact, to be given proof of the man’s discernment—it showed that he was deep and clever.

“You saw me shoot Blanca,” said Dakota with a strange smile, “and Duncan told you I was the man to put Doubler away. Those are my recommendations.” His voice was slightly ironical, almost concealing a slight harshness. “Did Duncan mention that he was a friend of mine?” he asked. “No?” His smile grew mocking. “Just merely mentioned that I was uncommonly clever in the art of getting people—undesirable people—out of the way. Don’t get the idea, though, because Duncan told you, that I make a business of shooting folks. I put Blanca out of the way because it was a question of him or me—I shot him to save my own hide. Shooting Doubler would be quite another proposition. Still——” He looked at Langford, his eyes narrowing and smoldering with a mysterious fire.

It seemed that he was inviting Langford to make a proposal, and the latter smiled evilly. “Still,” he said, repeating Dakota’s word with a significant inflection, “you don’t refuse to listen to me. It would be worth a thousand dollars to me to have Doubler out of the way,” he added.

It was out now, and Langford sat silent while Dakota gazed into the distance that reached toward the nester’s cabin. Langford watched Dakota closely, but there was an absolute lack of expression in the latter’s face.

“How are you offering to pay the thousand?” questioned Dakota. “And when?”

“In cash, when Doubler isn’t here any more.”

Dakota looked up at him, his face a mask of immobility. “That *sounds* all right,” he said, with slow emphasis. “I reckon you’ll put it in writing?”

Langford’s eyes narrowed; he smiled craftily. “That,” he said smoothly, “would put me in your power. I have never been accused of being a fool by any of the men with whom I have done business. Don’t you think that at my age it is a little late to start?”

“I reckon we don’t make any deal,” laughed Dakota shortly.

“We’ll arrange it this way,” suggested Langford. “Doubler is not the only man I want to get rid of. I want your land, too. But”—he added as he saw Dakota’s lips harden—“I don’t purpose to proceed against you in the manner I am dealing with Doubler. I flatter myself that I know men quite well. I’d like to buy your land. What would be a fair price for it?”

“Five thousand.”

“We’ll put it this way, then,” said Langford, briskly and silkily. “I will give you an agreement worded in this manner: ‘One month after date I promise to pay to Dakota the sum of six thousand dollars, in consideration of his rights and interest in the Star brand, provided that within one month from date he persuades Ben Doubler to leave Union county.’” He looked at Dakota with a significant smile. “You see,” he said, “that I am not particularly desirous of being instrumental in causing Doubler’s death—you have misjudged me.”

Dakota’s eyes met his with a glance of perfect knowledge. His smile possessed a subtly mocking quality—which was slightly disconcerting to Langford.

“I reckon you’ll be an angel—give you time,” he said. “I am accepting that proposition, though,” he added. “I’ve been wanting to leave here—I’ve got tired of it. And”—he continued with a mysterious smile—“if things turn out as I expect, you’ll be glad to have me go.” He rose from the bench. “Let’s write that agreement,” he suggested.

They entered the cabin, and a few minutes later Dakota sat again on the box in the lee of the cabin wall, mending his saddle, the signed agreement in his pocket. Smiling, Langford rode the river trail, satisfied with the result of his visit. Turning once—as he reached the rise upon which Sheila had halted that morning after leaving Dakota’s cabin, Langford looked back. Dakota was still busy with his saddle. Langford urged his pony down the slope of the rise and vanished from view. Then Dakota ceased working on the saddle, drew out the signed agreement and read it through many times.

“That man,” he said finally, looking toward the crest of the slope where Langford had disappeared, “thinks he has convinced me that I ought to kill my best friend. He hasn’t changed a bit—not a damned bit!”

CHAPTER X

DUNCAN ADDS TWO AND TWO

Had Langford known that there had been a witness to his visit to Dakota he might not have ridden away from the latter's cabin so entirely satisfied with the result of his interview.

Duncan had been much interested in Langford's differences with Doubler. He had agitated the trouble, and he fully expected Langford to take him into his confidence should any aggressive movement be contemplated. He had even expected to be allowed to plan the details of the scheme which would have as its object the downfall of the nester, for thus he hoped to satisfy his personal vengeance against the latter.

But since the interview with Doubler at Doubler's cabin, Langford had been strangely silent regarding his plans. Not once had he referred to the nester, and his silence had nettled Duncan. Langford had ignored his hints, had returned monosyllabic replies to his tentative questions, causing the manager to appear to be an outsider in an affair in which he felt a vital interest.

It was annoying, to say the least, and Duncan's nature rebelled against the slight, whether intentional or accidental. He had waited patiently until the morning following his conversation with Langford about Dakota, certain that the Double R owner would speak, but when after breakfast the next morning Langford had ridden away without breaking his silence, the manager had gone into the ranchhouse, secured his field glasses, mounted his pony, and followed.

He kept discreetly in the rear, lingering in the depressions, skirting the bases of the hills, concealing himself in draws and behind boulders—never once making the mistake of appearing on the skyline. And when Langford was sitting on the box in front of Dakota's cabin, the manager was deep into the woods that surrounded the clearing where the cabin stood, watching intently through his field glasses.

He saw Langford depart, remained after his departure to see Dakota repeatedly read the signed agreement. Of course, he was entirely ignorant of what had transpired, but there was little doubt in his mind that the two had reached some sort of an understanding. That their conversation and subsequent agreement concerned Doubler he had little doubt either, for fresh in his mind was a recollection of his conversation with Langford, distinguished by Langford's carefully guarded questions regarding Dakota's ability with the six-shooter. He felt that Langford was deliberately leaving him out of the scheme, whatever it was.

Puzzled and raging inwardly over the slight, Duncan did not return to the ranchhouse that day and spent the night at one of the line camps. The following day he rode in to the ranchhouse to find that Langford had gone out riding with Sheila. Morose, sullen, Duncan again rode abroad, returning with the dusk. In his conversation with Langford that night the Double R owner made no reference to Doubler, and, studying Sheila, Duncan thought she seemed depressed.

During her ride that day with her father Sheila had received a startling revelation of his character. She had questioned him regarding his treatment of Doubler, ending with a plea for justice for the latter. For the first time during all the time she had known Langford she had seen an angry intolerance in his eyes, and though his voice had been as bland and smooth as ever, it did not heal the wound which had been made in her heart over the discovery that he could feel impatient with her.

"My dear Sheila," he said, "I should regret to find that you are interested in my business affairs."

"Doubler declares that you are unjust," she persisted, determined to do her best to avert the trouble that seemed impending.

"Doubler is an obstacle in the path of progress and will get the consideration he deserves," he said shortly. "Please do not meddle with what does not concern you."

Thus had an idol which Sheila worshiped been tumbled from its pedestal. Sheila surveyed it, lying shattered at her feet, with moist eyes. It might be restored, patched so that it would resemble its original shape, but never again would it appear the same in her eyes. She had received a glimpse of her father's real character; she saw the merciless, designing, real man stripped of the polished veneer that she had admired; his soul lay naked before her, seared and rendered unlovely by the blackness of deceit and trickery.

As the days passed, however, she collected the fragments of the shattered idol and began to replace them. Piece by piece she fitted them together, cementing them with her faith, so that in time the idol resembled its original shape.

She had been too exacting, she told herself. Men had ways of dealing with one another which women could not understand. Her ideas of justice were tempered with mercy and pity; she allowed her heart to map out her line of conduct toward her fellow men, and as a consequence her sympathies were broad and tender. In business, though, she supposed, it must be different. There mind must rule. It was a struggle in which the keenest wit and the sharpest instinct counted, and in which the emotion of mercy was subordinate to the love of gain. And so in time she erected her idol again and the cracks and seams in it became almost invisible.

While she had been restoring her idol there had been other things to occupy her mind. A thin line divides tragedy from comedy, and after the tragedy of discovering her father's real character Sheila longed for something to take her mind out of the darkness. A recollection of Duncan's jealousy, which he had exhibited on the day that she had related the story of her rescue by Dakota, still abided with her, and convinced that she might secure diversion by fanning the spark that she had discovered, she began by inducing Duncan to ask her to ride with him.

Sitting on the grass one day in the shade of some fir-balsams on a slope several miles down the river, Sheila looked at Duncan with a smile.

"I believe that I am beginning to like the country," she said.

"I expected you would like it after you were here a while. Everybody does. It grows into one. If you ever go back East you will never be contented—you'll be dreaming and longing. The West improves on acquaintance, like the people."

"Meaning?" she said, with a defiant mockery so plain in her eyes that Duncan drew a deep breath.

"Meaning that you ought to begin to like us—the people," he said.

"Perhaps I do like some of the people," she laughed.

"For instance," he said, his face reddening a little.

She looked at him with a taunting smile. "I don't believe that I like you—so very well. You get too cross when things don't suit you."

"I think you are mistaken," he challenged. "When have I been cross?"

Sheila laughed. "Do you remember the night that I came home and told you and father how Dakota had rescued me from the quicksand? Well," she continued, noting his nod and the frown which accompanied it, "you were cross that night—almost boorish. You moped and went off to bed without saying good-night."

It pleased Duncan to tell her that he had forgotten if he had ever acted that way, and she did not press him. And so a silence fell between them.

"You said you were beginning to like some of the people," said Duncan presently. "You don't like me. Then who do you like?"

"Well," she said, appearing to meditate, but in reality watching him closely so that she might catch his gaze when he looked up. "There's Ben Doubler. He seems to be a very nice old man. And"—Duncan looked at her and she met his gaze fairly, her eyes dancing with mischief—"and Dakota. He is a character, don't you think?"

Duncan frowned darkly and removed his gaze from her face, directing it down into the plain on the other side of the river. What strange fatality had linked her sympathies and admiration with his enemies? A rage which he dared not let her see seized him, and he sat silent, clenching and unclenching his hands.

She saw his condition and pressed him without mercy.

"He *is* a character, isn't he? An odd one, but attractive?"

Duncan sneered. "He pulled you out of the quicksand, of course. Anybody could have done that, if they'd been around. I reckon that's what makes him 'attractive' in your eyes. On the other hand, he put Texas Blanca out of business. Does that killing help to make him attractive?"

"Wasn't Blanca his enemy. If you remember, you told father and me that Blanca sold him some stolen cattle. Then, according to what I have heard of the story, he met Blanca in Lazette, ordered him to leave, and when he didn't go he

shot him. I understand that that is the code in matters of that sort—people have to take the law in their own hands. But he gave Blanca the opportunity to shoot first. Wasn't that fair?"

It seemed odd to her that she was defending the man who had wronged her, yet strangely enough she discovered that defending him gave her a thrill of satisfaction, though she assured herself that the satisfaction came from the fact that she was engaged in the task of arousing Duncan's jealousy.

"You've been inquiring about him, then?" said Duncan, his face dark with rage and hatred. "What I told you about that calf deal is the story that Dakota himself tells about it. A lot of people in this country don't believe Dakota's story. They believe what I believe, that Dakota and Blanca were in partnership on that deal, and that Dakota framed up that story about Blanca selling out to him to avert suspicion. It's likely that they wised up to the fact that we were on to them."

"I believe you mentioned your suspicions to Dakota himself, didn't you? The day you went over after the calves? You had quite a talk with him about them, didn't you?" said Sheila, sweetly.

Duncan's face whitened. "Who told you that?" he demanded.

"And he told you that if you ever interfered with him again, or that if he heard of you repeating your suspicions to anyone, he would do something to you—run you out of the country, or something like that, didn't he?"

"Who told you that?" repeated Duncan.

"Doubler told me," returned Sheila with a smile.

Duncan's face worked with impotent wrath as he looked at her. "So Doubler's been gassing again?" he said with a sneer. "Well, there's never been any love lost between Doubler and me, and so what he says don't amount to much." He laughed oddly. "It's strange to think how thick you are with Doubler," he said. "I understand that your dad and Doubler ain't exactly on a friendly footing, that your dad was trying to buy him out and that he won't sell. There's likely to be trouble, for your dad is determined to get Doubler's land."

However, that was a subject upon which Sheila did not care to dwell.

"I don't think that I am interested in that," she said. "I presume that father is able to take care of his own affairs without any assistance from me."

Duncan's eyes lighted with interest. Her words showed that she was aware of Langford's differences with the nester. Probably her father had told her—taking her into his confidence while ignoring his manager. Perhaps he had even told her of his visit to Dakota; perhaps there had been more than one visit and Sheila had accompanied him. Undoubtedly, he told himself, Sheila's admiration for Dakota had resulted from not one, but many, meetings. He flushed at the thought, and was forced to look away from Sheila for fear that she might see the passion that flamed in his eyes.

"You seen Dakota lately?" he questioned, after he had regained sufficient control of himself to be able to speak quietly.

"No." Sheila was flecking some dust from her skirts with her riding whip, and her manner was one of absolute lack of interest.

"Then you ain't been riding with your father?" said Duncan.

"Some." Sheila continued to brush the dust from her skirts. After answering Duncan's question, however, she realized that there had been a subtle undercurrent of meaning in his voice, and she turned and looked sharply at him.

"Why?" she demanded. "Do you mean that father has visited Dakota?"

"I reckon I'm meaning just that."

Sheila did not like the expression in Duncan's eyes, and her chin was raised a little as she turned from him and gave her attention to flecking the grass near her with the lash of her riding whip.

"Father attends to his own business," she said with some coldness, for she resented Duncan's apparent desire to interfere. "I told you that before. What he does in a business way does not interest me."

"No?" said Duncan mockingly. "Well, he's made some sort of a deal with Dakota!" he snapped, aware of his lack of wisdom in telling her this, but unable to control his resentment over the slight which had been imposed on him by Langford, and by her own chilling manner, which seemed to emphasize the fact that he had been left outside their intimate councils.

“A deal?” said Sheila quickly, unable to control her interest.

For a moment he did not answer. He felt her gaze upon him, and he met it, smiling mysteriously. Under the sudden necessity of proving his statement, his thoughts centered upon the conclusion which had resulted from his suspicions—that Langford’s visit to Dakota concerned Doubler. Equivocation would have taken him safely away from the pitfall into which his rash words had almost plunged him, but he felt that any evasion now would only bring scorn into the eyes which he wished to see alight with something else. Besides, here was an opportunity to speak a derogatory word about his enemy, and he could not resist—could not throw it carelessly aside. There was a venomous note in his voice when he finally answered:

“The other day your father was speaking to me about gun-men. I told him that Dakota would do anything for money.”

A slow red appeared in Sheila’s cheeks, mounted to her temples, disappeared entirely and was succeeded by a paleness. She kept her gaze averted, and Duncan could not see her eyes—they were turned toward the slumberous plains that stretched away into the distance on the other side of the river. But Duncan knew that he had scored, and was not bothered over the possibility of there being little truth in his implied charge. He watched her, gloating over her, certain that at a stroke he had effectually eliminated Dakota as a rival.

Sheila turned suddenly to him. “How do you know that Dakota would do anything like that?”

Duncan smiled as he saw her lips, straight and white, and tightening coldly.

“How do I know?” he jeered. “How does a man know anything in this country? By using his eyes, of course. I’ve used mine. I’ve watched Dakota for five years. I’ve known all along that he isn’t on the square—that he has been running his branding iron on other folks’ cattle. I’ve told you that he worked a crooked deal on me, and then sent Blanca over the divide when he thought there was a chance of Blanca giving the deal away. I am told that when he met Blanca in the Red Dog Blanca told him plainly that he didn’t know anything about the calf deal. That shows how he treats his friends. He’ll do anything for money.

“The other day I saw your father at his cabin, talking to him. They had quite a confab. Your father has had trouble with Doubler—you know that. He has threatened to run Doubler off the Two Forks. I heard that myself. He wouldn’t try to run Doubler off himself—that’s too dangerous a business for him to undertake. Not wanting to take the chance himself he hires someone else. Who? Dakota’s the only gunman around these parts. Therefore, your dad goes to Dakota. He and Dakota signed a paper—I saw Dakota reading it. I’ve just put two and two together, and that’s the result. I reckon I ain’t far out of the way.”

Sheila laughed as she might have laughed had someone told her that she herself had plotted to murder Doubler—a laugh full of scorn and mockery. Yet in her eyes, which were wide with horror, and in her face, which was suddenly drawn and white, was proof that Duncan’s words had hurt her mortally.

She was silent; she did not offer to defend Dakota, for in her thoughts still lingered a recollection of the scene of the shooting in Lazette. And when she considered her father’s distant manner toward her and Ben Doubler’s grave prediction of trouble, it seemed that perhaps Duncan was right. Yet in spite of the shooting of Blanca and the evil light which was now thrown on Dakota through Duncan’s deductions, she felt confident that Dakota would not become a party to a plot in which the murder of a man was deliberately planned. He had wronged her and he had killed a man, but at the quicksand crossing that day—despite the rage which had been in her heart against him—she had studied him and had become convinced that behind his recklessness, back of the questionable impulses that seemed at times to move him, there lurked qualities which were wholly admirable, and which could be felt by anyone who came in contact with him. Certainly those qualities which she had seen had not been undiscovered by Duncan—and others.

