



TROUBLED WATERS



WILLIAM
MACLEOD
RAINE



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TROUBLED WATERS

BY
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AUTHOR OF
BUCKY O'CONNOR, MAN-SIZE,
THE BIG-TOWN ROUND-UP,
GUNSIGHT PASS, ETC.



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CHAPTER I

AMONG THE APPLE BLOSSOMS

THE young man drew up his horse at the side of the dusty road and looked across the barbed-wire fence into the orchard beyond. Far distant against the horizon could be seen the blue mountain range of the Big Horns, sharp-toothed, with fields of snow lying in the gulches. But in the valley basin where he rode an untempered sun, too hot for May, beat upon his brown neck and through the gray flannel shirt stretched taut across his flat back.

The trees were clouds of soft blossoms and the green alfalfa beneath looked delightfully cool. Warm and dry from travel as he was, that shadowy paradise of pink and white bloom and lush deep grass called mightily to him. A reader of character might have guessed that handsome Larry Silcott followed the line of least resistance. If his face betrayed no weakness, certainly it showed self-satisfaction, an assured smug acceptance of the fact that he was popular and knew it. Yet his friends, and he had many of them, would have protested that word smug. He was a good fellow, amiable, friendly, anxious to please. At dance and round-up he always had a smile or a laugh ready.

He caught a glimpse of the weathered roof of the ranch house where the rambling road dipped into a draw. Well, it would wait there for him. There were twenty-four hours in every day and seven days in each week. Time was one thing Larry had plenty of. Why not climb the fence and steal a long luxurious nap in the orchard of the Elkhorn Lodge? He looked at his watch—and ten seconds later was trespassing with long strides through the grass.

Larry was Irish by descent. He was five-and-twenty. He had the digestion of an ostrich. For which good reasons and several others he whistled as his quirt whipped the alfalfa tops from the stems. For the young range rider was in love with life, the mere living. Take last night, now. He had flirted outrageously at the Circle O T Ranch dance with Jack Cole's girl, though he had known she was expecting to be married before winter. Jack was his friend, and he had annoyed him and made him jealous. Larry had excited Kate with the flattery of a new conquest, and he had made the ranchers and their wives smile tolerantly at the way he had "rushed" her. All of this was grist to his mill. He liked to be envied, to be admired, to be thought irresistible. His vanity accepted it as tribute to his attractiveness. Besides, what harm did it do? Kate and Jack would quarrel and make up. This would be a variation to the monotony of their courtship. He had really done them a kindness, though probably Jack would not recognize it as one.

Flinging himself down beneath a tree, he drew a deep breath of content. Roving eyes swept the open pasture adjoining, the blue sky with its westering sun ready to sink behind a crotch of the hills. His blinking lids closed sleepily, and opened again while he nestled closer to the ground and pillowed a dusky head on an arm. He had slept only two hours the night before.

From the foliage above came a faint rustle followed by what might pass as a discreet little cough. The range rider sat up as though he were hinged at the hips, rose to his feet, and lifted the pinched-in felt hat to a glimpse of blue in the shower of blossoms.

“Where did *you* come from?” he demanded, face lifted to the foliage.

“From Keokuk, Iowa,” came the prompt answer.

He laughed at this literal response. “I’ll never believe it, ma’am. You’re one of these banshees my mother used to talk about, or else you’re a fairy or one of these here nymphs that dwell in trees.”

Through the blossoms he made out a slim figure of grace, vaguely outlined in the mass of efflorescence.

Her laughter rippled down to him. “Sorry to disappoint you, sir. But I’m a mere woman.”

“I ain’t so sure you won’t open up yore wings an’ fly away,” he protested. “But if you’re givin’ me the straight of it, all I’ve got to say is that I like women. I been waitin’ for one twenty-odd years. Last night I dreamed I was gonna find her before sunset to-day. That’s straight.”

She was seated on a branch, chin tilted in a little cupped fist, one heel caught on the bough below to steady her. With an instinct wholly feminine she dexterously arranged the skirt without being able to conceal some inches of slender limb rising from a well-turned ankle.

“You’ll have to hasten on your way, then. The sun sets in half an hour,” she told him.

His grin was genial, insinuating, an unfriendly critic might have said impudent. “Room for argument, ma’am,” he demurred. “Funny, ain’t it, that of all the millions of apple trees in the world I sat down under this one—an’ while you were in it? Here we are, the man, the tree, an’ the girl, as you might say.”

“Are you listing the items in the order of their importance?” she asked. “And anyhow we won’t be here long, since I am leaving now.”

“Why are you going?” he wanted to know.

“A little matter, a mere trifle. You seem to have forgotten it, but—we haven’t been introduced.”

“Now looky here, ma’am. What’s in a name? Some guys says, ‘Meet Mr. Jones,’ an’ you claim you know me. Not a thing to that. It’s a heap more fun to do our own introducin’. Now ain’t it? Honest Injun! I’m anything you want to call me, an’ you’re Miss-Lady-in-the-Apple-Blossoms. An’ now that’s been fixed, I reckon I’ll take the elevator up.”

The girl’s eyes sparkled. There was something attractive about this young fellow’s impudence that robbed it of offence. Womanlike, her mind ran to evasions. “You can’t come up. You’d shake down all the blossoms.”

“If I shook ’em all down but one I’ll bet the tree would bloom to beat any other in the orchard.”

“If that is meant for a compliment——”

“No, Lady, for the truth.”

He caught the lowest limb and was about to swing himself up. Her sharp “No!” held

him an instant while their eyes met. A smile crept into his and gave the face a roguish look, a touch of Pan.

“Will you come down then?”

“At my convenience, sir.”

An upward swing brought him to the fork of the tree. Yet a moment, and he was beside her among the blossoms. Her eyes swept him in one swift glance, curiously, a little shyly.

“With not even a by-your-leave. You are a claim jumper,” she said.

“No, ma’am. I’m locatin’ the one adjoinin’ yores.”

“You may have mine, since I’m vacating it.”

“Now don’t you,” he protested. “Let yoreself go once an’ be natural. Like a human being. Hear that meadow-lark calling to his mate. He’s tellin’ his lady friend how strong he is for her. Why even the irrigation ditch is singin’ a right nice song about what a peach of a day it is.”

The girl’s eyes appraised him without seeming to do so. So far the cow-punchers she had met had been shy and awkward, red-faced and perspiring. But this youth was none of these. The sun and the wind of the Rockies had painted the tan on face and neck and hands, had chiselled tiny humorous wrinkles that radiated from the corners of his eyes. Every inch of the broad-rimmed felt hat, of the fancy silk kerchief, of the decorated chaps, certified him a rider of the range. But where had he picked up that spirited look of gay energy, that whimsical smile which combined deference and audacity?

“He travels fast,” the girl announced to the world at large. “Which reminds me that so must I.”

Larry too made a confidant of his environment. “I wonder how she’ll get past me—unless she really has wings.”

“I’ve heard that all Westerners are gentlemen at heart,” she mused aloud. “Of course he’ll let me past.”

“Now she’s tryin’ to flatter me. Nothin’ doing. We’ll give it out right now that I’m no gentleman,” he replied, impersonally. Then, abandoning his communion with the apple blossoms, he put a question to the young woman who shared the tenancy of the tree with him: “Mind if I smoke?”

“Why should you ask me, since you confess—or do you boast?—that you are no gentleman?”

From the pocket of his shirt he drew tobacco and paper, then rolled a cigarette. “I’m one off an’ on,” he explained. “Whenever it don’t cramp my style, you understand.”

She took advantage of his preoccupation with the “makings,” stepped lightly to a neighbouring branch, swung to a lower one, and dropped easily to earth.

The eyes that looked up at him sparkled triumph. “I wish you luck in your search for that paragon you’re to meet before sunset,” she said.

“I’ll be lucky. Don’t you worry about that,” he boasted coolly. “Only I don’t have to find her now. I’ve found her.”

Then, unexpectedly, they went down into the alfalfa together amid a shower of apple blossoms. For he, swinging from the branch upon which he sat, had dropped, turned his

ankle on an outcropping root, and clutched at her as he fell.

The girl merely sat down abruptly, but he plunged cheek first into the soft loam of the plowed orchard. His nose and the side of his face were decorated with débris. Mopping his face with a handkerchief, he succeeded in scattering more widely the soil he had accumulated.

She looked at him, gave a little giggle, suppressed it decorously, then went off into a gale of laughter. He joined her mirth.

“Not that there’s anything really to laugh at,” he presently assured her with dignity.

The young woman made an honest attempt at gravity, but one look at his embellished face set her off again.

“We just sat down,” he explained.

“Yes. On your bubble of romance. It’s gone—punctured——”

“No, no, Miss Lady-in-the-Apple-Blossoms. I’m stickin’ to my story.”

“But it won’t stick to you, as for instance the dirt does that you grubbed into.”

“Sho!” He mopped his face again. “You know blame’ well we’re gonna be friends. Startin’ from right now.”

She started to rise, but he was before her. With both hands he drew her to her feet. She looked at him, warily, with a little alarm, for he had not released her hands.

“If you please,” she suggested, a warning in her voice.

He laughed, triumphantly, and swiftly drew her to him. His lips brushed her hot cheek before she could push him away.

She snatched her hands from him, glared indignantly for an instant at him, then turned on her heel in contemptuous silence.

Smilingly he watched her disappear.

Slowly, jubilation still dancing in his eyes, he waded through the alfalfa to the fence, crept between two strands, and mounted the patient cow pony.

As he rode by the ranch house the girl he had kissed heard an unabashed voice lifted gaily in song. The words drifted to her down the wind.

“Foot in the stirrup and hand on the horn,
Best damned cowboy that ever was born.”

It came to her as a boast, almost as a challenge. She recognized the voice, the jaunty impudence of its owner. There was no need to go to the window of her room to make sure of who the singer was. The blood burned in her cheeks. Fire sparked in her eyes. If he ever gave her a chance she would put him in his place, she vowed.

CHAPTER II

TIM FLANDERS OFFERS INFORMATION AND OPINIONS

AFTER dinner at the Elkhorn Lodge Ruth Trovillion left her aunt reading an installment of a magazine serial and drifted across to the large log cabin which was used as a recreation hall by guests of the "dude" ranch. At least she appeared to drift, to hesitate before starting, and after arriving gave an impression of being there tentatively. The thoughts and motives of young women are not always to be read by their manner.

Tim Flanders, owner of the ranch, was sitting on the porch smoking a postprandial pipe, his chair tilted back and his feet propped against one of the posts. At sight of Miss Trovillion, who was a favourite of his, the legs of the chair and his feet came to the floor simultaneously.

"Don't disturb yourself on my account, Mr. Flanders," she told him. "I'm not staying."

"Might as well 'light an' stay for a while," he said, and dragged a chair forward.

Ruth stood for a moment, as though uncertain, before she sat down. "Well, I will, thank you, since you've taken so much trouble."

They sat in silence, the girl looking across at the dark blue-black line of mountains which made a jagged outline against a sky not quite so dark. She had not yet lived long enough among the high hills to have got over her wonder at their various aspects under different lights and atmospheres.

"It's been kinda hot to-day for this time o' year," her host said at last by way of a conversational advance.

"Yes," she agreed. "But it will be June in a few days. Doesn't it begin to get warmer here then?"

"Not what you'd call real warm, ma'am. We're a mile high, an' then some more on top o' that," he reminded her.

Presently, the subject of the weather having been exhausted, Flanders offered another gambit.

"I hope, ma'am, you didn't break any more cowboy hearts to-day."

She turned eyes of amiable scorn upon him. "Cowboys! Where are they, these cowboys you promised me?"

"They been kinda scarce down this way lately, sure enough," he admitted. "But you mighta seen one to-day if you'd happen' to have been lookin' when he passed. His name is Larry Silcott."

Tim's shrewd eyes rested on her. He indulged in mental gossip instincts, and it happened that he had seen Silcott come out of the orchard only a few moments before Miss Trovillion had arrived at the house, evidently also from the orchard.

Indifferently Miss Trovillion answered, her eyes again on the distant blue-black silhouette. "Is he the one that was claiming so loudly to be the best cowboy in the world?"

"Yes, ma'am. Larry's liable to claim anything. He's that-a-way."

“Just what do you mean by that?”

“He’s got his nerve, Larry has.” He chuckled. “Last night, for instance, by what the boys say.”

“Yes?”

“There was a dance at the Circle O T. I reckon Larry was pretty scand’lous the way he shined up to another fellow’s girl.”

“I suppose he’s one of the kind that thinks he’s irresistible,” she said, an edge of contempt in her voice.

“Maybe he has got notions along that line. Probably he’s got some basis for them too. Larry is the sort women like, I judge.”

“What sort is that?” she wanted to know.

“They like a fellow who is gay an’ puts up a good bluff, one who has lots of little laughin’ secrets to whisper to ’em behind his hand when other folks are in the room.”

“You seem to know all about it, Mr. Flanders. Why don’t you write a book about us?”

He refused to be daunted by her sarcasm. “I notice what I notice.”

“And I suppose this Mr. Silcott is really what they call a four-flusher?” she asked.

“Well, no, he ain’t. In his way Larry is a top hand. I ain’t right keen on his way, but that’s a matter of opinion. He’s mighty popular, an’ he delivers the goods. None of the boys can ride a buckin’ bronco with him, unless it’s Rowan McCoy.”

“And who’s he? Another poser?”

Flanders’ answer came instantly and emphatically. “No, *ma’am*. He’s a genuine dyed-in-the-wool he-man, Rowan is. If you want to see a real Westerner, one of the best of the breed, why, Rowan McCoy is yore man.”

“Yes—and where is he on exhibit?” she asked lightly.

“He’s a cattleman. Owns the Circle Diamond Ranch—not so gosh awful far from here. I’ll ride over with you some day when I get time.”

Ruth knew he would never find time. Tim was temperamentally indolent. He could work hard when he once got his big body into action. But it took a charge of dynamite to start him. His promises were made in good faith, but he often did not quite get round to fulfilling them. He was always suggesting some place of interest she ought to see and offering to take her there some day. This suited Ruth well enough. She could always organize at any time a party for a day’s horseback trip among the guests of the “dude” ranch.

The girl referred again to her pretended grievance. “You’re a false alarm, Mr. Flanders, and I’m going to sue you for breach of contract. You promised me the second day we were here—you know you did—to round up a likely bunch of cow-punchers for me to study. We dudes don’t come out here just for the scenery, you know. We want all the local colour there is. It’s your business to supply it. I suppose it isn’t reasonable to ask for Indian raids any more, or hold-ups, or anything of that sort. But the least you can do is to supply us a few picturesque cowboys, even if you have to send to the moving-picture people to get them.”

“Say, Miss Trovillion, I’ve been readin’ about these new moving pictures. Last time I was in Denver I went to see one. It’s great. Of course I reckon it’s only a fad, but——”

“You’re dodging the issue, Mr. Flanders. Are you going to make good on those cowboys or aren’t you?”

The owner of the Elkhorn Lodge scratched his gray poll. “Sure I am. Right now most of the boys are busy up in the hills, but they’ll be driftin’ down soon. Say, I’m sure thick-haired. I’d ought to have taken you to that Circle O T dance last night. I expect Mrs. Flanders would have gone if I’d mentioned it. You would have seen plenty of the boys there. But one of these days there will be another dance. And say, ma’am, there’s Round-up Week at Bad Ax pretty soon. They’ll come ridin’ in for a hundred miles for that, every last one of these lads that throw a rope. That’s one real *rodeo*—ropin’, ridin’, bulldoggin’, pony races, Indian dances, anything you like.”

“Will they let a tenderfoot attend?”

“That’s what it’s for, to grab off the tenderfoot’s dough. But honest, it’s a good show. You’ll like it.”

“I’ll certainly be there, if Aunt is well enough,” Ruth announced with decision.