She remembered now that on a former occasion the manager had practically admitted his fear of Dakota, and then there was his conduct on that day when she had asked him to return Dakota’s pony. Duncan’s manner then had seemed to indicate that he feared Dakota—at the least did not like him. Ben Doubler had given her a different version of the trouble between Dakota and Duncan; how Duncan had accused Dakota of stealing the Double R calves, and how in the presence of Duncan’s own men Dakota had forced him to apologize. Taken altogether, it seemed that Duncan’s present suspicions were the result of his dislike, or fear, of Dakota. Convinced of this, her eyes flashed with contempt when she looked at the manager.

“I believe you are lying,” she said coldly. “You don’t like Dakota. But I have faith in him—in his manhood. I don’t believe that any man who has the courage to force another man to apologize to him in the face of great odds, would, or

could, be so entirely base as to plan to murder a poor, unoffending old man in cold blood. Perhaps you are not lying,” she concluded with straight lips, “but the very least that can be said for you is that you have a lurid imagination!”

In Duncan’s gleaming, shifting eyes, in the lips which were tensed over his teeth in a snarl, she could see the bitterness that was in his heart over the incident to which she had just referred.

“Wait,” he said smiling evilly. “You’ll know more about Dakota before long.”

Sheila rose and walked to her pony, mounting the animal and riding slowly away from the river. She did not see the queer smile on Duncan’s face as she rode, but looking back at the distance of a hundred yards, she saw that he did not intend to follow her. He was still sitting where she had left him, his back to her, his face turned toward the plains which spread away toward Dakota’s cabin, twenty miles down the river.

CHAPTER XI

A PARTING AND A VISIT

The problem which filled Duncan's mind as he sat on the edge of the slope overlooking the river was a three-sided one. To reach a conclusion the emotions of fear, hatred, and jealousy would have to be considered in the light of their relative importance.

There was, for example, his fear of Dakota, which must be taken into account when he meditated any action prompted by his jealousy, and his fear of Dakota was a check on his desires, a damper which must control the heat of his emotions. He might hate Dakota, but his fear of him would prevent his taking any action which might expose his own life to risk. On the other hand, jealousy urged him to accept any risk; it kept telling him over and over that he was a fool to allow Dakota to live. But Duncan knew better than to attempt an open clash with Dakota; each time that he had looked into Dakota's eyes he had seen there something which told him plainer than words of his own inferiority—that he would have no chance in a man-to-man encounter with him. And his latest experience with Dakota had proved that.

However, Duncan's character would not permit him to concede defeat, and his revenge was not a thing to be considered lightly. Therefore, though he sat for a long time on the slope, meditating over his problem, in the end he smiled. It was not a good smile to see, for his eyes were alight with a crafty, designing gleam, and there was a cruel curve in the lines of his lips. When he finally mounted his pony and rode away from the slope he was whistling.

During the next few days he did not see much of Sheila, for he avoided the ranchhouse as much as possible. He rode out with Langford many times, and though he covertly questioned the Double R owner concerning the affair with Doubler he could gain no satisfying information. Langford's reticence further aggravated the passions which rioted in his heart, and finally one afternoon when they rode up to the ranchhouse his curiosity could be held in check no longer, and he put the blunt question:

“What have you done about Doubler?”

Langford's shifting eyes rested for the fraction of a second on the face of his manager, and then the old, bland smile came into his own and he answered smoothly: “Nothing.”

“I have been thinking,” said Duncan carelessly, but with a sharp side glance at his employer, “that it wouldn't be a half bad idea to set a gunman on Doubler—a man like Dakota, for instance.”

The manager saw Langford's lips straighten a little, and his eyes flashed with a sudden fire. The expression on Langford's face strengthened the conviction already in Duncan's mind concerning the motive of his employer's visit to Dakota.

“I don't think I care to have any dealings with Dakota,” said Langford shortly.

Duncan's eyes blazed again. “I reckon if you'd go talk to him,” he persisted, turning his head so that Langford could not see the suppressed rage in his eyes, “you might be able to make a deal with him.”

“I don't wish to deal with him. I have decided not to bother Doubler at present. And I have no desire to talk with Dakota. Frankly, my dear Duncan, I don't like the man.”

“You been in the habit of forming opinions of men you've never talked to?” said Duncan. He could not keep the sneer out of his voice.

Langford noticed it and laughed softly.

“It is my recollection that a certain man of my acquaintance advised me at length of Dakota's shortcomings,” he said significantly. “For me to talk to Dakota after that would be to consider this man's words valueless. I will have nothing to do with Dakota. That is,” he added, “unless you have altered your opinion of him.”

Duncan did not reply, and he said nothing more to Langford on the subject, but he had discovered that for some reason Langford had chosen to keep the knowledge of his visit to Dakota secret, and Duncan's suspicions that the visit concerned Doubler became a conviction. Filled with resentment over Langford's attitude toward him, and with his mind definitely fixed upon the working out of his problem, Duncan decided to visit Doubler.

He chose a day when Langford had ridden away to a distant cow camp, and as when he was following the Double R owner, he did not ride the beaten trail but kept behind the ridges and in the depressions, and when he came within sight of Doubler's cabin he halted to reconnoiter. A swift survey of the corral showed him a rangy, piebald pony, which he knew to belong to Dakota. As the animal had on a bridle and a saddle he surmised that Dakota's visit would not be of long duration, and having no desire to visit Doubler in the presence of his rival, he shunted his own horse off the edge of a sand dune and down into the bed of a dry arroyo. Urging the animal along this, he presently reached a sand flat on whose edge arose a grove of fir-balsam and cottonwood.

For an hour, deep in the grove, he watched the cabin, and at length he saw Dakota come out; saw a smile on his face; heard him laugh. His lips writhed at the sound, and he listened intently to catch the conversation which was carried on between the two men, but the distance was too great. However, he was able to judge from the actions of the two that their relations were decidedly friendly, and this discovery immediately raised a doubt in his mind as to the correctness of his deductions.

Yet the doubt did not seriously affect his determination to carry out the plan he had in mind, and when a few moments after coming out of the cabin, Dakota departed down the river trail, Duncan slowly rode out of the grove and approached the cabin.

Doubler stood in the open doorway, looking after Dakota, and when the latter finally disappeared around a bend in the river the nester turned and saw Duncan. Instantly he stepped inside the cabin door, reappearing immediately, holding a rifle. Duncan continued to ride forward, raising one hand, with the palm toward Doubler, as a sign of the peacefulness of his intentions. The latter permitted him to approach, though he held the rifle belligerently.

"I want to talk," said Duncan, when he had come near enough to make himself heard.

"Pull up right where you are, then," commanded Doubler. He was silent while Duncan drew his pony to a halt and sat motionless in the saddle looking at him. Then his voice came with a truculent snap:

"You alone?"

Duncan nodded.

"Where's your new boss?" sarcastically inquired Doubler. "Ain't you scared he'll git lost—runnin' around alone without anyone to look after him?"

"I ain't his keeper," returned Duncan shortly.

Doubler laughed unbelievably. "You was puttin' in a heap of your time bein' his keeper, the last I saw of you," he declared coldly.

"Mebbe I was. We've had a falling out." The venom in Duncan's voice was not at all pretended. "He's double crossed me."

"Double crossed you?" There was disbelief and suspicion in Doubler's laugh. "How's he done that? I reckoned you was too smart for anyone to do that to you?" The sarcasm in this last brought a dark red into Duncan's face, but he successfully concealed his resentment and smiled.

"That's all right," he said; "I've got more than that coming from you. I'm telling you about what he done to me if you ain't got any objections to me getting off my horse."

"Tell me from where you are." In spite of the coldness in the nester's voice there was interest in his eyes. "Mebbe you an' him have had a fallin' out, but I ain't takin' any chances on you bein' my friend—not a durned chance."

"That's right. I don't blame you for not wanting to take a chance, and I'm not pretending to be your friend. And I sure ain't any friendly to Langford. He's double crossed me, but I ain't telling how he done it—that's between him and me. But I want to tell you something that will interest you a whole lot. It's about some guy which is trying to double cross you. To prove that I ain't thinking to plug you when you ain't looking I'm leaving my gun here." He drew out his six-shooter and stuck it behind his slicker, dismounted, and threw the reins over the pony's head.

In silence Doubler suffered him to approach, though he kept his rifle ready in his hand and his eyes still continued to wear a belligerent expression.

"You and me ain't been what you might call friendly for a long time," offered Duncan when he had halted a few feet from Doubler. "We've had words, but I've never tried to take any mean advantage of you—which I might have done if I'd

wanted to.” He smiled ingratiatingly.

“We ain’t goin’ to go over what’s happened between us,” declared Doubler coldly. “We’re lettin’ that go by. If you’ll stick to the palaver that you spoke about mebbe we’ll be able to git along for a minute or two. Meanwhile, you’ll excuse me if I keep this here gun in shape for you if you try any monkey business.”

Duncan masked his dislike of Doubler under a deprecatory smile. “That’s right,” he agreed. “We’ll let what’s happened pass without talking about it. What’s between us now is something different. I’ve never pretended to be your friend, and I’m not pretending to be your friend now. But I’ve always been square with you, and I’m square now. Can you say that about him?” He jerked his thumb in the direction of the river trail, on which Dakota had vanished some time before.

“Him?” inquired Doubler. “You mean Dakota?” He caught Duncan’s nod and smiled slowly. “I reckon you’re some off your range,” he said. “There ain’t no comparin’ Dakota to you—he’s always been my friend.”

“A man’s got a friend one day and he’s an enemy the next,” said Duncan mysteriously.

“Meanin’?”

“Meaning that Dakota ain’t so much of a friend as you think he is.”

Doubler’s lips grew straight and hard. “I reckon that ends the palaver,” he said coldly, while he fingered the rifle in his hand significantly. “If that’s what you come for you can be hittin’ the breeze right back to the Double R. I’m givin’ you _____”

“You’re traveling too fast,” remonstrated Duncan, a hoarseness coming into his voice. “You’ll talk different when you hear what I’ve got to say. I reckon you know that Langford ain’t any friendly to you?”

“I don’t see—” began Doubler.

He was interrupted by Duncan’s harsh laugh. “Of course you don’t see,” he said. “I’ve come over here to make you open your eyes. Langford ain’t no friend of yours, and I reckon that you wouldn’t consider any man your friend which sets in his cabin a couple of hours talking to Langford, about you?”

“Meanin’ that Langford’s been to see Dakota?” Doubler’s voice was suddenly harsh and his eyes glinted with suspicion. Certain that he had scored, Duncan turned and smiled into the distance. When he again faced Doubler his face wore an expression of sympathy.

“When a man’s been a friend to you and you find that he’s going to double cross you, it’s apt to make you feel pretty mean,” he said. “I’m allowing that. But there’s a lot of us get double crossed. I got it and I’m seeing that they don’t ring in any cold deck on you.”

“How do you know Dakota’s tryin’ to do that?” demanded Doubler.

Duncan laughed. “I’ve kept my eyes open. Also, I’ve been listening right hard. I wasn’t so far away when Langford went to Dakota’s shack, and I heard considerable of what they said about you.”

Doubler’s interest was now intense; he spoke eagerly: “What did they say?”

“I reckon you ought to be able to guess what they said,” said Duncan with a crafty smile. “I reckon you know that Langford wants your land mighty bad, don’t you? And you won’t sell. Didn’t he tell you in front of me that he was going to make trouble for you? He wants me to make it, though; he wants me to set the boys on you. But I won’t do it. Then he shuts up like a clam and don’t say anything more to me about it. He saw Dakota send Blanca over the divide and he’s some impressed by his shooting. He figures that if Dakota puts one man out of business he’ll put another out.”

“Meanin’ that Langford’s hired Dakota to look for me?” Doubler’s eyes were gleaming brightly.

“You’re some keen, after all,” taunted Duncan.

Doubler’s jaws snapped. “You’re a liar!” he said; “Dakota wouldn’t do it!”

“Maybe I’m a liar,” said Duncan, his face paling but his voice low and quiet. He was not surprised that Doubler should exhibit emotion over the charge that his friend was planning to murder him, yet he knew that the suspicion once established in Doubler’s mind would soon grow to the stature of a conviction.

“Maybe I’m a liar,” repeated Duncan. “But if you’ll use your brain a little you’ll see that things look bad for you. Dakota’s been here. Did he tell you about Langford coming to see him? I reckon not,” he added as he caught Doubler’s

blank stare; “he’d likely not tell you about it. But I reckon that if he was your friend he’d tell you. I reckon you told him about Langford wanting your land—about him telling you he’d make things hot for you?”

Doubler nodded silently, and Duncan continued. “Well,” he said, with a short laugh, “I’ve told you, and it’s up to you. They were talking about you, and if Dakota’s your friend, as you’re claiming him to be, he’d have told you what they was talking about—if it wasn’t what I say it was—him knowing how Langford feels toward you. And they didn’t only talk. Langford wrote something on a paper and gave it to Dakota. I don’t know what he wrote, but it seemed to tickle Dakota a heap. Leastways, he done a heap of laffing over it. Likely Langford’s promised him a heap of dust to do the job. Mebbe he’s your friend, but if I was you I wouldn’t give him no chance to say I drew first.”

Doubler placed his rifle down and passed a hand slowly and hesitatingly over his forehead. “I don’t like to think that of Dakota,” he said, faith and suspicion battling for supremacy. “Dakota just left here; he acted a heap friendly—as usual—mebbe more so.”

“I reckon that when a man goes gunning for another man he don’t advertise a whole lot,” observed Duncan insinuatingly.

“No,” agreed Doubler, staring blankly into the distance where he had last seen his supposed friend, “a man don’t generally do a heap of advertisin’ when he’s out lookin’ for a man.” He sat for a time staring straight ahead, and then he suddenly looked up, his eyes filled with a savage fierceness. “How do I know you ain’t lyin’ to me?” he demanded, glaring at Duncan, his hands clenched in an effort to control himself.

Duncan’s eyes did not waver. “I reckon you *don’t* know whether I’m lying,” he returned, showing his teeth in a slight smile. “But I reckon you’re twenty-one and ought to have your eye-teeth cut. Anyway, you ought to know that a man like Langford, who’s wanting your land, don’t go to talk with a man like Dakota, who’s some on the shoot, for nothing. How do you know that Langford and Dakota ain’t friends? How do you know but that they’ve been friends back East? Do you know where Dakota came from? Mebbe he’s from the East, too. I’m telling you one thing,” added Duncan, and now his voice was filled with passion, “Dakota and Sheila Langford are pretty thick. She makes believe that she don’t like him, but he saved her from a quicksand, and she’s been running with him considerable. Takes his part, too; does it, but she makes you believe that she don’t like him. I reckon she’s pretty foxy.”

Doubler’s memory went back to a conversation he had had with Sheila in which Dakota had been the subject under discussion. He remembered that she had shown a decided coldness, suggesting by her manner that she and Dakota were not on the best of terms. Could it be that she had merely pretended this coldness? Could it be that she was concerned in the plot against him, that she and her father and Dakota were combined against him for the common purpose of taking his life?

He was convinced that any such suspicion against Sheila must be unjust, for he had studied her face many times and was certain that there was not a line of deceit in it. And yet, was it not odd that, when he had told her of the trouble between him and her father, she had not immediately taken her parent’s side? To be sure, she had told him that Langford was merely her stepfather, but could not that statement also have been a misleading one? And even if Langford were only her stepfather, would she not have felt it her duty to align herself with him?

“I reckon you know a heap about Dakota, don’t you?” came Duncan’s voice, breaking into Doubler’s reflections. “You know, for instance, that Dakota came here from Dakota—or anyway, he says he came here from there. We’ll say you know that. But what do you know about Langford? Didn’t he tell you that he was going to ‘get’ you?”

Duncan turned his back to Doubler and walked to his pony. He drew out his six-shooter, stuck it into its holster, and placed one foot in a stirrup, preparatory to mounting. Then he turned and spoke gravely to Doubler.

“I’ve done all I could,” he said. “You know how you stand and the rest of it is up to you. You can go on, letting Dakota and Sheila pretend to be friendly to you, and some day you’ll get wise awful sudden—when it’s too late. Or, you can wise up now and fix Dakota before he gets a chance at you. I reckon that’s all. You can’t say that I didn’t put you wise to the game.”

He swung into the saddle and urged the pony toward the crossing. Looking back from a crest of a rise on the other side of the river, he saw Doubler still standing in the doorway, his head bowed in his hands. Duncan smiled, his lips in cold, crafty curves, for he had planted the seed of suspicion and was satisfied that it would presently flourish and grow until it would finally accomplish the destruction of his rival, Dakota.