CHAPTER III

A CHALLENGE

THE road meandered over and through brown Wyoming in the line of least resistance. It would no doubt reach the Fryingpan some time and ultimately Wagon Wheel, but the original surveyors of the trail were leisurely in their habits. They had chewed the bovine cud and circled hills with a saving instinct that wasted no effort. The ranchman of the Hill Creek district had taken the wise hint of their cattle. They, too, were in no haste and preferred to detour rather than climb.

If Rowan McCoy was in any hurry he gave no sign of it. He let his horse fall into a slow walk of its own choice. The problem of an overstocked range was worrying him. Sheep had come bleating across the bad lands to steal the grass from the cattle, regardless of priority of occupancy. It was a question that touched McCoy and his neighbours nearly. They had seen their stock pushed back from one feeding ground after another by herds of woolly invaders. Rowan could name a dozen cattlemen within as many miles who were face to face with ruin. All of them had well-stocked ranches, were heavily in debt, yet stood to make a good thing if they could hold the range even for two years longer. The price of a cattle had begun to go up and was due for a big rise. The point was whether they could hang on long enough to take advantage of this.

With a sweeping curve the road swung to the rim of a saucer-shaped valley and dipped abruptly over the brow—a white ribbon zigzagging across the tender spring green of the mountain park. Bovier's Camp the place was still called, but the Frenchman who had first set up a cabin here had been dead twenty years. The camp was a trading centre for thirty miles, though there was nothing to it but a blacksmith shop, a doctor's office with bachelor's quarters attached, a stage station, a general store and post office, and the houses of the Pin and Feather Ranch. Yet cow-punchers rode a day's journey to get their "air-tights" and their tobacco here and to lounge away an idle hour in gossip.

A man was swinging from his saddle just as McCoy rode up to the store. He was a big, loose-jointed fellow, hook-nosed, sullen of eye and mouth. His hard gaze met the glance of the cattleman with jeering hostility, but he offered no greeting before he turned away.

Two or three cow-punchers and a ranch owner were in the store. The hook-nosed man exchanged curt nods with them and went directly to the post office cage.

"Any mail for J. C. Tait?" he asked.

The postmistress handed him a letter and two circulars from liquor houses. She was an angular woman, plain, middle-aged, severe of feature.

"How's Norma?" she asked.

"Nothin' the matter with her far as I know," answered Tait sulkily. His manner gave the impression that he resented her question.

A shout of welcome met McCoy as he appeared in the doorway. It was plain that he was in the good books of those present as much as Tait was the opposite. For Rowan McCoy, owner of the Circle Diamond Ranch, was the leader of the cattle interests in this neighbourhood, and big Joe Tait was the most aggressive and the most bitter of the sheepmen fighting for the range.

Bovier's Camp was in the heart of the cattle country, but Tait made no concession to the fact that he was unwelcome here. He leaned against the counter, a revolver in its holster lying along his thigh. There was something sinister and deadly in the sneer with which he returned the coldness of the men he was facing.

He glanced over the liquor circulars before he ripped open the envelope of the letter. His black eyes, set in deep sockets, began to blaze. The red veined cheeks of his beefy face darkened to an apoplectic purple. Joe Tait enraged was not a pleasant object to see.

He flung a sudden profane defiance at them all. "You're a fine bunch of four-flushers. It's about your size to send a skull-and-crossbones threat through the mail, but I notice you haven't the guts to sign it. I'm not to cross the bad lands, eh? I'm to keep on the other side of the dead line you've drawn. And if I don't you warn me I'll get into trouble. To hell with your warning!" Tait crumpled the letter in his sinewy fist, flung it down, spat tobacco juice on it, and ground it savagely under his heel. "That's what I think of your warning, McCoy. Trouble! Me, I eat trouble. If you or any of your bunch of false alarms want any you can have it right now and here."

McCoy, sitting on a nail keg, had been talking with one of his friends. He did not move. There was a moment's chill silence. Every man present knew that Tait was ready to back his challenge. He might be a bully, but nobody doubted his gameness.

"I'm not looking for trouble," the cattleman said coldly.

"I thought you weren't," jeered Tait. "You never have been, far as I can make out."

The blood mounted to McCoy's face. Nobody in the room could miss the point of that last taunt. It was common knowledge in the Hill Creek country that years before Norma Davis had jilted him to run away with Joe Tait.

"I reckon you've said enough," suggested Falkner, the range rider to whom Rowan had been talking. "And enough is aplenty, Joe."

"Do I have to get your say-so before I can talk, Falkner? I'll say to you, too, what I'm saying to the man beside you. There can't any of you—no, nor all of you—run me out the way you did Pap Thomson. Try anything like that, and you'll find me lying right in the door of my sheep wagon with hell popping. Hear that, McCoy?"

"Yes, I hear you." McCoy looked at him hard. One could have gathered no impression of weakness from the lean brown face of the cattleman. The blue-gray eyes were direct and steely. Power lay in the packed muscles of the stocky frame. Confidence rested in the set of the broad shoulders and the poise of the close-cropped head. "I didn't write that letter to you, and I don't know who did. But I'll give you a piece of advice. Keep your sheep on the other side of the dead line. They'll maybe live longer."

The sheepman shook a fist at him furiously. "That's a threat, McCoy. Don't you back it. Don't you dare lift a finger to my sheep. I'll run them where I please. I'll bring 'em right up to the door of the Circle Diamond, too, if it suits me."

A young ranchman lounging in the doorway cut into the talk. "I reckon you can bring 'em there, Joe, but I ain't so sure you could take 'em away again."

"Who'd stop me?" demanded Tait, whirling on him. "Would it be you, Jack Cole?"

"I might be there, and I might not. You never can tell."

Tait took a step toward him. The undisciplined temper of the man was boiling up. He

had for nearly two days been drinking heavily.

“Might as well settle this now—the sooner the quicker,” he said thickly.

Sharply McCoy spoke: “We’re none of us armed, Tait. Don’t make a mistake.”

The sheep owner threw his revolver on the counter. “I don’t need any gun to settle any business I’ve got with Jack Cole.”

“Don’t you start anything here, Joe Tait,” ordered the postmistress in a shrill voice. She ran out from her cage and confronted the big man indomitably. “You can’t bully *me*. I’m the United States Government when I’m in this room. Don’t you forget it, either.”

A shadow darkened the doorway, and a young woman came into the store. She stopped, surprised, aware that she had interrupted a scene. Her soft dark eyes passed from one to another, asking information.

There was an awkward silence. The sheepman turned with a half-suppressed oath, snatched up his weapon, thrust it into the holster, and strode from the room. Yet a moment, and the thudding of hoofs could be heard.

The postmistress turned in explanation to the girl. “It’s Joe Tait. He’s always trying to raise a rookus, that man is. But he can’t bully me, no matter how bad an actor he is. I’m not his wife.” She walked around the counter and resumed a dry manner of business. “Do you want all the mail for the Elkhorn Lodge or just your own?”

“I’ll take it all, Mrs. Stovall.”

The young woman handed through the cage opening a canvas bag, into which papers and letters were stuffed.

“Three letters for you, Miss Trovillion,” the older woman said, sliding them across to her.

“You’re good to me to-day.” The girl thanked her with a quick smile.

“I notice I’m good to you most days,” Mrs. Stovall replied with friendly sarcasm.

Ruth Trovillion buckled the mail bag and turned to go. As she walked out of the store her glance flashed curiously over the men. It lingered for a scarcely perceptible instant on McCoy.

CHAPTER IV

INTRODUCING ROWAN McCOY TO RUTH TROVILLION

McCOY followed a road that led from Bovier's Camp into the hills. He was annoyed at the altercation with Tait that had flared up in the store. Between the sheep and cattle interests on the Fryingpan there had been a good deal of bickering and recrimination, some night raiding, an occasional interchange of shots. But for the most part there had been so far at least a decent pretense of respect for the law.

Except for Tait a compromise settlement might have been effected. But the big sheepman was not reasonable. Originally a cattleman himself, he had quarrelled violently with all of his range neighbours, and at last gone into sheep out of spite. There was no give-and-take about him. The policy of live and let live did not commend itself to his turbulent temper. What he wanted he intended to take with a high hand.