CHAPTER XII

A MEETING ON THE RIVER TRAIL

About ten o'clock in the morning of a perfect day Sheila left the Double R ranchhouse for a ride to the Two Forks to visit Doubler. This new world into which she had come so hopefully had lately grown very lonesome. It had promised much and it had given very little. The country itself was not to blame for the state of her mind, though, she told herself as she rode over the brown, sun-scorched grass of the river trail, it was the people. They—even her father—seemed to hold aloof from her.

It seemed that she would never be able to fit in anywhere. She was convinced that the people with whom she was forced to associate were entirely out of accord with the principles of life which had been her guide—they appeared selfish, cold, and distant. Duncan's sister, the only woman beside herself in the vicinity, had discouraged all her little advances toward a better acquaintance, betraying in many ways a disinclination toward those exchanges of confidence which are the delight of every normal woman. Sheila had become aware very soon that there could be no hope of gaining her friendship or confidence and so of late she had ceased her efforts.

Of course, she could not attempt to cultivate an acquaintance with any of the cowboys—she already knew *one* too well, and the knowledge of her relationship to him had the effect of dulling her desire for seeking the company of the others.

For Duncan she had developed a decided dislike which amounted almost to hatred. She had been able to see quite early in their acquaintance the defects of his character, and though she had played on his jealousy in a spirit of fun, she had been careful to make him see that anything more than mere acquaintance was impossible. At least that was what she had tried to do, and she doubted much whether she had succeeded.

Doubler was the only one who had betrayed any real friendship for her, and to him, in her lonesomeness, she turned, in spite of the warning he had given her. She had visited him once since the day following her father's visit, and he had received her with his usual cordiality, but she had been able to detect a certain constraint in his manner which had caused her to determine to stay away from the Two Forks. But this morning she felt that she must go somewhere, and she selected Doubler's cabin.

Since that day when on the edge of the butte overlooking the river Duncan had voiced his suspicions that her father had planned to remove Doubler, Sheila had felt more than ever the always widening gulf that separated her from her parent. From the day on which he had become impatient with her when she had questioned him concerning his intentions with regard to Doubler he had treated her in much the manner that he always treated her, though it had seemed to her that there was something lacking; there was a certain strained civility in his manner, a veneer which smoothed over the breach of trust which his attitude that day had created.

Many times, watching him, Sheila had wondered why she had never been able to peer through the mask of his imperturbability at the real, unlovely character it concealed. She believed it was because she had always trusted him and had not taken the trouble to try to uncover his real character. She had tried for a long time to fight down the inevitable, growing estrangement, telling herself that she had been, and was, mistaken in her estimate of his character since the day he had told her not to meddle with his affairs, and she had nearly succeeded in winning the fight when Duncan had again destroyed her faith with the story of her father's visit to Dakota.

Duncan had added two and two, he had told her when furnishing her with the threads out of which he had constructed the fabric of his suspicions, and she was compelled to acknowledge that they seemed sufficiently strong. Contemplation of the situation, however, had convinced her that Dakota was partly to blame, and her anger against him—greatly softened since the rescue at the quicksand—flared out again.

Two weeks had passed since Duncan had told her of his suspicions, and they had been two weeks of constant worry and dread to her.

Unable to stand the suspense longer she had finally decided to seek out Dakota to attempt to confirm Duncan's story of her father's visit and to plead with Dakota to withhold his hand. But first she would see Doubler.

The task of talking to Dakota about anything was not to her liking, but she compromised with her conscience by telling herself that she owed it to herself to prevent the murder of Doubler—that if the nester should be killed with her in

possession of the plan for his taking off, and able to lift a hand in protest or warning, she would be as guilty as her father or Dakota.

As she rode she could not help contrasting Dakota's character to those of her father and Duncan. She eliminated Duncan immediately, as being not strong enough to compare either favorably or unfavorably with either of the other two. And, much against her will, she was compelled to admit that with all his shortcomings Dakota made a better figure than her father. But there was little consolation for her in this comparison, for she bitterly assured herself that there was nothing attractive in either. Both had wronged her—Dakota deliberately and maliciously; her father had placed the bar of a cold civility between her and himself, and she could no longer go to him with her confidences. She had lost his friendship, and he had lost her respect.

Of late she had speculated much over Dakota. That day at the quicksand crossing he had seemed to be a different man from the one who had stood with revolver in hand before the closed door of his cabin, giving her a choice of two evils. For one thing, she was no longer afraid of him; in his treatment of her at the crossing he had not appeared as nearly so forbidding as formerly, had been almost attractive to her, in those moments when she could forget the injury he had done her. Those moments had been few, to be sure, but during them she had caught flashes of the real Dakota, and though she fought against admiring him, she knew that deep in her heart lingered an emotion which must be taken into account. He had really done her no serious injury, nothing which would not be undone through the simple process of the law, and in his manner on the day of the rescue there had been much respect, and in spite of the mocking levity with which he had met her reproaches she felt that he felt some slight remorse over his action.

For a time she forgot to think about Dakota, becoming lost in contemplation of the beauty of the country. Sweeping away from the crest of the ridge on which she was riding, it lay before her, basking in the warm sunlight of the morning, wild and picturesque, motionless, silent—as quiet and peaceful as might have been that morning on which, his work finished, the Creator had surveyed the new world with a satisfied eye.

She had reached a point about a mile from Doubler's cabin, still drinking in the beauty that met her eyes on every hand, when an odd sound broke the perfect quiet.

Suddenly alert, she halted her pony and listened.

The sound had been strangely like a pistol shot, though louder, she decided, as she listened to its echo reverberating in the adjacent hills. It became fainter, and finally died away, and she sat for a long time motionless in the saddle, listening, but no other sound disturbed the solemn quiet that surrounded her.

It seemed to her that the sound had come from the direction of Doubler's cabin, but she was not quite certain, knowing how difficult it was to determine the direction of sound in so vast a stretch of country.

She ceased to speculate, and once more gave her attention to the country, urging her pony forward, riding down the slope of the ridge to the level of the river trail.

Fifteen minutes later, still holding the river trail, she saw a horseman approaching, and long before he came near enough for her to distinguish his features she knew the rider for Dakota. He was sitting carelessly in the saddle, one leg thrown over the pommel, smoking a cigarette, and when he saw her he threw the latter away, doffed his broad hat, and smiled gravely at her.

"Were you shooting?" she questioned, aware that this was an odd greeting, but eager to have the mystery of that lone shot cleared up.

"I reckon I ain't been shooting—lately," he returned. "It must have been Doubler. I heard it myself. I've just left Doubler, and he was cleaning his rifle. He must have been trying it. I do that myself, often, after I've cleaned mine, just to make sure it's right." He narrowed his eyes whimsically at her. "So you're riding the fiver trail again?" he said. "I thought you'd be doing it."

"Why?" she questioned, defiantly.

"Well, for one thing, there's a certain fascination about a place where one has been close to cashing in—I expect that when we've been in such a place we like to come back and look at it just to see how near we came to going over the divide. And there's another reason why I expected to see you on the river trail again. You forgot to thank me for pulling you out."

He deserved thanks for that, she knew. But there were in his voice and eyes the same subtle mockery which had marked

his manner that other time, and as before she experienced a feeling of deep resentment. Why could he not have shown some evidence of remorse for his crime against her? She believed that had he done so now she might have found it in her heart to go a little distance toward forgiving him. But there was only mockery in his voice and words and her resentment against him grew. Mingling with it, moreover, was the bitterness which had settled over her within the last few days. It found expression in her voice when she answered him:

“This country is full of—of savages!”

“Indians, you mean, I reckon? Well, no, there are none around here—excepting over near Fort Union, on the reservation.” He drawled hatefully and regarded her with a mild smile.

“I mean white savages!” she declared spitefully.

His smile grew broader, and then slowly faded and he sat quiet, studying her face. The silence grew painful; she moved uneasily under his direct gaze and a dash of color swept into her cheeks. Then he spoke quietly.

“You been seeing white savages?”

“Yes!” venomously.

“Not around here?” The hateful mockery of that drawl!

“I am talking to one,” she said, her eyes blazing with impotent anger.

“I thought you was meaning me,” he said, without resentment. “I reckon I’ve got it coming to me. But at the same time that isn’t exactly the way to talk to your——” He hesitated and smiled oddly, apparently aware that he had made a mistake in referring to his crime against her. He hastened to repair it. “Your rescuer,” he corrected.

However, she saw through the artifice, and the bitterness in her voice grew more pronounced. “It is needless for you to remind me of our relationship,” she said; “I am not likely to forget.”

“Have you told your father yet?”

In his voice was the quiet scorn and the peculiar, repressed venom which she had detected when he had referred to her father during that other occasion at the crossing. It mystified her, and yet within the past few days she had felt this scorn herself and knew that it was not remarkable. Undoubtedly he, having had much experience with men, had been able to see through Langford’s mask and knew him for what he was. For the first time in her life she experienced a sensation of embarrassed guilt over hearing her name linked with Langford’s, and she looked defiantly at Dakota.

“I have not told him,” she said. “I won’t tell him. I told you that before—I do not care to undergo the humiliation of hearing my name mentioned in the same breath with yours. And if you do not already know it, I want to tell you that David Langford is not my father; my real father died a long time ago, and Langford is only my stepfather.”

A sudden moisture was in her eyes and she did not see Dakota start, did not observe the queer pallor that spread over his face, failed to detect the odd light in his eyes. However, she heard his voice—sharp in tone and filled with genuine astonishment.

“Your stepfather?” He had spurred his pony beside hers and looking up she saw that his face had suddenly grown stern and grim. “Do you mean that?” he demanded half angrily. “Why didn’t you tell me that before? Why didn’t you tell me when—the night I married you?”

“Would it have made any difference to you?” she said bitterly. “Does it make any difference now? You have treated me like a savage; you are treating me like one now. I—I haven’t any friends at all,” she continued, her voice breaking slightly, as she suddenly realized her entire helplessness before the combined evilness of Duncan, her father, and the man who sat on his pony beside her. A sob shook her, and her hands went to her face, covering her eyes.

She sat there for a time, shuddering, and watching her closely, Dakota’s face grew slowly pale, and grim, hard lines came into his lips.

“I know what Duncan’s friendship amounts to,” he said harshly. “But isn’t your stepfather your friend?”

“My friend?” She echoed his words with a hopeless intonation that closed Dakota’s teeth like a vise. “I don’t know what has come over him,” she continued, looking up at Dakota, her eyes filled with wonder for the sympathy which she saw in his face and voice; “he has changed since he came out here; he is so selfish and heartless.”

“What’s he been doing? Hurting you?” She did not detect the anger in his voice, for he had kept it so low that she scarcely heard the words.

“Hurting me? No; he has not done anything to me. Don’t you know?” she said scornfully, certain that he was mocking her again—for how could his interest be genuine when he was a party to the plot to murder Doubler? Yet perhaps not—maybe Duncan *had* been lying. Determined to get to the bottom of the affair as quickly as possible, Sheila continued rapidly, her scorn giving way to eagerness. “Don’t you know?” And this time her voice was almost a plea. “What did father visit you for? Wasn’t it about Doubler? Didn’t he hire you to—to kill him?”

She saw his lips tighten strangely, his face grow pale, his eyes flash with some mysterious emotion, and she knew in an instant that he was guilty—guilty as her father!

“Oh!” she said, and the scorn came into her voice again. “Then it is true! You and my father have conspired to murder an inoffensive old man! You—you cowards!”

He winced, as though he had received an unexpected blow in the face, but almost immediately he smiled—a hard, cold, sneering smile which chilled her.

“Who has been telling you this?” The question came slowly, without the slightest trace of excitement.

“Duncan told me.”

“Duncan?” There was much contempt in his voice. “Not your father?”

She shook her head negatively, wondering at his cold composure. No wonder her father had selected him!

He laughed mirthlessly. “So that’s the reason Doubler was so friendly to his rifle this morning?” he said, as though her words had explained a mystery which had been puzzling him. “Doubler and me have been friends for a long time. But this morning while I was talking to him he kept his rifle beside him all the time. He must have heard from someone that I was gunning for him.”

“Then you haven’t been hired to kill him?”

He smiled at her eagerness, but spoke gravely and with an earnestness which she could not help but feel. “Miss Sheila,” he said, “there isn’t money enough in ten counties like this to make me kill Doubler.” His lips curled with a quiet sarcasm. “You are like a lot of other people in this country,” he added. “Because I put Blanca away they think I am a professional gunman. But I want *you*”—he placed a significant emphasis on the word—“to understand that there wasn’t any other way to deal with Blanca. By coming back here after selling me that stolen Star stock and refusing to admit the deed in the presence of other people—even denying it and accusing me—he forced me to take the step I did with him. Even then, I gave him his chance. That he didn’t take it isn’t my fault.

“I suppose I look pretty black to you, because I treated you like I did. But it was partly your fault, too. Maybe that’s mysterious to you, but it will have to stay a mystery. I had an idea in my head that night—and something else. I’ve found something out since that makes me feel a lot sorry. If I had known what I know now, that wouldn’t have happened to you—I’ve got my eyes open now.”

Their ponies were very close together, and leaning over suddenly he placed both hands on her shoulders and gazed into her eyes, his own flashing with a strange light. She did not try to escape his hands, for she felt that his sincerity warranted the action.

“I’ve treated you mean, Sheila,” he said; “about as mean as a man could treat a woman. I am sorry. I want you to believe that. And maybe some day—when this business is over—you’ll understand and forgive me.”

“This business?” Sheila drew back and looked at him wonderingly. “What do you mean?”

There was no mirth in his laugh as he dropped his hands to his sides. Her question had brought about a return of that mocking reserve which she could not penetrate. Apparently he would let her no farther into the mystery whose existence his words had betrayed. He had allowed her to get a glimpse of his inner self; had shown her that he was not the despicable creature she had thought him; had apparently been about to take her into his confidence. And she had felt a growing sympathy for him and had been prepared to meet him half way in an effort to settle their differences, but she saw that the opportunity was gone—was hidden under the cloak of mystery which had been about him from the beginning of their acquaintance.

“This Doubler business,” he answered, and she nibbled impatiently at her lips, knowing that he had meant something

else.

“That’s evasion,” she said, looking straight at him, hoping that he would relent and speak.

“Is it?” In his unwavering eyes she saw a glint of grim humor. “Well, that’s the answer. I am not going to kill Doubler—if it will do you any good to know. I don’t kill my friends.”

“Then,” she said eagerly, catching at the hope which he held out to her, “father didn’t hire you to kill him? You didn’t talk to father about that?”

His lips curled. “Why don’t you ask your father about that?”

The hope died within her. Dakota’s words and manner implied that her father had tried to employ him to make way with the nester, but that he had refused. She had not been wrong—Duncan had not been wrong in his suspicion that her father was planning the death of the nester. Duncan’s only mistake was in including Dakota in the scheme.

She had hoped against hope that she might discover that Duncan had been wrong altogether; that she had done her father an injury in believing him capable of deliberately planning a murder. She looked again at Dakota. There was no mistaking his earnestness, she thought, for there was no evidence of deceit or knavery in his face, nor in the eyes that were steadily watching her.

She put her hands to her face and shivered, now thoroughly convinced of her father’s guilt; feeling a sudden repugnance for him, for everybody and everything in the country, excepting Doubler.

She had done all she could, however, to prevent them killing Doubler—all she could do except to warn Doubler of his danger, and she would go to him immediately. Without looking again at Dakota she turned, dry eyed and pale, urging her pony up the trail toward the nester’s cabin, leaving Dakota sitting silent in his saddle, watching her.

She lingered on the trail, riding slowly, halting when she came to a spot which offered a particularly good view of the country surrounding her, for in spite of her lonesomeness she could not help appreciating the beauty of the land, with its towering mountains, its blue sky, its vast, yawning distances, and the peacefulness which seemed to be everywhere except in her heart.

She presently reached the Two Forks and urged her pony through the shallow water of its crossing, riding up the slight, intervening slope and upon a stretch of plain beside a timber grove. A little later she came to the corral gates, where she dismounted and hitched her pony to a rail, smiling to herself as she thought of how surprised Doubler would be to see her.

Then she left the corral gate and stole softly around a corner of the cabin, determined to steal upon Doubler unawares. Once at the corner, she halted and peered around. She saw Doubler lying in the open doorway, his body twisted into a peculiarly odd position, face down, his arms outstretched, his legs doubled under him.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SHOT IN THE BACK

For an instant after discovering Doubler lying in the doorway, Sheila stood motionless at the corner of the cabin, looking down wonderingly at him. She thought at first that he was merely resting, but his body was doubled up so oddly that a grave doubt rose in her mind. A vague fear clutched at her heart, and she stood rigid, her eyes wide as she looked for some sign that would confirm her fears. And then she saw a moist red patch on his shirt on the right side just below the shoulder blade, and it seemed that a band of steel had been suddenly pressed down over her forehead. Something had happened to Doubler!

The world reeled, objects around her danced fantastically, the trees in the grove near her seemed to dip toward her in derision, her knees sagged and she held tightly to the corner of the cabin for support in her weakness.