There were personal reasons why McCoy desired no trouble with him. Rowan had not seen Norma half a dozen times since she had run away with Tait in anger after a quarrel between the lovers. If she regretted her folly, no word to that effect had ever reached McCoy or any other outsider. On the few occasions when she came out into her little neighbourhood world it was with a head still high. Without impertinence, one could do no more than guess at her unhappiness. Upon one thing her former lover was determined: there would be no trouble of his making between him and the man Norma had chosen for a husband.

The cattleman turned up a cañon, followed it to its head, cut across the hills, and descended into the valley of the Fryingpan. The river was high from the spring thaw of the mountain snows. Below him he could see its swirling waters tumbling down in agitated hurry.

On the road in front of him a trap was moving toward the stream. He recognized the straight back of the slim driver as that of the girl he had seen at the post office. Evidently she was taking the cut-off back to the ranch, unaware that the bridge had been washed out by the freshet. Would she turn back or would she try the ford just below the bridge? He touched his horse with the spur and put it to a canter.

The girl drew up and viewed the remains of the bridge, then turned to the ford. Presently she drove slowly down to its edge. After a moment's apparent hesitation she forced the reluctant horse to take the water. As the wheels sank deeper, as the turbid current swept above the axles and into the bed of the trap, the heart of the young woman failed. She gave a little cry of alarm and tried to turn back.

The man galloping toward the ford shouted a warning: "Keep going! Swing to the right!"

It is likely the driver did not hear his call. She tried to cramp to the left. The horse, frightened, plunged forward into the deep pool below the ford. The force of the stream swept horse and rig down. The girl screamed and started to rise, appalled by the whirling torrent.

Miraculously, a horse and rider appeared beside her. She was lifted bodily from the trap to the arms of a rescuer. For a few moments the cow pony struggled with the waters.

It fought hard for a footing, splashed into the shallows nearer shore, and emerged safely at the farther bank.

She found herself lifted to the ground and deserted. The Heaven-sent horseman unfastened the rope at his saddle, swung it round his head, and dropped a large loop over the back of the trap. The other end he tied to the pommel of the saddle. The cow pony obeyed orders, braced its legs, and began to pull. The owner of the animal did not wait for results, but waded deep into the river and seized the bridle of the exhausted buggy horse.

Even then it was a near thing. The Fryingpan fought with a heavy plunging suction to keep its prey. The man and the horses could barely hold their own, far less make headway against the current. As to the girl, she watched the battle with big, fascinated eyes, the blood driven from her heart by terror. Soon it flashed across her brain that these three creatures of flesh and blood could not win, for while they wore out their strength in vain the cruel river pounded down on them with undiminished energy.

She flew to the rope and pulled, digging her heels into the sand for a better purchase. After what seemed to her a long time, almost imperceptibly, at first by fitful starts, the rope moved. McCoy inched his way to the shallower water and a more secure footing. Man, horse, and trap came jerkily to land.

Almost exhausted, the cattleman staggered to his bronco and leaned against its heaving flanks. His eyes met those of the girl. Her tremulous lips were ashen. He guessed that she was keeping a tight rein on a hysterical urge to collapse into tears.

"It's all right," he said, and she liked the pleasant smile that went with the words. "We're all safe now. No harm done. None a-tall."

"I thought—I was afraid——" She caught her lip between her white teeth.

"Sure. Anybody would be. You oughtn't to have tried the ford. There should be a sign up there. I'll get after the road commissioners."

Ruth knew he was talking to give her time to recover composure. He went on, casually and cheerfully.

"The Fryingpan is mighty deceiving. When she's in flood she certainly tears along in a hurry. More than one cow-puncher has been drowned in her."

She managed a smile. "I've been complaining because I couldn't find an adventure. This was a little too serious. I thought, one time, that—that you might not get out."

"So you pulled me out. That was fine. I won't forget it."

The girl looked at the blisters on her soft palms, and again a faint little smile twitched at her face. "Neither shall I for a day or two. I have souvenirs."

He began to arrange the disordered harness, rebuckling a strap here and pulling the leather into place there. Dark eyes under long, curved lashes observed him as he moved, lean-loined and broad of shoulder, the bronze of the eternal outdoors burned into his hands and neck and lean face.

"My name is Trovillion; Ruth Trovillion," she said shyly. "I'm staying at Elkhorn Lodge, or the Dude Ranch, as you people call it."

He shook hands without embarrassment. "My name is Rowan McCoy."

Level eyes, with the blue of Western skies in them, looked straight into hers. A little wave of emotion beat through her veins. She knew, warned by the sure instinct of her sex,

that this man who had torn her from the hands of death was to be no stranger in her life.

“I think I saw you at the store to-day. And I’ve heard of you, from Mr. Flanders.”

“Yes.”

She abandoned that avenue of approach, and came to a more personal one—came to it with a face of marble except for the live eyes.

“But for you I would have drowned,” she said, and shuddered.

“Maybe so; maybe not.”

“Yes. I couldn’t have got out alone,” she insisted. “Of course I can’t thank you. There’s no use trying. But I’ll never forget—never as long as I live.”

About her there was a proud, delicate beauty that charmed him. She was at once so slender and so vital. Her face was like a fine, exquisitely cut cameo.

“All right,” he agreed cheerfully. “Honours are easy then, Miss Trovillion. I lifted you out and you pulled me out.”

“Oh, you can say that! As if I did anything that counted.” The fount of her feelings had been touched, and she was still tremulous. It was impossible for her to dismiss this adventure as casually as he seemed ready to do. After all, it had been the most tremendous hazard of her young, well-sheltered life.

When he had made sure the trap was fit for the road, McCoy turned to his companion and helped her in. She drove slowly. The cattleman rode beside her. He was going out of his way, but he found for himself a sufficient excuse. She was a slim slip of a girl who had lived her nineteen or twenty years in cities far from the primitive dangers of the wild. Probably she was unstrung from her experience and might collapse. Anyhow, he was not going to take the chance of it.

CHAPTER V

A RIDE

STILL at the age when she was frankly the centre of her own universe, Ruth Trovillion had an abundant sense of romance. There was no intention in her decided young mind of treading a road worn dusty by the feet of the commonplace. On occasion a fine rapture filled her hours. She was still reacting to the ecstatic shock of youth's early-morning plunge into the wonderful river of life.

Rowan McCoy had impressed himself upon her imagination. He had not come into her life with jingling spurs, garnished like Larry Silcott with all the picturesque trimmings of the frontier. Larry was too free, too fresh, she thought. But McCoy, quiet, competent son of the hard-riding West, depended on no adventitious aid of costume. He was as indigenous and genuine as one of his own hill cattle. Ruth had admirers in plenty, but they dwindled to non-heroic proportions before his brown virility, his gentle, reticent strength.

Quietly she gathered information about him. The owner of the Circle Diamond was a leader in the community by grace of natural fitness. Tim Flanders, who kept the Elkhorn Lodge, summed him up for Ruth in two sentences:

"He's a straight-up rider, Mac is. He'll do to take along."

"What do you mean by that?" asked his young guest.

"You can tie to him. He'll go through. There's no yellow in Rowan McCoy."

She thought over that a good deal. Her judgment concurred. So far as it went, the verdict of Flanders was sound. But it did not go far enough. During the ride to the ranch she had discovered that the cattleman had a capacity for silence. Ruth found herself fascinated by the desire to push through to the personality behind the wall of reserve.

For some time she was given no chance. It was ten days after the rescue before she saw him again.

She went on her way with what patience she could, enjoying the activities of the "dude" ranch. She rode, fished, and picnicked in the hills with the other guests. Two days were spent in climbing Big Twin Peak. In the evenings she read to her aunt while that lady indefatigably knitted. The surface of her mind was absorbed by the details of the life arranged for her. McCoy was not on the horizon of her movements, but he was very much in the map of her thoughts. She did not hear his name mentioned. To these well-to-do people from the East spending a pleasant vacation in Wyoming he did not exist. But it was impossible for Ruth to get this quiet, steady-eyed man out of her mind.

Why did he not come to see her? Yet, even as she asked herself the question, Ruth found an adequate answer. She had very little vanity. Probably she had not interested him. There was no real reason why he should call unless he wanted to do so.

Then one day, unexpectedly, she met him on a hill trail.

"Why haven't you been to see me?" she asked, with the directness that characterized her at times.

Yet she quaked at her own audacity. He might think even though he would be too courteous to say so, that he did not care to waste the time.

He thought a moment before he committed himself to words. He had wanted to come, but he had passed through an experience which made him very reserved with women. He never called on any, nor did he go to dances or merrymakings.

“I’ve been pretty busy, Miss Trovillion,” he said.

“That’s no excuse. I might have got pneumonia from wet feet or gone into a nervous breakdown from the shock. You’ve got no right to pull a girl out of the river and then ride away and forget she ever existed. It’s not good form. They are not doing it this year.”

He laughed at the jaunty impudence of her tilted chin. Somehow she reminded him of a young, singing meadow-lark experimenting with its wings. He suspected shyness back of her audacity. Yet he was surprised at his own answer when he heard it; at least he was surprised at the impulse which had led him to make it.

“Oh, I haven’t forgotten you. I’ll be glad to come to see you, if I may.”

“When?”

“Will this evening do?”

“I’ll be looking for you, Mr. McCoy.”

The cattleman told the simple truth when he said that he had not forgotten her. The girl had been very much in his mind ever since he had left her at the gate of the Lodge. He loved all young, clean life even among animals, and she seemed to him the embodied youth of the world, free and light-footed as a fawn in the misty break of day.

When McCoy reached Elkhorn Lodge after dinner Ruth introduced him to her aunt, a thin, flat-bosomed spinster with the marks of ill health on her face. Miss Morgan and her niece had come to the Rockies for the health of the older woman, and were scheduled to make an indefinite stay. Before the cattleman had talked with her five minutes he knew that Miss Morgan viewed life from a narrow, Puritanic standpoint. He guessed that there was little real sympathy between her and the vivid girl by her side.

In her early years Ruth had been a lonely, repressed little soul. An orphaned child, she had been brought up by this maiden lady, who looked on the leggy, helter-skelter youngster with the tangled flying hair as a burden laid upon her by the Lord. Ruth had been a lawless, wilful little thing, naughty and painfully plain by the standard of her aunt; a difficult little girl to train in the way she should go.

Surprisingly she had blossomed from the ugly-duckling stage into a most attractive girl. Nobody had been more amazed at the transformation than her aunt. The change was not merely external. The manner of Ruth had become gentler, less wilful. As a nurse she had developed patience toward the invalid.

“Do you mind if Mr. McCoy and I ride out to Flat Top for the sunset?” she asked now.

“No, child. I’ll be all right. But don’t stay late,” Miss Morgan assented a little fretfully. It was one of Ruth’s ways to become absorbed in the interest of the moment to forgetfulness of everything else. This was one of the penalties her friends paid for her vivid enthusiasms.

The riders passed a poster tacked to a tree just outside the gates of the ranch. It bore this legend:

RIDE 'EM, COWBOYS!

ANNUAL ROUND-UP AT BAD AX
July 2, 3, and 4.

Best Bronco Busters, Ropers,
And Bulldoggers
From a Dozen States Will Compete
FOR WORLD'S CHAMPIONSHIP

Pony Races, Indian Dances, Balls,
and Street Carnival.

Also Fancy Roping and Riding

DON'T MISS THIS GREAT ROUND-UP.
IT'S A BIG LEAGUE SHOW.

Ruth drew up to read it. She turned to her companion. "You'll ride, I suppose? Mr. Flanders says you're a famous bronco buster."

"I don't reckon I will," he answered. "Some of the boys entered me, but I've decided not to go in this year."

"Why not?"

"Gettin' too old to be jolted around so rough," he replied, smiling. "The younger lads can take their turn."

"Yes, you look as though you had one foot in the grave," she derided, with a swift glance at the muscular shoulders above the long, lean body. "Of course you'll ride. You've got to. Aren't you champion of the world?"

"That's just a way of talkin'," he explained. "They have one of these shows each year at Cheyenne. Other places have 'em too. The winners can't all be champions of the world."

"But I want to see you ride," she told him, as though he could not without discourtesy refuse so small a favour.

He dismissed this with a smile.

From Flat Top they watched the sun go down behind a sea of rounded hills. The flame of it was in her blood, the glow of it on her face. She was in love with Wyoming these days, with the cool and crystalline air of its mornings, with the scarfs of heat waving across the desert at noon, with the porphyry mountain peaks edged with fire at even. There was this much of the poet in Ruth Trovillion, that she could go out at dewy dawn and find a miracle in the sunrise.

Impulsively she turned to her companion a face luminous with joy.

"Don't you just love it all?"

He nodded. The picture struck a spark from his imagination. By some trick of light and shade she seemed the heart of the sunset, a golden, glowing creature of soft, warm flesh through which an ardent soul quivered and palpitated with vague yearnings and inarticulate desires.

Into the perfect peace of a harmonious world jarred a raucous shout. From a hill pocket back of Flat Top came a cloud of dust. In the falling light a dim, gray mass poured out upon the mesa. It moved with a soft rustle of small, padded feet, of wool fleeces rubbing against each other.

A horseman cantered into view and caught sight of McCoy. With a jeering laugh he shouted a greeting:

“Fine sheep weather these days, McCoy. How about cows?”

The eyes of the cattleman blazed. The girl noticed the swift flush under the tan of the cheeks, the lips that closed like a steel trap. It was plain that the man rode himself with a strong rein.

“I’m still waiting in the door of my sheep wagon for you and your friends,” scoffed the drunken voice. “And my wagon is a whole lot nearer the Circle Diamond than it was. One of these days I’ll drive up to your door like I promised.”

Still McCoy said nothing, but the muscles stood out on his clamped jaws like ropes. The sheepman rode closer, turned insolent eyes on the girl. From his ribald, hateful mirth she shrank back with a sense of degradation.

Tait turned his horse and galloped away. He shouted an order to a herder. A dog passed silently in and out of the gray mass, which moved across the mesa like an agitated wave of the sea.

The girl asked a question: “Has he crossed the dead line?”

“Yes.” Then: “What do you know about the dead line?” asked her companion, surprised.

“Oh, I have eyes and ears.” She put herself swiftly on his side. “I think you’re right. He’s bad—hateful. Your cattle were here first. He brought sheep in to spite you and his other neighbours. Isn’t that true?”

“Yes.”

McCoy wondered how much more this uncannily shrewd young person knew about the relations between him and Tait. Did she know, for instance, the story of how Norma Davis had jilted him to marry the sheepman?

“What will you do? Will you fight for the range?”

“Yes.” This was a subject the cattleman could not discuss. He dismissed it promptly. “Hadn’t we better be moving toward the ranch, Miss Trovillion?”

They rode back together in the gathering dusk.

CHAPTER VI

CHAMPION OF THE WORLD

“LARRY SILCOTT on Rocking Chair,” boomed a deep voice through a megaphone.

A girl in one of the front boxes of the grand stand saw a young cow-puncher move with jingling spurs across the wide race track toward the corral beyond. He looked up, easy and debonair as an actor, and raked with his eyes the big crowd watching him. Smile met smile, when his glance came to halt at the eager girl looking down.

Ruth Trovillion’s smile went out like the flame of a blown candle. She had not caught the name announced through the megaphone, but now she recognized him. The last time she had seen this gay youth, now sunning himself so jauntily in the public regard, had been in the orchard of Elkhorn Lodge; he had kissed her impudently, and when their eyes had met hers had flashed hatred at him for the affront he had dared to put upon her.

She turned away, flaming, chin in the air.

“Is he a good rider?” she asked the man sitting beside her.

“Wyoming doesn’t raise better riders than Larry Silcott,” he answered promptly. “He’s an A-1 rider—the best of the lot.”

“You beat him last year, didn’t you?” she challenged.