She saw it all in a flash. Dakota had been to visit Doubler and had shot him. She had heard the shot. Duncan had been right, and Dakota—how she despised him now!—was probably even now picturing in his imagination the scene of her discovering the nester lying on his own threshold, murdered. An anger against him, which arose at the thought, did much to help her regain control of herself.

She must be brave now, for there might still be life in Doubler's body, and she went slowly toward him, cringing and shrinking, along the wall of the cabin.

She touched him first, lightly with the tips of her fingers, calling softly to him in a quavering voice. Becoming more bold, she took hold of him by the left shoulder and shook him slightly, and her heart seemed to leap within her when a faint moan escaped his lips. Her fear fled instantly as she realized that he was alive, that she had not to deal with a dead man.

Stifling a quivering sob she took hold of him again, tugging and pulling at him, trying to turn him over so that she might see his face. She observed that the red patch on his shoulder grew larger with the effort, and her face grew paler with apprehension, but convinced that she must persist she shut her eyes and tugged desperately at him, finally succeeding in pulling him over on his back.

He moaned again, though his face was ashen and lifeless, and with hope filling her heart she redoubled her efforts and finally succeeded in dragging him inside the cabin, out of the sun, where he lay inert, with wide-stretched arms, a gruesome figure to the girl.

Panting and exhausted, some stray wisps of hair sweeping her temples, the rest of it threatening to come tumbling down around her shoulders, she leaned against one of the door jambs, thinking rapidly. She ought to have help, of course, and her thoughts went to Dakota, riding unconcernedly away on the river trail. She could not go to him for assistance, such a course was not to be considered, she would rather let Doubler die than to go to his murderer; she could never have endured the irony of such an action. Besides, she was certain that even were she to go to him, he would find some excuse to refuse her, for having shot the nester, he certainly would do nothing toward bringing the help which might possibly restore him to life.

She put aside the thought with a shudder of horror, yet conscious that something must be done for Doubler at once if he was to live. Perhaps it was already too late to go for assistance; there seemed to be but very little life in his body, and trembling with anxiety she decided that she must render him whatever aid she could. There was not much that she could do, to be sure, but if she could do something she might keep him alive until other help would come.

She stood beside the door jamb and watched him for some time, for she dreaded the idea of touching him again, but after a while her courage returned, and she again went to him, kneeling down beside him, laying her head on his breast and listening. His heart was beating, faintly, but still it was beating, and she rose from him, determined.

She found a sheath knife in one of his pockets, and with this she cut the shirt away from the wound, discovering, when she drew the pieces of cloth away, that there was a large, round hole in his breast. She came near to swooning when she thought of the red patch on his back, for that seemed to prove that the bullet had gone clear through him. It had missed a vital spot, though, she thought, for it seemed to be rather high on the shoulder.

She got some water from a pail that stood just inside the door, and with this and some white cloth which she tore from

one of her skirts, she bathed and bandaged the wound and laid a wet cloth on his forehead. She tried to force some of the water down his throat, but he could not swallow, lying there with closed eyes and drawing his breath in short, painful gasps.

After she had worked with him for a quarter of an hour or more she stood up, convinced that she had done all she could for him and that the next move would be to get a doctor.

She had heard Duncan say that it was fifty miles to Dry Bottom, and she knew that it was at least forty to Lazette. She had never heard anyone mention that there was a doctor nearer, and so of course she would have to go to Lazette—ten miles would make a great difference.

She might ride to the Double R ranchhouse, and she thought of going there, but it was at least ten miles off the Lazette trail, and even though at the Double R she might get a cowboy to make the ride to Lazette, she would be losing much valuable time. She drew a deep breath over the contemplation of the long ride—at best it would take her four hours—but she did not hesitate long and with a last glance at Doubler she was out of the door and walking to the corral, where she unhitched her pony, mounted, and sent the animal over the level toward the crossing at a sharp gallop.

Once over the crossing and on the river trail where the riding was better, she held the pony to an even, steady pace. One mile, two miles, five or six she rode with her hair flying in the breeze, her cheeks pale, except for a bright red spot in the center of each—which betrayed the excitement under which she was laboring. There was a resolute gleam in her eyes, though, and she rode lightly, helping her pony as much as possible. However, the animal was fresh and did not seem to mind the pace, cavorting and lunging up the rises and pulling hard on the reins on the levels, showing a desire to run. She held it in, though, realizing that during the forty mile ride the animal would have plenty of opportunity to prove its mettle.

She reached and passed the quicksand crossing from which she had been pulled by Dakota, the pony running with the sure regularity of a machine, and was on a level which led into some hills directly ahead, when the pony stumbled.

She tried to jerk it erect with the reins, but in spite of the effort she felt it sink under her, and with a sensation of dismay clutching at her heart she slid out of the saddle.

A swift examination showed her that the pony's right fore-leg was deep in the sand of the trail, and she surmised instantly that it had stepped into a prairie dog hole. When she went to it and raised its head it looked appealingly at her, and she stifled a groan of sympathy and began looking about for some means to extricate it.

She found this no easy task, for the pony's leg was deep in the sand, and when she finally dug a space around it with a branch of tree which she procured from a nearby grove, the animal struggled out, only to limp badly. The leg, Sheila decided, after a quick examination, was not broken, but badly sprained, and she knew enough about horses to be certain that the injured pony would never be able to carry her to Lazette.

She would be forced to go to the Double R now, there was nothing else that she could do. Standing beside the pony, debating whether she had not better walk than try to ride him, even to the Double R, she heard a clatter of hoofs and turned to see Dakota riding the trail toward her. He was traveling in the direction she had been traveling when the accident had happened, and apparently had left the trail somewhere back in the distance, or she would have seen him. Perhaps, she speculated, with a flash of dull anger, he had followed her near to Doubler's cabin, perhaps had been near when she had dragged the wounded nester into it.

His first word showed her that there was ground for this suspicion. He drew up beside her and looked at her with a queer smile, and she, aware of his guilt, wondered at his composure.

"You didn't stay long at Doubler's shack," he said. "I was on a ridge, back on the trail a ways, and I saw you hitting the breeze away from there some rapid. I was thinking to intercept you, but you went tearing by so fast that I didn't get a chance. You're in an awful hurry. What's wrong?"

"You ought to know that," she said, bitterly angry because of his pretended serenity. "You—you murderer!"

His face paled instantly, but his voice was clear and sharp.

"Murderer?" he said sternly. "Who has been murdered?"

"You don't know, of course," she said scornfully, her face flaming, her eyes alight with loathing and contempt. "You shot him and then let me ride on alone to—to find him, shot—shot in the back! Oh!"

She shuddered at the recollection, held her hands over her eyes for an instant to keep from looking at the expression of

amazement in his eyes, and while she stood thus she heard a movement, and withdrew her hands from her eyes to see him standing beside her, so close that his body touched hers, his eyes ablaze with curiosity and interest and repressed anxiety. She cringed and cried with pain as he seized her arm and twisted her forcibly around so that she faced him.

“Stop this fooling and tell me what has happened!” he said, with short, incisive accents. “Who did you find shot? Who has been murdered?”

Oh, it was admirable acting, she told herself as she tore herself away from him and stood back a little, her eyes flashing with scorn and horror. “You don’t know, of course,” she flared. “You shot him—shot him in the back and sent me on to find him. You gloried in the thought of me finding him dead. But he isn’t dead, thank God, and will live, if I can get a doctor, to accuse you!” She pointed a finger at him, but he ignored it and took a step toward her, his eyes cold and boring into hers.

“Who?” he demanded. “Who?”

“Ben Doubler. Oh!” she cried, in an excess of rage and horror, “to think that I should have to tell you!”

But if he heard her last words he paid no attention to them, for he was suddenly at his pony’s side, buckling the cinches tighter. She watched him, fascinated at the repressed energy of his movements, and became so interested that she started when he suddenly looked up at her.

“He isn’t dead, then,” he said rapidly, sharply, the words coming with short, metallic snaps. “You were going to Lazette for a doctor. I’m glad I happened along—glad I saw you. I’ll be able to make better time than you.”

“Where are you going?” she demanded, scarcely having heard his words, though aware that he was preparing to leave. She took a step forward and seized his pony’s bridle rein, her eyes blazing with wrath over the thought that he should attempt to deceive her with so bald a ruse.

“For the doctor,” he said shortly. “This is no time for melodramatics, ma’am, if Doubler is badly hurt. Will you please let go of that bridle?”

“Do you think,” she demanded, her cheeks aflame, her hair, loosened from the long ride, straggling over her temples and giving her a singularly disheveled appearance, “that I am going to let you go for the doctor? You!”

“This isn’t a case where your feelings should be considered, ma’am,” he said. “If Ben Doubler has been hurt like you think he has I’m going to get the doctor mighty sudden, whether you think I ought to or not!”

“You won’t!” she declared, stamping a foot furiously. “You shot him and now you want to disarm suspicion by going after the doctor for him. But you won’t! I won’t let you!”

“You’ll have to,” he said rapidly. “The doctor isn’t at Lazette; he is over on Carrizo Creek, taking care of Dave Moreland’s wife, who is down bad. I saw Dave yesterday, and he was telling me about her; that the doctor is to stay there until she is out of danger. You don’t know where Moreland’s place is. Be sensible, now,” he said gruffly. “I’ll talk to you later about you suspecting me.”

“You shan’t go,” she protested; “I am going myself. I will find Moreland’s place. I can’t let you go—it would be horrible!”

For answer he swung quickly down from the saddle, seized her by the waist, disengaged her hands from the bridle rein, and picking her up bodily carried her, struggling and fighting and striking blindly at his face, to the side of the trail. When he set her down he pinned her arms to her sides. He did not speak, and she was entirely helpless in his grasp, but when he released his grasp of her arms and tried to leave her she seized the collar of his vest. With a grim laugh he slipped out of the garment, leaving it dangling from her hand.

“Keep it for me, ma’am,” he said with a cold chuckle. “But get back to Doubler’s cabin and see what you can do for him. You’ll be able to do a lot. I’ll be back with the doctor before sundown.”

In an instant he was at his pony’s side, mounting with the animal at a run, and in a brief space had vanished around a turn in the trail, leaving a cloud of dust to mark the spot where Sheila had seen him disappear.

For a long time Sheila stood beside the trail, looking at the spot where he had disappeared, holding his vest with an unconscious grasp. Looking down she saw it and with an exclamation of rage threw it from her, watching it fall into the sand. But after an instant she went over and took it up, recovering, at the same time, a black leather pocket memoranda which had slipped out of it. She put the memoranda back into one of the pockets, handling both the book and the vest

gingerly, for she felt an aversion to touching them. She conquered this feeling long enough to tuck the vest into the slicker behind the saddle, and then she mounted and sent her pony up the trail toward Doubler's cabin.

She found Doubler where she had left him, and he was still unconscious. The water pail was empty and she went down to the river and refilled it, returning to the cabin and again bathing and bandaging Doubler's wound, and placing a fresh cloth on his forehead.

For a time she sat watching the injured man, revolving the incident of her discovery of him in her mind, going over and over again the gruesome details. She did not dwell long on the latter, for she could not prevent her mind reviewing Dakota's words and actions—his satanic cleverness in pretending to be on the verge of taking her into his confidence, his prediction that she would understand when this "business" was over. She did not need to wait, she understood now!

Finding the silence in the cabin irksome, she rose, placed Doubler's head in a more comfortable position, and went outside into the bright sunshine of the afternoon. She took a turn around the corral, abstractedly watched the awkward antics of several yearlings which were penned in a corner, and then returned to the cabin door, where she sat on the edge of the step.

Near the side of the cabin door, leaning against the wall, she saw a rifle. She started, not remembering to have seen it there before, but presently she found courage to take it up gingerly, turning it over and over in her hands.

Some initials had been carved on the stock and she examined them, making them out finally as "B. D."—Doubler's. Examining the weapon she found an empty shell in the chamber, and she nearly dropped the rifle when the thought struck her that perhaps Doubler had been shot with it. She set it down quickly, shuddering, and for diversion walked to her pony, examining the injured leg and rubbing it, the pony nickering gratefully. Returning to the cabin she sat for a long time on the step, but she did not again take up the rifle. Several times while she sat on the step she heard Doubler moan, and once she got up and went to him, again bathing his wound, but returning instantly to the door step, for she could not bear the silence of the interior.

Suddenly remembering Dakota's vest and the black leather memoranda which had dropped from one of the pockets, she got up again and went to the bench where she had laid the garment, taking out the book and regarding it with some curiosity.

There was nothing on the cover to suggest what might be the nature of its contents—time had worn away any printing that might have been on it. She hesitated, debating the propriety of an examination, but her curiosity got the better of her and with a sharp glance at Doubler she turned her back and opened the book.

Almost the first object that caught her gaze was a piece of paper, detached from the leaves, with some writing on it. The writing seemed unimportant, but as she turned it, intending to replace it between the leaves of the book, she saw her father's name, and she read, holding her breath with dread, for fresh in her mind was Duncan's charge that her father had entered into an agreement with Dakota for the murder of Doubler. She read the words several times, standing beside the bench and swaying back and forth, a sudden weakness gripping her.

"One month from to-day"—ran the words—"I promise to pay to Dakota the sum of six thousand dollars in consideration of his rights and interest in the Star brand, provided that within one month from date he persuades Ben Doubler to leave Union County."

Signed: "David Dowd Langford."

There it was—conclusive, damning evidence of her father's guilt—and of Dakota's!

How cleverly that last clause covered the evil intent of the document! Sheila read it again and again with dry eyes. Her horror and grief were too great for tears. She felt that the discovery of the paper removed the last lingering doubt, and though she had been partially prepared for proof, she had not been prepared to have it thrust so quickly and convincingly before her.

How long she sat on the door step she did not know, or care, for at a stroke she had lost all interest in everything in the country. Even its people interested her only to the point of loathing—they were murderers, even her father. Time represented to her nothing now except a dreary space which, if she endured, would bring the moment in which she could leave. For within the last few minutes she seemed to have been robbed of all the things which had made existence here endurable and she was determined to end it all. When she finally got up and looked about her she saw that the sun had traveled quite a distance down the sky. A sorrowful smile reached her face as she watched it. It was going away, and

before it could complete another circle she would go too—back to the East from where she had come, where there were at least *some* friends who could be depended upon to commit no atrocious crimes.

No plan of action formed in her mind; she could not think lucidly with the knowledge that her father was convicted of complicity in an attempted murder.

Would she be able to face her father again? To bid him good-bye? She thought not. It would be better for both if she departed without him being aware of her going. He would not care, she told herself bitterly; lately he had withheld from her all those little evidences of affection to which she had grown accustomed, and it would not be hard for him, he would not miss her, perhaps would even be glad of her absence, for then he could continue his murderous schemes without fear of her “meddling” with them.

There was a fascination in the paper on which was written the signed agreement. She read it carefully again, and then concealed it in her bodice, pinning it there so that it would not become lost. Then she rose and went into the cabin, placing the memoranda on a shelf where Dakota would be sure to find it when he returned with the doctor. She did not care to read anything contained in it.

Marveling at her coolness, she went outside again and resumed her seat on the door step. It was not such a blow to her, after all, and there arose in her mind as she sat on the step a wonder, as to how her father would act were she to confront him with evidence of his guilt. Perhaps she would not show him the paper, but she finally became convinced that she must talk to him, must learn from him in some manner his connection with the attempted murder of Doubler. Then, after receiving from him some sign which would convince her, she would take her belongings and depart for the East, leaving him to his own devices.

Looking up at the sun, she saw that it still had quite a distance to travel before it reached the mountains. Stealing into the cabin, she once more fixed the bandages on the wounded man. Then she went out, mounted her pony, and rode through the shallow water of the crossing toward the Double R ranch.

CHAPTER XIV

LANGFORD LAYS OFF THE MASK

The sun was still an hour above the horizon when Sheila rode up to the corral gates. While removing the saddle and bridle from her pony she noted with satisfaction that the horse which her father had been accustomed to ride was inside the corral. Therefore her father was somewhere about.

Hanging the saddle and bridle from a rail of the corral fence, she went into the house to find that Langford was not there. Duncan's sister curtly informed her that she had seen him a few minutes before down at the stables. Sheila went into the office, which was a lean-to addition to the ranchhouse, and seating herself at her father's desk picked up a six month's old copy of a magazine and tried to read.

Finding that she could not concentrate her thoughts, she dropped the magazine into her lap and leaned back with a sigh. From where she sat she had a good view of the stables, and fifteen minutes later, while she still watched, she saw Langford come out of one of the stable doors and walk toward the house. She felt absolutely no emotion whatever over his coming; there was only a mild curiosity in her mind as to the manner in which he would take the news of her intended departure from the Double R. She observed, with a sort of detached interest, that he looked twice at her saddle and bridle as he passed them, and so of course he surmised that she had come in from her ride. For a moment she lost sight of him behind some buildings, and then he opened the door of the office and entered.

He stopped on the threshold for an instant and looked at her, evidently expecting her to offer her usual greeting. He frowned slightly when it did not come, and then smiled.