McCoy did not quite understand her imperious resentment. It seemed to go a little farther than the occasion called for. “That was the luck of the day. I happened——”

“Oh, yes, you happened!” scoffed Ruth. “You could go out and beat him now if you wanted to. Why don’t you ride? Your name is entered. I should think you would defend your championship. Everybody wants to see last year’s winner ride. I haven’t any patience with you.”

Rowan smiled. “I see you haven’t, Miss Ruth. I’ve tried to explain. I like Larry. We’re friends. Besides, I taught him his riding. Looks to me as if it is one of the younger fellow’s turn. Now is a good time for me to quit after I have won two years running.”

The young woman was not convinced, but she dropped the argument. Her resentful eyes moved back to the arena, into which a meek-looking claybank had been driven. It stood with blinking eyes, drooping at the hip, palpably uninterested in the proceedings.

Of a sudden the ears of the bronco pricked, its eyes dilated. A man in chaps was moving toward it, a rope in his hands. The loop of the lariat circled, went whistling forward, fell true over the head of the outlaw horse. The claybank reared, tried to bolt, came strangling to a halt as the loop tightened. A second rope slid into place beside the first. The horse stood trembling while a third man coaxed a blanket over its eyes.

Warily and deftly Silcott saddled, looking well to the cinch.

“All ready,” he told his assistants.

Ropes and blanket were whipped off as he swung to the seat. Rocking Chair stood motionless for a moment, bewildered at the things happening so fast. Then the outlaw realized that a human clothespin was straddling its back. It went whirling upward as if trying to tie itself into a knot. The rider clamped his knees against the sides of the bronco

and swung his hat with a joyous whoop.

Rocking Chair had a reputation to live up to. It was a noted fence rower, weaver, and sunfisher. Savagely it whirled, went up in another buck, came down stiff-legged, with arched back. The jolt was like that of a pile driver, but Silcott met it with limp spine, his hat still fanning against the flank of the animal. The outlaw went round and round in a vicious circle. The incubus was still astride of its back. It bolted; jarred to a sudden, sideways halt. Spurs were rowelling its sides cruelly.

Up again it went in a series of furious bucks, one after another, short, sharp, violent. Meanwhile, Silcott, who was a trick rider, went through his little performance. He drank a bottle of ginger ale and flung away the bottle. He took the rein between his teeth and slipped off coat and waistcoat. He rode with his feet out of the stirrups. The grand stand clamoured wild applause. The young cattleman from the Open A N C was easily the hero of the day.

The outlaw horse stopped bucking as suddenly as it had begun. Larry slipped from the saddle in front of the grand stand and stood bowing, a lithe, graceful young figure of supple ease, to the plaudits which rained upon him.

Abruptly Ruth turned to McCoy. "I want you to ride," she told him in a low voice.

The cattleman hesitated. He did not want to ride. Without saying so in words, he had let the other competitors understand that he did not mean to defend his title. There had been a good deal of pressure to induce him to drag a saddle into the arena but so far he had resisted it.

He turned to decline, but the words died on his lips. The eyes of the girl were stormy; her cheeks flushed. It was plain that for some reason she had set her heart on his winning. Why? His pulses crashed with the swift, tumultuous beating of the red blood in him. Rowan McCoy was not a vain man. It was hard for him to accept the conclusion for which his whole soul longed. But what other reason could there be for her insistence?

During the past few weeks he had been with Ruth Trovillion a great deal. He had ridden with her, climbed Old Baldy by her side, eaten picnic lunches as her companion far up in flower-strewn mountain parks. He had taught her to shoot, to fish, to make camp. They had been gay and wholesome comrades for long summer days. The new and secret thing that had come into his life he had hidden from her as if it had been a sin. The desire of his heart was impossible, he had always told himself. How could it be otherwise? This fine, spirited young creature, upon whom was stamped so ineradicably the look of the thoroughbred, would go back to her own kind when the time came. Meanwhile, let him make the best of his little day of sunshine.

"I told the boys I wasn't expecting to ride," he parried. "It has been rather understood that I wouldn't."

"But if I ask you?" she demanded.

There was no resisting that low, imperious appeal.

He looked straight into her eyes. "If you ask it, I'll ride."

"I do ask it."

He rose. "It's your say-so, little partner. I'll let the committee know."

The eyes of the girl followed him, a brown, sun-baked man, quiet and strong and

resolute. Her glance questioned shyly what manner of man this was, after all, who had imposed himself so greatly upon her thoughts. He was genuine. So much she knew. He did not need the gay trappings of Larry Silcott to brand him a rider of the hills, foursquare to every wind that blew. Behind the curtain of his reticence she had divined some vague hint of a woman in his life. Now a queer little thrill of jealousy, savage and primeval, claimed her for the first time. She knew her own power over Rowan McCoy. It hurt her to feel that another girl had once possessed it, too.

A cow-puncher from Laramie, in yellow wool chaps and a shirt of robin's-egg blue, took the stage after Silcott. He drew a roan with a red-hot devil of malice in its eye. The bronco hunched itself over to the fence in a series of jarring bucks, and jammed the leg of the rider against a post. The Laramie youth, beside himself with pain, caught at the saddle horn to save his seat. The nearest judge fired a revolver to tell him he was out of the running. He had "touched leather."

His successor took the dust ignominiously in a clean tumble. He got up, looked ruefully at the bronco that had unseated him, and went his bowlegged way back to meet the derisive condolences of forty grinning punchers.

"Too bad the judges didn't have the ground plowed up for you, Shorty. It would 'a' been a heap softer," murmured one.

"If I'd only remembered to ride on my spurs like you done, Wade, I needn't have fallen at all," came back Shorty with genial malice at his tormentor.

Whereat the laugh was on Wade, who had been detected earlier in the day digging his spurs into the cinch to help him stick to the saddle.

"Rowan McCoy on Tenderfoot," announced the leather-lunged megaphone man.

A wave of interest swept through the grand stand. Everybody had wanted to see the champion ride. Now they were going to get the chance. The announcement caused a stir even among the hard-bitten riders at the entrance to the corral. For McCoy was not only a famous bronco buster; he was a man whose personality had won him many friends and some enemies.

The owner of the Circle Diamond rode like a centaur. He tried no tricks, no fancy business to win the applause of the spectators. But he held his seat with such ease and mastery that his long, lithe body might have been a part of the horse. His riding was characteristic of him—straight and strong and genuine.

The outlaw tried its wicked best, and no bronco in the Rockies was better known than Tenderfoot for the fighting devil that slumbered in its heart. Neither side bucking nor pitching, sunfishing nor weaving could shake the lean-loined, broad-shouldered figure from his seat. It was not merely that McCoy could not be unseated; there was never a moment when there was any doubt of whether man or beast was master. Even when the bronco flung itself backward, McCoy was in the saddle again before the animal was on its feet.

The eyes of Ruth never left the fighting pair. She leaned forward, fascinated, lost to everything in the world but the duel that was being fought out in front of her. They were a splendid pair of animals, each keyed to the highest notch of efficiency. But the one in the saddle was something more. His perfect poise was no doubt instinctive, born of long experience. His skill had become automatic. Yet back of this she sensed mind, a will that

flashed along the reins to the brute beneath. Slowly Tenderfoot answered to its master, acknowledged the dominion of the man.

Its pitching became less violent, its bucking halfhearted. At a signal from one of the judges, McCoy slipped from the saddle. Without an instant's delay, without a single glance at the storm-tossed grand stand, the rider strode across the arena and disappeared. He did not know that Ruth Trovillion was beating her gloved hands excitedly along with five thousand other cheering spectators. He could not guess how her heart had stood still when the bronco toppled backward, nor how it had raced when his toes found again the stirrups as the horse struggled to its feet.

The judges conferred for a few minutes before the megaphone man announced that the championship belt went to McCoy, second prize to Silcott. Once more the grand stand gave itself to eager applause of the decision.

Just before the wild-horse race, which was the last event on the program, McCoy made his way to the box where Miss Trovillion was sitting with Tim Flanders, of the Elkhorn Lodge, and his wife.