"Hello!" he said cordially. "You are back, I see. And tired," he added, noting her position. He walked over and laid a hand on her forehead and she involuntarily shrank from his touch, shuddering, for the hand which he had placed on her forehead was the right one—the hand with which he had signed the agreement with Dakota—Doubler's death warrant.

"Don't, please," she said.

"Cross, too?" he said jocularly.

"Just tired," she lied listlessly, and with an air of great indifference.

He looked critically at her for an instant, then smiled again and dragged a chair over near a window and looked out, apparently little concerned over her manner. But she noted that he glanced furtively at her several times, and that he seemed greatly satisfied over something. She wondered if he had seen Dakota; if he knew that the latter had already attempted to carry out the agreement to "Persuade Doubler to leave the county."

"Ride far?" he questioned, turning and facing her, his voice casual.

"Not very far."

"The river trail?"

Sheila nodded, and saw a sudden interest flash into his eyes.

"Which way?" he asked quickly.

"Down," she returned. She had not lied, for she *had* ridden "down," and though she had also ridden up the river she preferred to let him guess a little, for she resented the curiosity in his voice and was determined to broach the subject which she had in mind in her own time and after the manner that suited her best.

He had not been interested in her for a long time, had not appeared to care where she spent her time. Why should he betray interest now? She saw a mysterious smile on his face and knew before he spoke that his apparent interest in her was not genuine—that he was merely curious.

"Then you haven't heard the news?" he said softly. He was looking out of the window now, and she could not see his face.

She took up the magazine and turned several pages, pretending to read, but in reality waiting for him to continue. When he made no effort to do so her own curiosity got the better of her.

“What news?” she questioned, without looking at him.

“About Doubler,” he said. “He is dead.”

Her surprise was genuine, and her hands trembled as the leaves of the magazine fluttered and closed. Had the nester died since she had left his cabin? A moment’s thought convinced her that this could not be the explanation, for assuredly she would have seen anyone who had arrived at Doubler’s cabin; she had scanned the surrounding country before and after leaving the vicinity of the crossing and had seen no signs of anyone. Besides, Langford’s news seemed to have abided with him a long time—it seemed to her that he had known it for hours. She could not tell why she felt this, but she was certain that he had not received word recently—within an hour or two at any rate—unless he had seen Dakota.

This seemed to be the secret of his knowledge, and the more she considered the latter’s excitement during her meeting with him on the trail, the more fully she became convinced that Langford had talked to him. The latter’s anxiety to relieve her of the task of riding to Lazette for the doctor had been spurious; he had merely wanted to be the first to carry the news of Doubler’s death to Langford, and after leaving her he had undoubtedly taken a roundabout trail for the Double R. Possibly by this time he had settled with Langford and was on his way out of the country.

“Dead?” she said, turning to Langford. “Who——” In her momentary excitement she had come very near to asking him who had brought him the news. She hesitated, for she saw a glint of surprise and suspicion in his eyes.

“My dear girl, did I say that he had been ‘killed’?”

His smile was without humor. Evidently he had expected that she had been about to ask who had killed the nester.

He looked at her steadily, an intolerant smile playing about the corners of his mouth. “I am aware that you have been suspicious of me ever since you heard that I had a quarrel with Doubler. But, thank God, my dear, I have not that crime to answer for. Doubler, however, has been killed—murdered.”

Sheila repressed a desire to shudder, and turned from Langford so that he would not be able to see the disgust that had come into her eyes over the discovery that in addition to being a murderer her father was that most despicable of all living things—a hypocrite! It required all of her composure to be able to look at him again.

“Who killed him?” she asked evenly.

“Dakota, my dear.”

“Dakota!” She pronounced the name abstractedly, for she was surprised at the admission.

“How do you know that Dakota killed him?” she said, looking straight at him. He changed color, though his manner was still smooth and his smile bland.

“Duncan was fortunate enough to be in the vicinity when the deed was committed,” he told her. “And he saw Dakota shoot him in the back. With his own rifle, too.”

There was a quality in his voice which hinted at satisfaction; a peculiar emphasis on the word “fortunate” which caused Sheila to wonder why he should consider it fortunate that Duncan had seen the murder done, when it would have been much better for the success of Dakota’s and her father’s scheme if there had been no witness to it at all.

“However,” continued Langford, with a sigh of resignation that caused Sheila a shiver of repugnance and horror, “Doubler’s death will not be a very great loss to the country. Duncan tells me that he has long been suspected of cattle stealing, and sooner or later he would have been caught in the act. And as for Dakota,” he laughed harshly, with a note of suppressed triumph that filled her with an unaccountable resentment; “Dakota is an evil in the country, too. Do you remember how he killed that Mexican half-breed over in Lazette that day?—the day I came? Wanton murder, I call it. Such a man is a danger and a menace, and I shall not be sorry to see him hanged for killing Doubler.”

“Then you will have Duncan charge Dakota with the murder?”

“Of course, my dear; why shouldn’t I? Assuredly you would not allow Dakota to go unpunished?”

“No,” said Sheila, “Doubler’s murderer should be punished.”

Two things were now fixed in her mind as certainties. Dakota had not been to see her father since she had left him on the river trail; he had not received his blood-money—would never receive it. Her father had no intention of living up to his agreement with Dakota and intended to allow him to be hanged. She thought of the signed agreement in her bodice. Langford had given it to Dakota, but she had little doubt that in case Dakota still had it in his possession and dared to

produce it, Langford would deny having made it—would probably term it a forgery. It was harmless, too; who would be likely to intimate that the clause regarding Dakota inducing Doubler to leave the country meant that Langford had hired Dakota to kill the nester? Sheila sat silent, looking at Langford, wondering how it happened that he had been able to masquerade so long before her; why she had permitted herself to love a being so depraved, so entirely lacking in principle.

But a thrill of hope swept over her. Perhaps Doubler would not die? She had been considering the situation from the viewpoint of the nester's death, but if Dakota had really been in earnest and had gone for a doctor, there was a chance that the tragedy which seemed so imminent would be turned into something less serious. Immediately her spirits rose and she was able to smile quietly at Langford when he continued:

"Dakota will be hung, of course; decency demands it. When Duncan came to me with the news I sent him instantly to Lazette to inform the sheriff of what had happened. Undoubtedly he will take Dakota into custody at once."

"But not for murder," said Sheila evenly, unable to keep a quiver of triumph out of her voice.

"Not?" said Langford, startled. "Why not?"

"Because," returned Sheila, enjoying the sudden consternation that was revealed in her father's face, and drawing her words a little to further confound him; "because Doubler isn't dead."

"Not dead!" Langford's jaws sagged, and he sat looking at Sheila with wide, staring, vacuous eyes. "Not dead?" he repeated hoarsely. "Why, Duncan told me he had examined him, that he had been shot through the lungs and had bled to death before he left him! How do you know that he is not dead?" he suddenly demanded, leaning toward her, a wild hope in his eyes.

"I went to his cabin before noon," said Sheila. "I found him lying in the doorway. He had been shot through the right side, near the shoulder, but not through the lung, and he was still alive. I dragged him into the cabin and did what I could for him. Then I started for the doctor."

"For the doctor?" he said incredulously. "Then how does it happen that you are here? You couldn't possibly ride to Lazette and return by this time!"

"I believe I said that I 'started' for the doctor," said Sheila with a quiet smile. She was enjoying his excitement. "I met Dakota on the trail, and he went."

Langford continued to stare at her; it seemed that he could not realize the truth. Then suddenly he was out of his chair and standing over her, his face bloated poisonously, his eyes ablaze with a malignant light.

"Damn you!" he shrieked. "This is what comes of your infernal meddling! What business had you to interfere? Why didn't you let him die? I've a notion——"

His hands clenched and unclenched before her eyes, and she sat with blanched face, certain that he was about to attack her—perhaps kill her. She did not seem to care much, however, and looked up into his face steadily and defiantly.

After a moment, however, he regained control of himself, leaving her side and pacing rapidly back and forth in the office, cursing bitterly.

Curiously, Sheila was not surprised at this outburst; she had rather expected it since she had become aware of his real character. Nor was she surprised to discover that he had dropped pretense altogether—he was bound to do that sooner or later. Her only surprise was at her own feelings. She did not experience the slightest concern over him—it was as though she were talking to a stranger. She was interested to the point of taking a grim enjoyment out of his confusion, but beyond that she was not interested in anything.

It made little difference to her what became of Langford, Dakota, Duncan—any of them, except Doubler. She intended to return to the nester's cabin, to help the doctor make him comfortable—for he had been the only person in the country who had shown her any kindness; he was the only one who had not wronged her, and she was grateful to him.

Langford was standing over her again, his breath coming short and fast.

"Where did you see Dakota?" he questioned hoarsely. "Answer!" he added, when she did not speak immediately.

"On the river trail."

"Before you found Doubler?"

“Before, yes—and after. I met him twice.”

She discerned his motive in asking these questions, but it made no difference to her and she answered truthfully. She did not intend to shield Dakota; the fact that Doubler had not been killed outright did not lessen the gravity of the offense in her eyes.

“Before you found Doubler!” Langford’s voice came with a vicious snap. “You met him coming from Doubler’s cabin, I suppose?”

“Yes,” she answered wearily, “I met him coming from there. I was on the trail—going there—and I heard the shot. I know Dakota killed him.”

Langford made an exclamation of satisfaction.

“Well, it isn’t so bad, after all. You’ll have to be a witness against Dakota. And very likely Doubler will die—probably is dead by this time; will certainly be dead before the Lazette doctor can reach his cabin. No, my dear,” he added, smiling at Sheila, “it isn’t so bad, after all.”

Sheila rose. Her poignant anger against him was equaled only by her disgust. He expected her to bear witness against Dakota; desired her to participate in his scheme to fasten upon the latter the entire blame for the commission of a crime in which he himself was the moving factor.

“I shall not bear witness against him,” she told Langford coldly. “For I am going away—back East—to-morrow. Don’t imagine that I have been in complete ignorance of what has been going on; that I have been unaware of the part you have played in the shooting of Doubler. I have known for quite a long while that you had decided to have Doubler murdered, and only recently I learned that you hired Dakota to kill him. And this morning, when I met Dakota on the river trail, he dropped this from a pocket of his vest.” She fumbled at her bodice and produced the signed agreement, holding it out to him.

As she expected, he repudiated it, though his face paled a little as he read it.

“This is a forgery, my dear,” he said, in the old, smooth, even voice that she had grown to despise.

“No,” she returned calmly, “it is not a forgery. You forget that only a minute ago you practically admitted it to be a true agreement by telling me that I should have allowed Doubler to die. You are an accomplice in the shooting of Doubler, and if I am compelled to testify in Dakota’s trial I shall tell everything I know.”

She watched while he lighted a match, held it to the paper, smiling as the licking flames consumed it. He was entirely composed now, and through the gathering darkness of the interior of the office she saw a sneer come into his face.

“I shall do all I can to assist you to discontinue the associations which are so distasteful to you. You will start for the East immediately, I presume?”

“To-morrow,” she said. “In the afternoon. I shall have my trunks taken over to Lazette in the morning.”

“In the morning?” said Langford, puzzled. “Why not ride over with them, in the afternoon, in the buckboard?”

“I shall ride my pony. The man can return him.” She took a step toward the door, but halted before reaching it, turning to look back at him.

“I don’t think it is necessary for me to say good-by. But you have not treated me badly in the past, and I thank you—for that—and wish you well.”

“Where are you going?”

Sheila had walked to the door and stood with one hand on the latch. He came and stood beside her, a suppressed excitement in his manner, his eyes gleaming brightly in the dusk which had suddenly fallen.

“I think I told you that before. Ben Doubler is alone, and he needs care. I am going to him—to stay with him until the doctor arrives. He will die if someone does not take care of him.”

“You are determined to continue to meddle, are you?” he said, his voice quivering with anger, his lips working strangely. “I am sick of your damned interference. Sick of it, I tell you!” His voice lowered to a harsh, throaty whisper. “You won’t leave this office until to-morrow afternoon! Do you hear? What business is it of yours if Doubler dies?”

Sheila did not answer, but pressed the door latch. His arm suddenly interposed, his fingers closing on her arm, gripping

it so tightly that she cried out with pain. Then suddenly his fingers were boring into her shoulders; she was twisted, helpless in his brutal grasp, and flung bodily into the chair beside the desk, where she sat, sobbing breathlessly.

She did not cry out again, but sat motionless, her lips quivering, rubbing her shoulders where his iron fingers had sunk into the flesh, her soul filled with a revolting horror for his brutality.

For a moment there was no movement. Then, in the semi-darkness she saw him leave the door; watched him as he approached a shelf on which stood a kerosene lamp, lifted the chimney and applied a match to the wick. For an instant after replacing the chimney he stood full in the glare of light, his face contorted with rage, his eyes gleaming with venom.

“Now you know exactly where I stand, you—you huzzy!” he said, grinning satyrically as she winced under the insult. “I’m your father, damn you! Your father—do you hear? And I’ll not have you go back East to gab and gossip about me. You’ll stay here, and you’ll bear witness against Dakota, and you’ll keep quiet about me!” He was trembling horribly as he came close to her, and his breath was coughing in his throat shrilly.

“I won’t do anything of the kind!” Sheila got to her feet, and stood, rigid with anger, her eyes flaming defiance. “I am going to Doubler’s cabin this minute, and if you molest me again I shall go to the sheriff with my story!”

He seemed about to attack her again, and his hands were raised as though to grasp her throat, when there came a sound at the door, it swung open, and Dakota stepped in, closing the door behind him.

Dakota’s face was white—white as it had been that other day at the quicksand crossing when Sheila had looked up to see him sitting on his pony, watching her. There was an entire absence of excitement in his manner, though; no visible sign to tell that what he had seen on entering the cabin disturbed him in the least. Yet the whiteness of his face belied this apparent composure. It seemed to Sheila that his eyes betrayed the strong emotion that was gripping him.

She retreated to the chair beside the desk and sank into it. Langford had wheeled and was now facing Dakota, a shallow smile on his face.

There was a smile on Dakota’s face, too; a mysterious, cold, prepared grin that fascinated Sheila as she watched him. The smile faded a little when he spoke to Langford, his voice vibrating, as though he had been running.

“When you’re fighting a woman, Langford, you ought to make sure there isn’t a man around!”

Mingling with Sheila’s recognition of the obvious and admirable philosophy of this statement was a realization that Dakota must have been riding hard. There was much dust on his clothing, the scarf at his neck was thick with it; it streaked his face, his voice was husky, his lips dry.

Langford did not answer him, stepping back against the desk and regarding him with a mirthless, forced smile which, Sheila was certain, he had assumed in order to conceal his fear of the man who stood before him.

“So you haven’t got any thoughts just at this minute,” said Dakota with cold insinuation. “You are one of those men who can talk bravely enough to women, but who can’t think of anything exactly proper for a man to hear. Well, you’ll do your talking later.” He looked at Sheila, ignoring Langford completely.

“I expect you’ve been wondering, ma’am, why I’m here, when I ought to be over at the Two Forks, trying to do something for Doubler. But the doctor’s there, taking care of him. The reason I’ve come is that I’ve found this in Doubler’s cabin.” He drew out the memoranda which Sheila had placed on the shelf in the cabin, holding it up so that she might see.

“You took my vest,” he went on. “And I was looking for it. I found it all right, but something was missing. You’re the only one who has been to Doubler’s cabin since I left there, I expect, and it must have been you who opened this book. It isn’t in the same shape it was when you pulled it off me when I was talking to you down there on the river trail—something has been taken out of it, a paper. That’s why I rode over here—to see if you’d got it. Have you, ma’am?”

Sheila pointed mutely to the floor, where a bit of thin, crinkled ash was all that remained of the signed agreement.

“Burned!” said Dakota sharply.

He caught Sheila’s nod and questioned coldly:

“Who burned it?”

“My—Mr. Langford,” returned Sheila.

“You found it and showed it to him, and he burned it,” said Dakota slowly. “Why?”

“Don’t you see?” Sheila’s eyes mocked Langford as she intercepted his gaze, which had been fixed on Dakota. “It was evidence against him,” she concluded, indicating her father.

“I reckon I see.” The smile was entirely gone out of Dakota’s face now, and as he turned to look at Langford there was an expression in his eyes which chilled the latter.

“You’ve flunked on the agreement. You’ve burned it—won’t recognize it, eh? Well, I’m not any surprised.”

Langford had partially recovered from the shock occasioned by Dakota’s unexpected appearance, and he shook his head in emphatic, brazen denial.

“There was no agreement between us, my friend,” he said. “The paper I burned was a forgery.”

Dakota’s lips hardened. “You called me your friend once before, Langford,” he said coldly. “Don’t do it again or I’ll forget that you are Sheila’s father. I reckon she has told you about Doubler. That’s why I came over here to get the paper, for I knew that if you got hold of it you’d make short work of it. I know something else.” He took a step forward and tried to hold Langford’s gaze, his own eyes filled with a snapping menace. “I know that you’ve sent Duncan to Lazette for the sheriff. The doctor told me he’d met him,—Duncan—and the doctor says Duncan told him that you’d said that I fixed Doubler. How do you know I did?”