The girl looked up, her eyes shining. "Congratulations, Mr. Champion of the World." She felt after a fashion that she had helped to beat the conceited Silcott, the youth who had affronted her with his presumptuous kiss.

"I was lucky," he said simply.

"You were the best rider." Then, with a little touch of feminine ferocity: "I knew you would beat *him*."

"Silcott? I still think I was lucky."

Already the grand stand was beginning to empty. Round-up Week was almost over.

"We'd better be getting back to town if we want any supper," proposed Flanders.

The same idea had suggested itself to several thousand more visitors to Bad Ax. A throng of automobiles was presently creeping toward the gates, every engine racing and every horn squawking. Once outside, the whole plain seemed alive with moving cars, buckboards, wagons, and horses all going swiftly townward in a mad race for hotels and restaurants.

Bad Ax was crowded to its suburbs. Hotels were jammed, rooming houses doing a capacity business. A steady stream of automobiles had poured in all week from Denver and other points. Trains loaded to the vestibules had emptied themselves into the town. The bells of saloon cash registers were ringing continuously. Cow-punchers from Sheridan and Cody jostled shoulders with tourists from New Haven and Kansas City, their worn leathers and faded gray shirts discarded for gaudy costumes that ran the rainbow from sunset orange to violent shades of blue.

The whole town was a welter of barbaric colour. Streamers stretched across from building to building, and "spielers" for side shows bawled the merits of their attraction. Everywhere one met the loud gaiety of youth on a frolic. Young as the night was, merrymakers were surging up and down the streets tossing confetti and blowing horns.

In the crowded streets, after they had found something to eat in a vacant store where the ladies of the Baptist church were serving a supper, McCoy and Miss Trovillion became separated from their friends. Hours later they wandered from the crowd toward the suburb where the young woman and the Flanders family had found rooms.

Unaccountably their animation ebbed when they were alone under the stars. They had been full of laughter and small talk so long as the crowd jostled them. Now they could find neither. In every fibre of him Rowan was aware of the slight, dainty figure moving by his side so lightly. The delicate, penetrating fragrance of her personality came to him with poignant sweetness.

Once his hand crept out and touched her white gown in the darkness. If she knew, she gave no sign.

Her eyes were on the hills which rose sheer back of the town high into the sky line. They seemed to press in closely and to lift her vision to the heavens, to shut out all the little commonplace things of life.

“Do you suppose God made them to wash sin out of the hearts of people?” she asked.

“A night like this does give a fellow queer feelings,” he answered in a low voice. “Have you ever camped in the high hills with the wind blowin’ kinda soft through the pines? I have, alone, often. Makes a fellow feel as though he’d like to begin again with a clean page.”

She nodded. “Yes. I’ve felt it, too, though I never camped alone of course. As though something fine and wonderful and all-powerful was whispering to me and drawing me nearer to eternal things. It must be something in ourselves, don’t you think? It can’t be that the mountains at night are really a kind of Holy of Holies.”

“I reckon,” he agreed. He had never before tried or heard anybody else try to put into words the strange influence of the shadowy range at night upon one camped in the hollow of a draw, an influence which at the same time seemed to reduce one to an atom in an ocean of space and to lift one into the heights of the everlasting verities. He was shy of any expression of his emotions.

They fell into silence, and presently she turned reluctantly back toward the town. He fell into step beside her. Soon now, he knew, they would be caught again into the spirit of the commonplace.

So he spoke, abruptly, to hold in his heart some permanent comfort from the hour when they had been alone with each other and the voices of the world had been very far and faint.

“Why did you want me to ride?”

It was a simple question, but one not so easily answered. She could have told him the truth, that she did not want Larry Silcott to win. But that would have been only part of the truth. She wanted Rowan McCoy to win, wanted it more than she had wished anything for a long time. Yet why? She was not ready to give a candid reason even to herself, far less to him.

Womanlike, she evaded. “Why shouldn’t I want you to win? You’re my friend. I thought——”

He surprised himself almost as much as he did her by his answer. “I’m not yore friend.”

She looked at him, startled at his brusqueness.

“I’m a man that loves you,” he said roughly.

A tremor passed through her. She was conscious of a strange sweet faintness. The soft

eyes veiled themselves beneath dark lashes.

“Have I spoiled everything, little partner?” he asked gently.

“How can I tell—yet?” she whispered, and looked up at him shyly, tremulously.

He knew, as his arms went around her, that he had entered upon the greatest joy of his life.

CHAPTER VII

FATE FLINGS OPEN A CLOSED DOOR

ROWAN McCOY drove his new car—it was a flivver, though they did not call it that in those days—with the meticulous care of one who still distrusts the intentions of the brute and his own skill at circumventing them.

As he skidded to a halt in front of the store with brakes set hard a woman came out to the porch and nodded to him. She waited until the noise of the engine had died before she spoke:

“Going down to Wagon Wheel, Mac?”

“If I can stay with this gasoline bronc that far. Anything I can do for you, Mrs. Stovall?”

The woman hesitated, her thin lips pressed tight in an habitual expression of dry irony. She moved closer.

“That houn’ Joe Tait has been a-beatin’ up Norma again. She phoned up she wanted to get down to the train. I’ve a fool notion she’s quittin’ him for good.”

The cattleman waited in silence. It was not a habit of his to waste words.

“Wanted I should find someone to take her and her traps to Wagon Wheel. But seems like everybody’s right busy all of a sudden.” A light sarcasm filtered through the thin, cool voice of the postmistress. “Folks just hate to be onneighbourly, but their team has done gone lame or the wife’s sick or the wagon broke a wheel. O’ course it ain’t that any of them’s afraid to mad that crazy gunman, Tait. Nothin’ like that.”

McCoy looked across at the blue-ribbed mountains. Mrs. Stovall noticed that the muscles stood out like ropes on the brown cheeks of his close-gripped jaw. She did not need to ask the reason. Everybody in the Hill Creek country knew the story of Norma Davis and Rowan.

“I’m not asking you to take her, Mac,” the woman ran on sharply. “You got more right to have a flat tire than Pete Henderson has to have——”

“Where is she?” interrupted the man.

“You’ll find her the yon side of the creek.”

Mrs. Stovall knew when she had said enough. Silently she watched him crank the car and drive away. As he disappeared at the rim of the park a faint, grim smile of triumph touched her sunken mouth.

“I ’most knew he’d take her,” she said aloud to herself. “Course there’ll be a rookus between him and Joe Tait, but I reckon that’s his business.”

At intervals during the morning that sardonic smile lit the wrinkled face. It was an odd swing of the pendulum, she thought, that had reversed the situation. Years ago Norma had run away from her lover with good-for-nothing Joe Tait. Now she was escaping from Tait with McCoy by her side. How far would fate carry the ironic jest? Mrs. Stovall was no Puritan. If Norma could unravel some scattered threads of happiness from the tangled skein of her wretched life, Martha Stovall cared little whether she kept within the code or not. No woman was ever more entitled to a divorce than the abused wife of the sheepman.

A woman came out from the cottonwoods beyond the ford to meet McCoy. She was dressed in a cheap gown hopelessly out of date, and she carried a telescope valise with two broken straps.

If any of the bitterness McCoy had felt toward her when his wound was fresh survived the years it must have died now. Life had dealt harshly with her. There had been a time when she was the belle of all this ranch country, when she had bloomed with health and spirits, had been as full of fire as an unbroken bronco. Now her step dragged. The spark of frolicsome devilry had long been quenched from her eye. Her pride had been dragged in the dust, her courage brutally derided. Even the good looks with which she had queened it were marred. She was on the way to become that unattractive creature, the household drudge. Yet on her latest birthday she had reached only the age of twenty-six.

At recognition of the man in the car she gave a startled little cry:

“You—Rowan!”

It was the first time they had been alone together in seven years, the first time she had directly addressed him since the hour of their quarrel. At the unexpectedness of the meeting emotion welled up in her throat and registered there like the quicksilver in a thermometer.