“Duncan saw you,” said Langford.

Dakota’s lips curled. “Duncan tell you that?” he questioned.

At Langford’s nod he laughed harshly. “So it’s a plant, eh?” he said, with a mirthless chuckle. “You are figuring to get two birds with one stone—Doubler and me. You’ve already got Doubler, or think you have, and now it’s my turn. It does look pretty bad for me, for a fact, doesn’t it? You’ve burned the agreement you made with me, so that you could slip out of your obligation. I reckon you think that after the sheriff gets me you’ll be able to take the Star without any trouble—like you expect to take Doubler’s land.

“You’ve got Duncan to swear that he saw me do for Doubler, and you’ve got your daughter to testify that she saw me on the trail, coming from Doubler’s cabin right after she heard the shooting. It was a right clever scheme, but it was my fault for letting you get anything on me—I ought to have known that you’d try some dog’s trick or other.”

His voice was coming rapidly, sharply, and was burdened with a lashing sarcasm. “Yes, it’s a right clever scheme, Mister Langford, and it ought to be successful. But there’s one thing you’ve forgot. I’ve lived too long in this country to let anyone tangle me up like you’d like to have me. When a man gets double crossed in this country, he can’t go to the law for redress—he makes his own laws. I’m making mine. You’ve double crossed me, and damn your hide, I’m going to send you over the divide in a hurry!”

One of his heavy revolvers leaped from its holster and showed for an instant in his right hand. Sheila had been watching closely, forewarned by Dakota’s manner, and when she saw his right hand drop to the holster she sprang upon him, catching the weapon by the muzzle.

Langford had covered his face with his hands, and stood beside the desk, trembling, and Sheila cried aloud in protest when she saw Dakota draw the weapon that swung at his other hip, holding her off with the hand which she had seized. But when Dakota saw Langford’s hands go to his face he hesitated, smiling scornfully. He turned to Sheila, looking down at her face close to his, his smile softening.

“I forgot,” he said gently, “I forgot he is your father.”

“It isn’t that,” she said. “He isn’t my father, any more. But—” she looked at Dakota pleadingly—“please don’t shoot him. Go—leave the country. You have plenty of time. You have enough to answer for. Please go!”

For answer he grasped her by the shoulders, swinging her around so that she faced him,—as he had forced her to face him that day on the river trail—and there was a regretful, admiring gleam in his eyes.

“You told him—” he jerked a thumb toward Langford—“that you wouldn’t bear witness against me. I heard you. You’re a true blue girl, and your father’s a fool or he wouldn’t lose you, like he is going to lose you. If I had you I would take mighty good care that you didn’t get away from me. You’ve given me some mighty good advice, and I would act on it if I was guilty of shooting Doubler. But I didn’t shoot him—your father and Duncan have framed up on me. Doubler isn’t dead yet, and so I’m not running away. If Doubler had someone to nurse him, he might—” He hesitated and looked at her

with a strange smile. “You think I shot Doubler, too, don’t you? Well, there’s a chance that if we can get Doubler revived he can tell who did shoot him. Do you want to know the truth? I heard you say a while ago, while I was standing at the window, looking in at your father giving a demonstration of his love for you, that you intended going over to Doubler’s shack to nurse him. If you’re still of the same mind, I’ll take you over there.”

Sheila was at the door in an instant, but halted on the threshold to listen to Dakota’s parting word to Langford.

“Mister man,” he said enigmatically, “there’s just one thing that I want to say to you. There’s a day coming when you’ll think thoughts—plenty of them.”

In a flash he had stepped outside the door and closed it after him.

A few minutes later, still standing beside the desk, Langford heard the rapid beat of hoofs on the hard sand of the corral yard. Faint they became, and their rhythmic beat faster, until they died away entirely. But Dakota’s words still lingered in Langford’s mind, and it seemed to him that they conveyed a prophecy.

CHAPTER XV

THE PARTING ON THE RIVER TRAIL

"I'll be leaving you now, ma'am." There was a good moon, and its mellow light streamed full into Dakota's grim, travel-stained face as he halted his pony on the crest of a slope above the Two Forks and pointed out a light that glimmered weakly through the trees on a level some distance on the other side of the river.

"There's Doubler's cabin—where you see that light," he continued, speaking to Sheila in a low voice. "You've been there before, and you won't get lost going the rest of the way alone. Do what you can for Doubler. I'm going down to my shack. I've done a heap of riding to-day, and I don't feel exactly like I want to keep going on, unless it's important. Besides, maybe Doubler will get along a whole lot better if I don't hang around there. At least, he'll do as well."

Sheila had turned her head from him. He was exhibiting a perfectly natural aversion toward visiting the man he had nearly killed, she assured herself with a shudder, and she felt no pity for him. He had done her a service, however, in appearing at the Double R at a most opportune time, and she was grateful. Therefore she lingered, finding it hard to choose words.

"I am sorry," she finally said.

"Thank you." He maneuvered his pony until the moonlight streamed in her face. "I reckon you've got the same notion as your father—that I shot Doubler?" he said, watching her narrowly. "You are willing to take Duncan's word for it?"

"Duncan's word, and the agreement which I found in the pocket of your vest," she returned, without looking at him. "I suppose that is proof enough?"

"Well," he said with a bitter laugh, "it does look bad for me, for a fact. I can't deny that. And I don't blame you for thinking as you do. But you heard what I told your father about the shooting of Doubler being a plant."

"A plant?"

"A scheme, a plot—to make an innocent man seem guilty. That is what has been done with me. I didn't shoot Doubler. I wouldn't shoot him."

She looked at him now, unbelief in her eyes.

"Of course you would deny it," she said.

"Well," he said resignedly, "I reckon that's all. I can't say that I expected anything else. I've done some things in my life that I've regretted, but I've never told a lie when the truth would do as well. There is no reason now why I should lie, and so I want you to know that I am telling the truth when I say that I didn't shoot Doubler. Won't you believe me?"

"No," she returned, unaffected by the earnestness in his voice. "You were at Doubler's cabin when I heard the shot—I met you on the trail. You killed that man, Blanca, over in Lazette, for nothing. You didn't need to kill him; you shot him in pure wantonness. But you killed Doubler for money. You would have killed my father had I not been there to prevent you. Perhaps you can't help killing people. You have my sympathy on that account, and I hope that in time you will do better—will reform. But I don't believe you."

"You forgot to mention one other crime," he reminded her in a low voice, not without a trace of sarcasm.

"I have not forgotten it. I will never forget it. But I forgive you, for in comparison to your other crimes your sin against me was trivial—though it was great enough."

Again his bitter laugh reached her ears. "I thought," he began, and then stopped short. "Well, I reckon it doesn't make much difference what I thought. I would have to tell you many things before you would understand, and even then I suppose you wouldn't believe me. So I am keeping quiet until—until the time comes. Maybe that won't be so long, and then you'll understand. I'll be seeing you again."

"I am leaving this country to-morrow," she informed him coldly.

She saw him start and experienced a sensation of vindictive satisfaction.

“Well,” he said, with a queer note of regret in his voice, “that’s too bad. But I reckon I’ll be seeing you again anyway, if the sheriff doesn’t get me.”

“Do you think they will come for you to-night?” she asked, suddenly remembering that her father had told her that Duncan had gone to Lazette for the sheriff. “What will they do?”

“Nothing, I reckon. That is, they won’t do anything except take me into custody. They can’t do anything until Doubler dies.”

“If he doesn’t die?” she said. “What can they do then?”

“Usually it isn’t considered a crime to shoot a man—if he doesn’t die. Likely they wouldn’t do anything to me if Doubler gets well. They might want me to leave the country. But I don’t reckon that I’m going to let them take me—whether Doubler dies or not. Once they’ve got a man it’s pretty easy to prove him guilty—in this country. Usually they hang a man and consider the evidence afterward. I’m not letting them do that to me. If I was guilty, I suppose I might look at it differently, but maybe not.”

Sheila was silent; he became silent, too, and looked gravely at her.

“Well,” he said presently, “I’ll be going.” He urged his pony forward, but when it had gone only a few steps he turned and looked back at her. “Do your best to keep Doubler alive,” he said.

There was a note of the old mockery in his voice, and it lingered long in Sheila’s ears after she had watched him vanish into the mysterious shadows that surrounded the trail. Stifling a sigh of regret and pity, she spoke to her pony, and the animal shuffled down the long slope, forded the river, and so brought her to the door of Doubler’s cabin.

The doctor was there; he was bending over Doubler at the instant Sheila entered the cabin, and he looked up at her with grave, questioning eyes.

“I am going to nurse him,” she informed the doctor.

“That’s good,” he returned softly; “he needs lots of care—the care that a woman can give him.”

Then he went off into a maze of medical terms and phrases that left her confused, but out of which she gathered the fact that the bullet had missed a vital spot, that Doubler was suffering more from shock than from real injury, and that the only danger—his constitution being strong enough to withstand the shock—would be from blood poisoning. He had some fever, the doctor told Sheila, and he left a small vial on a shelf with instructions to administer a number of drops of its contents in a spoonful of water if Doubler became restless. The bandages were to be changed several times a day, and the wound bathed.

The doctor was glad that she had come, for he had a very sick patient in Mrs. Moreland, and he must return to her immediately. He would try to look in in a day or two. No, he said, in answer to her question, she could not leave Doubler to-morrow, even to go home—if she wanted the patient to get well.

And so Sheila watched him as he went out and saddled his horse and rode away down the river trail. Then with a sigh she returned to the cabin, closed the door, and took up her vigil beside the nester.

CHAPTER XVI

SHERIFF ALLEN TAKES A HAND

The sheriff's posse—three men whom he had deputized in Lazette and himself—had ridden hard over the twenty miles of rough trail from Lazette, for Duncan had assured Allen that he would have to get into action before Dakota could discover that there had been a witness to his deed, and therefore when they arrived at the edge of the clearing near Dakota's cabin at midnight, they were glad of an opportunity to dismount and stretch themselves.

There was no light in Dakota's cabin, no sign that the man the sheriff was after was anywhere about, and the latter consulted gravely with his men.

"This ain't going to be any picnic, boys," he said. "We've got to take our time and keep our eyes open. Dakota ain't no spring chicken, and if he don't want to come with us peaceable, he'll make things plumb lively."

A careful examination of the horses in the corral resulted in the discovery of one which had evidently been ridden hard and unsaddled but a few minutes before, for its flanks were in a lather and steam rose from its sides.

However, the discovery of the pony told the sheriff nothing beyond the fact that Dakota had ridden to the cabin from somewhere, some time before. Whether he was asleep, or watching the posse from some vantage point within or outside of the cabin was not quite clear. Therefore Allen, the sheriff, a man of much experience, advised caution. After another careful reconnoiter, which settled beyond all reasonable doubt the fact that Dakota was not secreted in the timber in the vicinity of the cabin, Allen told his deputies to remain concealed on the edge of the clearing, while he proceeded boldly to the door of the cabin and knocked loudly. He and Dakota had always been very friendly.

At the sound of the knock, Dakota's voice came from within the cabin, burdened with mockery.

"Sorry, Allen," it said, "but I'm locked up for the night. Can't take any chances on leaving my door unbarred—can't tell who's prowling around. If you'd sent word, now, so I would have had time to dress decently, I might have let you in, seeing it's you. I'm sure some sorry."

"Sorry, too." Allen grinned at the door. "I told the boys you'd be watching. Well, it can't be helped, I reckon. Only, I'd like mighty well to see you. Coming out in the morning?"

"Maybe. Missed my beauty sleep already." His voice was dryly sarcastic. "It's too bad you rode this far for nothing; can't even get a look at me. But it's no time to visit a man, anyway. You and your boys flop outside. We'll swap palaver in the morning. Good night."

"Good night."

Allen returned to the edge of the clearing, where he communicated to his men the result of the conference.

"He ain't allowing that he wants to be disturbed just now," he told them. "And he's too damned polite to monkey with. We'll wait. Likely he'll change his mind over-night."

"Wait nothing," growled Duncan. "Bust the door in!"

Allen grinned mildly. "Good advice," he said quietly. "Me and my men will set here while you do the busting. Don't imagine that we'll be sore because you take the lead in such a little matter as that."

"If I was the sheriff——" began Duncan.

"Sure," interrupted Allen with a dry laugh; "if you was the sheriff. There's a lot of things we'd do if we was somebody else. Maybe breaking down Dakota's door is one of them. But we don't want anyone killed if we can help it, and it's a dead sure thing that some one would cash in if we tried any monkey business with that door. If you're wanting to do something that amounts to something to help this game along, swap your cayuse for one of Dakota's and hit the breeze to the Double R for grub. We'll be needing it by the time you get back."

Duncan had already ridden over sixty miles within the past twenty-four hours, and he made a grumbling rejoinder. But in the end he roped one of Dakota's horses, saddled it, and presently vanished in the darkness. Allen and his men built a fire near the edge of the clearing and rolled into their blankets.

At eight o'clock the following morning, Langford appeared on the river trail, leading a pack horse loaded with provisions and cooking utensils for the sheriff and his men. Duncan, Langford told Allen while they breakfasted, had sought his bunk, being tired from the day's activities.

"You're the owner of the Double R?" questioned Allen.

"You and Dakota friendly?" he questioned again, noting Langford's nod.

"We've been quite friendly," smiled Langford.

"But you ain't now?"

"Not since this has happened. We must have law and order, even at the price of friendship."

Allen squinted a mildly hostile eye at Langford. "That's a good principle to get back of—for a weak-kneed friendship. But most men who have got friends wouldn't let a little thing like law and order interfere between them."

Langford reddened. "I haven't known Dakota long of course," he defended. "Perhaps I erred in saying we were friends. Acquaintances would better describe it I think."

Allen's eye narrowed again with an emotion that Langford could not fathom. "I always had a heap of faith in Dakota's judgment," he said. And then, when Langford's face flushed with a realization of the subtle insult, Allen said gruffly:

"You say Doubler's dead?"

"I don't remember to have said that to you," returned Langford, his voice snapping with rage. "What I did say was that Duncan saw him killed and came to me with the news. I sent him for you. Since then my daughter has been over to Doubler's cabin. He is quite dead, she reported," he lied. "There can be no doubt of his guilt, if that is what bothers you," he continued. "Duncan saw him shoot Doubler in the back with Doubler's own rifle, and my daughter heard the shot and met Dakota coming from Doubler's cabin, immediately after. It's a clear case, it seems to me."

"Yes, clear," said Allen. "The evidence is all against him."

Yet it was not all quite clear to Langford. To be sure, he had expected to receive news that Dakota had accomplished the destruction of Doubler, but he had not anticipated the fortunate appearance of Duncan at the nester's cabin during the commission of the murder, nor had he expected Sheila to be near the scene of the crime. It had turned out better than he had planned, for since he had burned the agreement that he had made with Dakota, the latter had no hold on him whatever, and if it were finally proved that he had committed the crime there would come an end to both Dakota and Doubler.

Only one thing puzzled him. Dakota had been to his place, he knew that he was charged with the murder and that the agreement had been burned. He also knew that Duncan and Sheila would bear witness against him. And yet, though he had had an opportunity to escape, he had not done so. Why not?

He put this interrogation to Allen, carefully avoiding reference to anything which would give the sheriff any idea that he possessed any suspicion that Dakota was not really guilty.

"That's what's bothering me!" declared the latter. "He's had time enough to hit the breeze clear out of the Territory. Though," he added, squinting at Langford, "Dakota ain't never been much on the run. He'd a heap rather face the music. Damn the cuss!" he exploded impatiently.

He finished his breakfast in silence, and then again approached the door of Dakota's cabin, knocking loudly, as before.

"I'm wanting that palaver now, Dakota," he said coaxingly.

He heard Dakota laugh. "Have you viewed the corpse, Allen?" came his voice, burdened with mockery.

"No," said Allen.

"You're a hell of a sheriff—wanting to take a man when you don't know whether he's done anything."

"I reckon you ain't fooling me none," said Allen slowly. "The evidence is dead against you."

"What evidence?"

"Duncan saw you fixing Doubler, and Langford's daughter met you coming from his cabin."

"Who told you that?"

“Langford. He’s just brought some grub over.”

The silence that followed Allen’s words lasted long, and the sheriff fidgeted impatiently. When he again spoke there was the sharpness of intolerance in his voice.

“If talking to you was all I had to do, I might monkey around here all summer,” he said. “I’ve give you about eight hours to think this thing over, and that’s plenty long enough. I don’t like to get into any gun argument with you, because I know that somebody will get hurt. Why in hell don’t you surrender decently? I’m a friend of yours and you hadn’t ought to want to make any trouble for me. And them’s good boys that I’ve got over there and I wouldn’t want to see any of them perforated. And I’d hate like blazes to have to put you out of business. Why don’t you act decent and come out like a man?”

“Go and look at the corpse,” insisted Dakota.

“There’ll be plenty of time to look at the corpse after you’re took.”

There was no answer. Allen sighed regretfully. “Well,” he said presently, “I’ve done what I could. From now on, I’m looking for you.”

“Just a minute, Allen,” came Dakota’s voice. To Allen’s surprise he heard a fumbling at the fastenings of the door, and an instant later it swung open and Dakota stood in the opening, one of his six-shooters in hand.

“I reckon I know you well enough to be tolerably sure that you’ll get me before you leave here,” he said, as Allen wheeled and faced him, his arms folded over his chest as a declaration of his present peaceful intentions. “But I want you to get this business straight before anything is started. And then you’ll be responsible. I’m giving it to you straight. Somebody’s framed up on me. I didn’t shoot Doubler. When I left him he was cleaning his rifle. After I left him I heard shooting. I thought it was him trying his rifle, or I would have gone back.

“Then I met Sheila Langford on the river trail, near the cabin. She’d heard the shooting, too. She thinks I did it. You think I did it, and Duncan says he saw me do it. Doubler isn’t dead. At least he wasn’t dead when I left the doctor with him at sundown. But he wasn’t far from it, and if he dies without coming to it’s likely that things will look bad for me. But because I knew he wasn’t dead I took a chance on staying here. I am not allowing that I’m going to let anyone hang me for a thing I didn’t do, and so if you’re determined to get me without making sure that Doubler’s going to have mourners immediately, it’s a dead sure thing that some one’s going to get hurt. I reckon that’s all. I’ve given you fair warning, and after you get back to the edge of the clearing our friendship don’t count any more.”

He stepped back and closed the door.

Allen walked slowly toward the clearing, thinking seriously. He said nothing to Langford or his men concerning his conversation with Dakota, and though he covertly questioned the former he could discover nothing more than that which the Double R owner had already told him. Several times during the morning he was on the point of planning an attack on the cabin, but Dakota’s voice had a ring of truth in it and he delayed action, waiting for some more favorable turn of events.

And so the hours dragged. The men lounged in the shade of the trees and talked; Langford—though he had no further excuse for staying—remained, concealing his impatience over Allen’s inaction by taking short rides, but always returning; Allen, taciturn, morose even, paid no attention to him.

The afternoon waned; the sun descended to the peaks of the mountains, and there was still inaction on Allen’s part, still silence from the cabin. Just at sundown Allen called his men to him and told them to guard the cabin closely, not to shoot unless forced by Dakota, but to be certain that he did not escape.

He said they might expect him to return by dawn of the following morning. Then, during Langford’s absence on one of his rides, he loped his pony up the river trail toward Ben Doubler’s cabin.

CHAPTER XVII

DOUBLER TALKS

After the departure of the doctor Sheila entered the cabin and closed the door, fastening the bars and drawing a chair over near the table. Doubler seemed to be resting easier, though there was a flush in his cheeks that told of the presence of fever. However, he breathed more regularly and with less effort than before the coming of the doctor, and as a consequence, Sheila felt decidedly better. At intervals during the night she gave him quantities of the medicine which the doctor had left, but only when the fever seemed to increase, forcing the liquid through his lips. Several times she changed the bandages, and once or twice during the night when he moaned she pulled her chair over beside him and smoothed his forehead, soothing him. When the dawn came it found her heavy eyed and tired.

She went to the river and procured fresh water, washed her hands and face, prepared a breakfast of bacon and soda biscuit—which she found in a tin box in a corner of the cabin, and then, as Doubler seemed to be doing nicely, she saddled her pony and took a short gallop. Returning, she entered the cabin, to find Doubler tossing restlessly.

She gave him a dose of the medicine—an extra large one—but it had little effect, quieting him only momentarily. Evidently he was growing worse. The thought aroused apprehension in her mind, but she fought it down and stayed resolutely at the sick man's side.

Through the slow-dragging hours of the morning she sat beside him, giving him the best care possible under the circumstances, but in spite of her efforts the fever steadily rose, and at noon he sat suddenly up in the bunk and gazed at her with blazing, vacuous eyes.

“You're a liar!” he shouted. “Dakota's square!”

Sheila stifled a scream of fear and shrank from him. But recovering, she went to him, seizing his shoulders and forcing him back into the bunk. He did not resist, not seeming to pay any attention to her at all, but he mumbled, inexpressively:

“It ain't so, I tell you. He's just left me, an' any man which could talk like he talked to me ain't—I reckon not,” he said, shaking his head with a vigorous, negative motion; “you're a heap mistaken—you ain't got him right at all.”

He was quiet for a time after this, but toward the middle of the afternoon Sheila saw that his gaze was following her as she paced softly back and forth in the cabin.

“So you're stuck on that Langford girl, are you?” he demanded, laughing. “Well, it won't do you any good, Dakota, she's—well, she's some sore at you for something. She won't listen to anything which is said about you.” The laughter died out of his eyes; they became cold with menace. “I ain't listenin' to any more of that sorta talk, I tell you! I've got my eyes open. Why!” he said in surprise, starting up, “he's gone!” He suddenly shuddered and cursed. “In the back,” he said. “You—you——” And profanity gushed from his lips. Then he collapsed, closing his eyes, and lay silent and motionless.

Out of the jumble of disconnected sentences Sheila was able to gather two things of importance—perhaps three.

The first was that some one had told him of Dakota's complicity in the plan to murder him and that he refused to believe his friend capable of such depravity. The second was that he knew who had shot him; he also knew the man who had informed him of Dakota's duplicity—though this knowledge would amount to very little unless he recovered enough to be able to supply the missing threads.

Sheila despaired of him supplying anything, for it seemed that he was steadily growing worse, and when the dusk came she began to feel a dread of remaining with him in the cabin during the night. If only the doctor would return! If Dakota would come—Duncan, her father, anybody! But nobody came, and the silence around the cabin grew so oppressive that she felt she must scream. When darkness succeeded dusk she lighted the kerosene lamp, placed a bar over the window, secured the door fastenings, and seated herself at the table, determined to take a short nap.

It seemed that she had scarcely dropped off to sleep—though in reality she had been unconscious for more than two hours—when she awoke suddenly, to see Doubler sitting erect in the bunk, watching her with a wan, sympathetic smile. There was the light of reason in his eyes and her heart gave an ecstatic leap.

“Could you give me a drink of water, ma'am?” he said, in the voice that she knew well.

She sprang to the pail, to find that it contained very little. She had lifted it, and was about to unfasten the door, intending to go to the river to procure fresh water, when Doubler's voice arrested her.

"There's some water there—I can hear it splashin': It'll do well enough just now. I don't want much. You can get some fresh after a while. I want to talk to you."

She placed the pail down and went over to him, standing beside him.

"What is it?" she asked.

"How long have you been here? I knowed you was here all the time—I kept seein' you, but somehow things was a little mixed. But I know that you've been here quite a while. How long?"

"This is the second night."

"You found me layin' there—in the door. I dropped there, not bein' able to go any further. I felt you touchin' me—draggin' me. There was someone else here, too. Who was it?"

"The doctor and Dakota."

"Where's Dakota now?"

"At his cabin, I suppose. He didn't stay here long—he left right after he brought the doctor. I imagine you know why he didn't stay. He was afraid that you would recognize him and accuse him."

"Accuse him of what, ma'am?"

"Of shooting you."

He smiled. "I reckon, ma'am, that you don't understand. It wasn't Dakota that shot me."

"Who did, then?" she questioned eagerly. "Who?"

"Duncan."

"Why—why——" she said, sitting suddenly erect, a mysterious elation filling her, her eyes wide with surprise and delight, and a fear that Doubler might have been mistaken—"Why, I saw Dakota on the river trail just after you were shot."

"He'd just left me. He hadn't been gone more than ten minutes or so when Duncan rode up—comin' out of the timber just down by the crick. Likely he'd been hidin' there. I was cleanin' my rifle; we had words, and when I set my rifle down just outside the shack, he grabbed it an' shot me. After that I don't seem to remember a heap, except that someone was touchin' me—which must have been you."

"Oh!" she said. "I am *so* glad!"

She was thinking now of Dakota's parting words to her the night before on the crest of the slope above the river,—of his words, of the truth of his statement denying his guilt, and she was glad that she had not spoken some of the spiteful things which had been in her mind. How she had misjudged him!

"I reckon it's something to be glad for," smiled Doubler, misunderstanding her elation, "but I reckon I owe it to you—I'd have pulled my freight sure, if you hadn't come when you did. An' I told you not to be comin' here any more." He laughed. "Ain't it odd how things turn out—sometimes. I'd have died sure," he repeated.

"You are going to live a long while," she said. And then, to his surprise, she bent over and kissed his forehead, leaving his side instantly, her cheeks aflame, her eyes alight with a mysterious fire. To conceal her emotion from Doubler she seized the water pail.

"I will get some fresh water," she said, with a quick, smiling glance at him. "You'll want a fresh drink, and your bandages must be changed."

She opened the door and stepped down into the darkness.

There was a moon, and the trail to the river was light enough for her to see plainly, but when she reached the timber clump in which Doubler had said Duncan had been hiding, she shuddered and made a detour to avoid passing close to it. This took her some distance out of her way, and she reached the river and walked along its bank for a little distance, searching for a deep accessible spot into which she could dip the pail.

The shallow crossing over which she had ridden many times was not far away, and when she stooped to fill the pail she heard a sudden clatter and splashing, and looked up to see a horseman riding into the water from the opposite side of the river.

He saw her at the instant she discovered him, and once over the ford he turned his horse and rode directly toward her.

After gaining the bank he halted his pony and looked intently at her.

“You’re Langford’s daughter, I reckon,” he said.

“Yes,” she returned, seeing that he was a stranger; “I am.”

“I’m Ben Allen,” he said shortly; “the sheriff of this county. What are you doing here?”

“I am taking care of Ben Doubler,” she said; “he has been——”

“Then he ain’t dead, of course,” said Allen, interrupting her. It seemed to Sheila that there was relief and satisfaction in his voice, and she peered closer at him, but his face was hidden in the shadow of his hat brim.

“He is very much better now,” she told him, scarcely able to conceal her delight. “But he has been very bad.”

“Able to talk?”

“Yes. He has just been talking to me.” She took a step toward him, speaking earnestly and rapidly. “I suppose you are looking for Dakota,” she said, remembering what her father had told her about sending Duncan to Lazette for the sheriff. “If you are looking for him, I want to tell you that he didn’t shoot Doubler. It was Duncan. Doubler told me so not over five minutes ago. He said——”

But Allen had spurred his pony forward, and before she could finish he was out of hearing distance, riding swiftly toward the cabin.

Sheila lingered at the water’s edge, for now suddenly she saw much beauty in the surrounding country, and she was no longer lonesome. She stood on the bank of the river, gazing long at the shadowy rims of the distant mountains, at their peaks, rising majestically in the luminous mist of the night; at the plains, stretching away and fading into the mysterious shadows of the distance; watching the waters of the river, shimmering like quicksilver—a band of glowing ribbon winding in and out and around the moon-touched buttes of the canyons.

“Oh!” she said irrelevantly, “he isn’t so bad, after all!”

Stooping over again to fill the pail, she heard a sharp clatter of hoofs behind her. A horseman was racing toward the river—toward her—bending low over his pony’s mane, riding desperately. She placed the pail down and watched him. Apparently he did not see her, for, swerving suddenly, he made for the crossing without slackening speed. He had almost reached the water’s edge when there came a spurt of flame from the door of Doubler’s cabin, followed by the sharp whip like crack of a rifle!

In the doorway of the cabin, clearly outlined against the flickering light of the interior, was a man. And as Sheila watched another streak of fire burst from the door, and she heard the shrill sighing of the bullet, heard the horseman curse. But he did not stop in his flight, and in an instant he had crossed the river. She saw him for an instant as he was outlined against the clear sky in the moonlight that bathed the crest of the slope, and then he was gone.

Dropping the pail, Sheila ran toward the cabin, fearing that Doubler had suddenly become delirious and had attacked Allen. But it seemed to her that it had not been Allen who had raced away from the cabin, and she had not gone more than half way toward it when she saw another horseman coming. She halted to wait for him, and when he halted and drew up beside her she saw that it was the sheriff.

“Who was it?” she demanded, breathlessly.

“Duncan!” Allen cursed picturesquely and profanely. “When I got to the shack he was inside, standing over Doubler, strangling him. The damned skunk! You was right,” he added; “it was him who shot Doubler!” He continued rapidly, grimly, taking a piece of paper from a pocket and writing something on it.

“My men have got Dakota corraled in his cabin. If he tries to get away they will do for him. I don’t want that to happen; there’s too few square men in the country as it is. Take this”—he held out the paper to her—“and get down to Dakota’s cabin with it. Give it to Bud—one of my men—and tell him to scatter the others and try to head off Duncan if he comes that way. I’m after him!”

The paper fluttered toward her, she snatched at it, missed it, and stooped to take it from the ground. When she stood erect she saw Allen and his pony silhouetted for an instant on the crest of the ridge on the other side of the river. Then he vanished.

CHAPTER XVIII

FOR DAKOTA

Though in a state of anxiety and excitement over the incident of Duncan's attack on Doubler and the subsequent shooting, together with a realization of Dakota's danger, Sheila did not lose her composure. She ran to the river and secured the water, aware that it might be needed now more than ever. Then, hurrying as best she could with the weight of the pail, she returned to the cabin.

She was relieved to find that Doubler had received no injury, and she paused long enough to allow him to tell her that Duncan had entered the cabin shortly after she had left it. He had attacked Doubler, but had been interrupted by Allen, who had suddenly ridden up. Duncan had heard him coming, and had concealed himself behind the door, and when Allen had entered Duncan had struck him on the head with the butt of his six-shooter, knocking him down. The blow had been a glancing one, however, and Allen had recovered quickly, seizing Doubler's rifle and trying to bring down the would be murderer as he fled.

While attending to Doubler's bandages, Sheila repeated the conversation she had had with Allen concerning the situation in which he had left Dakota, and instantly the nester's anxiety for his friend took precedence over any thoughts for his own immediate welfare.

"There'll be trouble sure, now that Allen's left there," he said. "Dakota won't be a heap easy with them deputies."

He told Sheila to let the bandaging go until later, but she refused.

"Dakota'll be needin' you a heap more than I need you," he insisted, refusing to allow her to touch the bandages.

"There'll be the devil to pay if any of them deputies try to rush Dakota's shack. I want you to go down there right now. If you wait, it'll mebbe be too late."

Sheila hesitated for a moment, and then, yielding to the entreaty in Doubler's eyes, she was at his side, pressing his hand.

"Ride ma'am!" he told her, when she was ready to go, his cheeks flushed with excitement, his eyes bright.

Her pony snorted with surprise when she brought her riding whip down against its flanks when turning from the corral gates, but it needed no second urging, and its pace when it splashed through the shallow water of the crossing was fully as great as that of Duncan's pony, which had previously passed through it.

Once on the hard sand of the river trail it settled into a long, swinging gallop, under which the miles flew by rapidly and steadily. Sheila drew the animal up on the rises, breathing it sometimes, but on the levels she urged it with whip and spur, and in something more than an hour after leaving Doubler's cabin, she flashed by the quicksand crossing, which she estimated as being not more than twelve miles from her journey's end.

She was tired after her long vigil at Doubler's side, but the weariness was entirely physical, for her brain was working rapidly, filling her thoughts with picturesque conjectures, drawing pictures in which she saw Dakota being shot down by Allen's deputies. And he was innocent!

She did not blame herself for Dakota's dilemma, though she felt a keen regret over her treatment of him, over her unjust suspicions. He had really been in earnest when he had told her the night before on the river trail that he was not guilty—that everybody had misjudged him. Vivid in her recollection was the curious expression on his face when he had said to her just before leaving her that night:

"Won't you believe me?"

And that other time, when he had taken her by the shoulders and looked steadily into her eyes—she remembered that, too; she could almost feel his fingers, and the words he had uttered then were fresh in her memory: "I've treated you mean, Sheila, about as mean as a man could treat a woman. I am sorry. I want you to believe that. And maybe some day—when this business is over—you'll understand, and forgive me."

There had been mystery in his actions ever since she had seen him the first time, and though she could not yet understand it, she had discovered that there were forces at work in his affairs which seemed to indicate that he had not told her that for the purpose of attempting to justify his previous actions.

Evidently, whatever the mystery that surrounded him, her father and Duncan were concerned in it, and this thought spurred her on, for it gave her a keen delight to think that she was arrayed against them, even though she were on the side of the man who had wronged her. He, at least, had not been concerned in the plot to murder Doubler.

When she reached the last rise—on the crest of which she had sat on her pony on the morning following her marriage to Dakota in the cabin and from which she had seen the parson riding away—she was trembling with eagerness and dread for fear that something might happen before she could arrive. It was three miles down the slope, and when she reached the level there was Dakota's cabin before her.

She drew her pony to a walk, for she saw men grouped in front of the cabin door, saw Dakota there himself, standing in the open doorway, framed in the light from within. There were no evidences of the conflict which she had dreaded. She had arrived in time.

Convinced of this, she felt for the first time her physical weariness, and she leaned forward on her pony, holding to its mane for support, approaching the cabin slowly.

Her father was there, she observed, as she drew nearer; and three strangers—and Allen! And near Allen, sitting on his horse dejectedly, was Duncan!

One of Duncan's arms swung oddly at his side, and Sheila thought instantly of his curse when he had been riding near her at the river crossing. Evidently Allen's bullet had struck him.

Sheila's presence at Dakota's cabin was now unnecessary, for it was evident that an understanding had been reached with Allen, and Sheila experienced a sudden aversion to appearing among the men. Turning her pony, she was about to ride away, intending to return to Doubler's cabin, when Allen turned and saw her. He spurred quickly to her side, seizing the pony by the bridle rein and leading it toward the cabin door.

"It's all right, ma'am," he said, "I got him. Holy smoke!" he exclaimed as she came within the radius of the light. "You certainly rode some, didn't you, ma'am?"

She did not answer. She saw her father look at her, noted his start, smiled scornfully when she observed a paleness overspreading his face. She looked from him to Duncan, and the latter flushed and turned his head. Then Allen's voice reached her, as he spoke to Dakota.

"This young woman has rode twenty miles to-night—to save your hide—you durned cuss. If you was anyways hospitable, you'd——"

Allen's voice seemed to grow distant to Sheila, the figures of the men in the group blurred, the light danced, she reeled in the saddle, tried to check herself, failed, and toppled limply forward over her pony's neck. She heard an exclamation, saw Dakota spring suddenly from the doorway, felt his arms around her. She struggled in his grasp, trying to fight him off, and then she drifted into oblivion.

CHAPTER XIX

SOME MEMORIES

When Sheila recovered consciousness she was in Dakota's cabin—in the bunk in which she had lain on another night in the yesterday of her life in this country. She recognized it instantly. There was the candle on the table, there were the familiar chairs, the fireplace, the shelves upon which were Dakota's tobacco tins and matches; there was the guitar, with its gaudy string, suspended from the wall. If it had been raining, she might have imagined that she was just awakening from a sleep in that other time. She felt a hand on her forehead, a damp cloth, and she opened her eyes to gaze fairly into Dakota's.

"Don't, please," she said, shrinking from him.

It occurred to her that she had uttered the same words to him before, and, closing her eyes for a moment, she remembered. It had been when he had tried to assist her out of the water at the quicksand crossing, and as on that occasion, his answer was the same.

"Then I won't."

She lay for a long time, looking straight up at the ceiling, utterly tired, wondering vaguely what had become of her father, Duncan, Allen, and the others. She would have given much to have been able to lie there for a time—a long time—and rest. But that was not to be thought of. She struggled to a sitting position, and when her eyes had become accustomed to the light she saw her father sitting in a chair near the fireplace. The door was closed—barred. Sheila glanced again at her father, and then questioningly at Dakota, who was watching her from the center of the room, his face inscrutable.

"What does this mean? Where are the others?" she demanded.

"Allen and his men have gone back to Lazette," returned Dakota quietly. "This means"—he pointed to Langford—"that we're going to have a little talk—about things."

Sheila rose. "I don't care to hear any talk; I am not interested."

"You'll be interested in *my* talk," said Dakota.

Curiously, he seemed to be invested with a new character. Just now he was more like the man he had been the night she had met him the first time—before he had forced her to marry him—than he had been since. Only, she felt as she watched him standing quietly in the middle of the room, the recklessness which had marked his manner that other time seemed to have entirely disappeared, seemed to have been replaced by something else—determination.

Beneath the drooping mustache Sheila saw the lines of his lips; they had always seemed hard to her, and now there were little curves at the corners which hinted at amusement—grim amusement. His eyes, too, were different; the mockery had departed from them. They were steady and unwavering, as before, and though they still baffled her, she was certain that she saw a slumbering devil in them—as though he possessed some mysterious knowledge and purposed to confound Sheila and her father with it, though in his own way and to suit his convenience. Yet behind it all there lurked a certain gravity—a cold deliberation that seemed to proclaim that he was in no mood to trifle and that he proposed to follow some plan and would brook no interference.

Fascinated by the change in him Sheila resumed her seat on the edge of the bunk, watching him closely. He drew a chair over near the door, tilted it back and dropped into it, thus mutely announcing that he intended keeping the prisoners until he had delivered himself of that mysterious knowledge which seemed to be in his mind.

Glancing furtively at her father, Sheila observed that he appeared to have formed some sort of a conclusion regarding Dakota's actions also, for he sat very erect on his chair, staring at the latter, an intense interest in his eyes.

Sheila had become interested, too; she had forgotten her weariness. And yet Dakota's first words disappointed her—somehow they seemed irrelevant.

"This isn't such a big world, after all, is it?" He addressed both Sheila and her father, though he looked at neither. His tone was quietly conversational, and when he received no answer to his remark he looked up with a quiet smile.

"That has been said by a great many people, hasn't it? I've heard it many times. I reckon you have, too. But it's a fact,

just the same. The world *is* a small place. Take us three. You”—he said, pointing to Langford—“come out here from Albany and buy a ranch. You”—he smiled at Sheila—“came with your father as a matter of course. You”—he looked again at Langford—“might have bought a ranch in another part of the country. You didn’t need to buy this particular one. But you did. Take me. I spent five years in Dakota before I came here. I’ve been here five years.

“A man up in Dakota wanted me to stay there; said he’d do most anything for me if I would. But I didn’t like Dakota; something kept telling me that I ought to move around a little. I came here, I liked the place, and I’ve stayed here. I know that neither of you are very much interested in what has happened to me, but I’ve told you that much just to prove my contention about the world being a small place. It surely isn’t so very big when you consider that three persons can meet up like we’ve met—our trails leading us to the same section of the country.”

“I don’t see how that concerns us,” said Langford impatiently.

“No,” returned Dakota, and now there was a note of sarcasm in his voice, “you don’t see. Lots of folks don’t see. But there are trails that lead everywhere. Fate marks them out—blazes them. There are trails that lead us into trouble, others that lead us to pleasure—straight trails, crooked ones, trails that cross—all kinds. Folks start out on a crooked trail, trying to get away from something, but pretty soon another trail crosses the one they are on—maybe it will be a straight one that crosses theirs, with a straight man riding it.

“The man riding the crooked trail and the man riding the straight one meet at the place where the trails cross. Such trails don’t lead to any to-morrow; they are yesterday’s trails, and before the man riding the crooked trail and the man riding the straight trail can go any further there has got to be an accounting. That is what has happened here. You”—he smiled gravely as he looked at Langford—“have been riding a crooked trail. I have been hanging onto the straight one as best I could. Now we’ve got to where the trails cross.”

“Meaning that you want an explanation of my action in burning that signed agreement, I suppose?” sneered Langford, looking up.

“Still trying to ride the crooked trail?” smiled Dakota, with the first note of mockery that Sheila had heard in his voice since he had begun speaking. “I’m not worrying a bit about that agreement. Why, man, I’d have shot myself before I’d have shot Doubler. He’s my friend—the only real friend I’ve had in ten years.”

“Then when you signed the agreement you didn’t mean to keep it?” questioned Langford incautiously, disarmed by Dakota’s earnestness.

“Ten years ago a boy named Ned Keegles went to Dakota. I am glad to see that you are familiar with the name,” he added with a smile as Langford started and stiffened in his chair, his face suddenly ashen. “You knowing Keegles will save me explaining a lot,” continued Dakota. “Well, Keegles went to Dakota—where I was. He was eighteen and wasn’t very strong, as young men go. But he got a job punching cows and I got to know him pretty well—used to bunk with him. He took a liking to me because I took an interest in him.

“He didn’t like the work, because he had been raised differently. He lived in Albany before he went West. His father, William Keegles, was in the hardware business with a man named Langford—David Dowd Langford. You see, I couldn’t be mistaken in the name of the man; it’s such an uncommon one.”

He smiled significantly at Sheila, and an odd expression came into her face, for she remembered that on the night of her coming he had made the same remark.

“One day Ned Keegles got sick and took me into his confidence. He wasn’t in the West for his health, he said. He was a fugitive from the law, accused of murdering his father. It wasn’t a nice story to hear, but he told it, thinking he was going to die.”

Dakota smiled enigmatically at Sheila and coldly at the now shrinking man seated in the chair beside the fireplace.

“One day Keegles went into his father’s office. His father’s partner, David Dowd Langford, was there, talking to his father. They’d had hard words. Keegle’s father had discovered that Langford had appropriated a large sum of the firm’s money. By forging his partner’s signature he had escaped detection until one day when the elder Keegles had accidentally discovered the fraud—which was the day on which Ned Keegles visited his father. It isn’t necessary to go into detail, but it was perfectly plain that Langford was guilty.

“There were hard words, as I have said. The elder Keegles threatened to prosecute. Langford seized a sample knife that had been lying on the elder Keegle’s desk, and stabbed him, killing him instantly. Then, while Ned Keegles stood by,

stunned by the suddenness of the attack, Langford coolly walked to a telephone and notified the police of the murder. Hanging up the receiver, he raised the hue and cry, and a dozen clerks burst into the office, to find Ned Keegles bending over his father, trying to withdraw the knife.

“Langford accused Ned Keegles of the murder. He protested, of course, but seeing that the evidence was against him, he fought his way out of the office and escaped. He went to Dakota—where I met him.” He hesitated and looked steadily at Langford. “Do you see how the trails have crossed? The crooked one and the straight one?”

Langford was leaning forward in his chair, a scared, wild expression in his eyes, his teeth and hands clenched in an effort to control his emotions.

“It’s a lie!” he shouted. “I didn’t kill him! Ned Keegles——”

“Wait!” Dakota rose from his chair and walked to a shelf, from which he took a box, returning to Langford’s side and opening it. He drew out a knife, shoving it before Langford’s eyes and pointing out some rust spots on the blade.

“This knife was given to me by Ned Keegles,” he said slowly. “These rust spots on the blade are from his father’s blood. Look at them!” he said sharply, for Langford had turned his head.

At the command he swung around, his gaze resting on the knife. “That’s a pretty story,” he sneered.

Dakota’s laugh when he returned the knife to the box chilled Sheila as that same laugh had chilled her when she had heard it during her first night in the country—in this same cabin, with Dakota sitting at the table—a bitter, mocking laugh that had in it a savagery controlled by an iron will. He turned abruptly and walked to his chair, seating himself.

“Yes,” he said, “it’s a pretty story. But it hasn’t all been told. With a besmirched name and the thoughts which were with him all the time, life wasn’t exactly a joyful one for Ned Keegles. He was young, you see, and it all preyed on his mind. But after a while it hardened him. He’d hit town with the rest of the boys, and he’d drink whiskey until he’d forget. But he couldn’t forget long. He kept seeing his father and Langford; nights he’d start from his blankets, living over and over again the incident of the murder. He got so he couldn’t stay in Dakota. He came down here and tried to forget. It was just the same—there was no forgetfulness.

“One night when he was on the trail near here, he met a woman. It was raining and the woman had lost the trail. He took the woman in. She interested him, and he questioned her. He discovered that she was the daughter of the man who had murdered his father—the daughter of David Dowd Langford!”

Langford cringed and looked at Sheila, who was looking straight at Dakota, her eyes alight with knowledge.

“Ned Keegles kept his silence, as he had kept it for ten years,” resumed Dakota. “But the coming of the woman brought back the bitter memories, and while the woman slept in his cabin he turned to the whiskey bottle for comfort. As he drank his troubles danced before him—magnified. He thought it would be a fine revenge if he should force the woman to marry him, for he figured that it would be a blow at the father’s pride. If it hadn’t been for a cowardly parson and the whiskey the marriage would never have occurred—Ned Keegles would not have thought of it. But he didn’t hurt the woman; she left him pure as she came—mentally and physically.”

Langford slowly rose from his chair, his lips twitching, his face working strangely, his eyes wide and glaring.

“You say she married him—Ned Keegles?” he said, his voice high keyed and shrill. He turned to Sheila after catching Dakota’s nod. “Is this true?” he demanded sharply. “Did you marry him as this man says you did?”

“Yes; I married him,” returned Sheila dully, and Langford sank limply into his chair.

Dakota smiled with flashing eyes and continued:

“Keegles married the woman,” he said coldly, “because he thought she was Langford’s real daughter.” He looked at Sheila with a glance of compassion. “Later, when Keegles discovered that the woman was only Langford’s stepdaughter, he was mighty sorry. Not for Langford, however, because he could not consider Langford’s feelings. And in spite of what he had done he was still determined to secure revenge.

“One day Langford came to Keegles with a proposal. He had seen Keegles kill one man, and he wanted to hire him to kill another—a man named Doubler. Keegles agreed, for the purpose of getting Langford into——”

Dakota hesitated, for Langford had risen to his feet and stood looking at him, his eyes bulging, his face livid.

“You!” he said, in a choking, wailing voice; “you—you, are Ned Keegles! You—you—— Why——” he hesitated and

passed a hand uncertainly over his forehead, looking from Sheila to Dakota with glazed eyes. “You—you are a liar!” he suddenly screamed, his voice raised to a maniacal pitch. “It isn’t so! You—both of you—have conspired against me!”

“Wait!” Dakota got to his feet, walked to a shelf, and took down a small glass, a pair of shears, a shaving cup, and a razor. While Langford watched, staring at him with fearful, wondering eyes, Dakota deftly snipped off the mustache with the shears, lathered his lip, and shaved it clean. Then he turned and confronted Langford.

The latter looked at him with one, long, intense gaze, and then with a dry sob which caught in his throat and seemed to choke him, he covered his face with his hands, shuddered convulsively, and without a sound pitched forward, face down, at Dakota’s feet.

CHAPTER XX

INTO THE UNKNOWN

After a time Sheila rose from the bunk on which she had been sitting and stood in the center of the floor, looking down at her father. Dakota had not moved. He stood also, watching Langford, his face pale and grim, and he did not speak until Sheila had addressed him twice.

“What are you going to do now?” she said dully. “It is for you to say, you know. You hold his life in your hands.”

“Do?” He smiled bitterly at her. “What would you do? I have waited ten years for this day. It must go on to the end.”

“The end?”

“Yes; the end,” he said gravely. “He”—Dakota pointed to the prostrate figure—“must sign a written confession.”

“And then?”

“He will return to answer for his crime.”

Sheila shuddered and turned from him with bowed head.

“Oh!” she said at last; “it will be too horrible! My friends in the East—they will——”

“Your friends,” he said with some bitterness. “Could your friends say more than my friends said when they thought that I had murdered my own father in cold blood and then run away?”

“But I am innocent,” she pleaded.

“I was innocent,” he returned, with a grave smile.

“Yes, but I could not help you, you know, for I wasn’t there when you were accused. But you are here, and you can help me. Don’t you see,” she said, coming close to him, “don’t you see that the disgrace will not fall on him, but on me. I will make him sign the confession,” she offered, “you can hold it over him. He will make restitution of your property. But do not force him to go back East. Let him go somewhere—anywhere—but let him live. For, after all, he is my father—the only one I ever knew.”

“But my vengeance,” he said, the bitterness of his smile softening as he looked down at her.

“Your vengeance?” She came closer to him, looking up into his face. “Are we to judge—to condemn? Will not the power which led us three together—the power which you are pleased to call ‘Fate’; the power that blazed the trail which you have followed from the yesterday of your life;—will not this power judge him—punish him? Please,” she pleaded, “please, for my sake, for—for”—her voice broke and she came forward and placed her hands on his shoulders—“for your wife’s sake.”

He looked down at her for an instant, the hard lines of his face breaking into gentle, sympathetic curves. Then his arms went around her, and she leaned against him, her head against his shoulder, while she wept softly.

An hour later, standing side by side in the open doorway of the cabin, Sheila and Dakota watched in silence while Langford, having signed a confession dictated by Dakota, mounted his pony and rode slowly up the river trail toward Lazette.

He slowly passed the timber clump near the cabin, and with bowed head traveled up the long slope which led to the rise upon which, in another time, Sheila had caught her last glimpse of the parson. It was in the cold, bleak moment of the morning when darkness has not yet gone and the dawn not come, and Langford looked strangely desolate out there on the trail alone—alone with thoughts more desolate than his surroundings.

Sheila shivered and snuggled closer to Dakota. He looked down at her with a sympathetic smile.

“It is so lonesome,” she said.

“Where?” he asked.

“Out there—where he is going.”

Dakota did not answer. For a long time they watched the huddled form of the rider. They saw him approach the crest of the rise—reach it. Then from the mountains in the eastern distance came a shaft of light, striking the summit of the rise where the rider bestrode his pony—throwing both into bold relief. For a moment the rider halted the pony, turned, glanced back an instant, and was gone.

THE END

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