He tossed her grip into the back of the car, along with his own, and turned to help her to the seat beside the driver. For just an instant she hesitated, then with a bitter, choking little laugh gave way. What else could she do? It was merely another ironic blow of fate that the lover she had discarded should be the man to help her fly from the destiny her wilfulness had invited.

In silence they sat knee to knee while the car rolled the miles. The distant hills and valleys which slid indistinguishably into each other detached themselves as they approached, took on individuality, vanished in the dusty rear.

Neither of them welcomed the chance that had thrown them together again. It shocked the pride of the woman, put her under an obligation to the man against whom she had nursed resentment for years. His presence stressed the degradation into which she seemed to herself to have fallen. For him, too, the meeting was untimely. To-day of all days he wanted to forget the past, to turn over a page that was to begin the story of a new record. Deliberately he had shut the door on the story of his unhappy love for Norma Davis, and with an impish grin fate had flung it open again.

The heady wilfulness of the girl had given place to the tight-lipped self-repression of a suffering woman. Not once in all the years had she complained to an outsider. But her flight was a confession. The stress of her feeling overflowed into words bitter and stinging.

“You’ve got your revenge, Rowan McCoy. If I treated you shabbily you can say ‘I told you so’ now. They used to say I was too proud. Maybe I was. Well, I’ve been paid for it a thousand times. I’ve got mighty little to be proud of to-day.”

“Norma!” he pleaded in a low voice.

With the instinct of one who bites on an ulcerated tooth to accent the pain, she drew up a loose sleeve and showed him blue-and-yellow bruises.

“Look!” she ordered in an ecstasy of self-contempt. “I’ve hidden this sort of thing for years—and worse—a hundred times worse.”

“The hound!” His strong, clenched teeth smothered the word.

Instantly the mood of the woman changed. She would have none of his sympathy.

“I’m a fool,” she snapped. “I’ve made my bed. I’ll lie in it. This world wasn’t built for women, anyhow. Why should I complain?”

Never a talkative man, McCoy said nothing now.

They had reached the Fryingpan, and the road wound down beside the little river as it tumbled toward the plains over bowlders and around them. The trout were feeding, and occasionally one leaped for a fly, a flash of silver in the sunlight. Both of them recalled vividly the time they had last gone fishing here. They had taken a picnic lunch, and it had been on the way home that a quarrel had flashed between them about the attentions of Joe Tait to her. That night she had eloped.

The woman noticed that McCoy was not wearing to-day the broad-rimmed white felt hat and the wrinkled corduroys that were so much an expression of his personality. He was in a new, dark suit, new shoes, and an up-to-date straw hat. The suitcase that jostled her shabby telescope valise would have done credit to a Chicago travelling salesman.

“You’re going to take the train,” she suggested.

“To Cheyenne,” he answered.

“Why, I’m going to Laramie, if——”

She cut her sentence short. It was not to be presumed that he cared where she was going. Moreover, she could not finish without telling more than she wanted to. But McCoy guessed the condition. She would go if she could borrow at Wagon Wheel the money for a ticket.

They drove into the county seat long before train time.

“Where shall I take you?” he asked.

“To Moody’s, if you will.”

He helped her from the car and carried the valise into the store. Moody was in the cubby-hole that had been cut off from the store for an office. Rowan hailed him cheerfully.

“Look here, Trent. What’s the best price you can give me for those hides?” He walked toward the storekeeper and bargained with him audibly, but he found time to slip in an undertone: “If Mrs. Tait wants any money, give it to her. I’ll be responsible. But don’t tell her I said so.”

Moody grinned dubiously. He was a little embarrassed and not a little curious. “All right, Mac. Whatever you say.”

As Rowan went out of the office Norma timidly entered. Moody was a tight, hard little man, and she did not expect him to let her have the money. If he refused she did not know what she would do.

McCoy strolled down to the station to inquire about the lower he had reserved in the Pullman.

“You’re in luck, Mac,” the station agent told him. “Travel is heavy. There isn’t another berth left—not even an upper. You got the last.”

“Then I’m out of luck, Tim,” smiled the cattleman. “A lady from our part of the country is going to Laramie. Give her my berth, but don’t let her know I had reserved it.

The lady is Mrs. Tait.”

A quarter of an hour later Norma Tait, not yet fully recovered from her surprise at the ease with which she had acquired the small roll of bills now in her pocketbook, learned from the station agent that there was one sleeper berth left. She exchanged three dollars for the ticket, and sat down to wait until the Limited arrived. It was a nervous hour she spent before her train drew in, for at any moment her husband might arrive to make trouble. That she saw nothing more of Rowan McCoy before the Limited reached Wagon Wheel was a relief. Tait had always been jealous of him, and would, she knew, jump to the wrong conclusion if he saw them ready to leave together. At the first chance she vanished into the Pullman.

Just as the conductor shouted his “All aboard!” a big, rawboned man galloped up to the station and flung himself from the saddle. He caught sight of McCoy standing by the last sleeper.

“What have you done with my wife?” he roared.

The train began to move. McCoy climbed to the step and looked down contemptuously at the furious man. “Try not to be a fool, Tait,” he advised.

The man running beside the train answered the spirit of the words rather than the letter. “You’re a liar. She’s in that car. You’re running away with her. You sneak, I’m going in to see.”

He caught at the railing to swing himself up.

The cattleman wasted no words. His left fist doubled, shot forward a scant six inches, collided with the heavy chin of Tait. The big sheepman’s head snapped back, and he went down heavily like a sack of meal.

CHAPTER VIII

A COLD TRAIL

THE white-rimmed eyes of the porter rolled admiringly toward McCoy as the cattleman disappeared into the sleeper. "Some kick, b'lieve me!" he murmured to the world at large.

Rowan stopped at the section where Norma Tait sat. "I'm going forward to the day coach," he explained. "If there's anything I can do for you, Norma, now or at any time, I want you to call on me."

The woman looked at him, a man from his soles up, coffee-brown, lean, steady as a ground-sunk rock. She knew his standing in the countryside. His fellows liked him, trusted him, followed him, for by the grace of Heaven he had been born a leader of men. McCoy was no plaster saint. The wild and sometimes lawless way of his kind he had trodden, but always there burned in him the dynamic spark of self-respect that lifted him above meanness, held him to loyalty and decency. It came to her with a surge of emotion that here a woman's love could find safe anchorage. What a fool she had been to throw him aside in the pride of her youth!

"Why should I ask favours of you? What have I ever done but bring trouble and unhappiness to you?" she cried in a low voice.

"Never mind that. If there's anything I can do for you I'm here to do it."

She gulped down a sob. "No, you've done enough for me—too much. Joe will hear that you drove me to town. He'll make trouble for you. I know him." A faint flush of anger dyed her thin cheeks. "No, I'll go my road and you'll go yours. I'm an old woman already in my feelings. I'm burned out, seems like. But you're young. Forget there was ever such a girl as Norma Davis."

He hesitated, uncertain what to say, and while he groped she spoke again:

"There's a girl waiting for you somewhere, Rowan. Go and find her—and marry her."

Beneath the tan he flushed, but his eyes did not waver. "I'm going to her now, Norma."

"Now?" Her surprised glance swept the dark, new suit and the modish straw hat.

"She's waiting for me at Cheyenne. We're to be married to-morrow."

After just an instant came the woman's little, whispered cry: "Be good to her, Rowan."

He nodded, then shook hands with her.

"And you be good to yourself, Norma. Better luck ahead."

She gave a little wry smile. "Good-bye!"

McCoy passed forward to the day coach. From the train butcher he bought a magazine and settled himself for a long ride. He intended to spend the night where he was, even if a vacant berth should develop later in the sleeper. Tait would mole out quite enough evidence against him without any additional data supplied by indiscretion.

At Red Gulch a big, tanned Westerner entered the car and stopped beside the cattleman.

“’Lo, Mac,” he nodded genially.

“’Lo, Sheriff! Ain’t you off your range?”

The big man was booted and spurred. As he sat down something metallic on his hip struck the woodwork of the seat arm.

“Been looking for a horse thief I heard was at Red Gulch. False alarm,” he explained.

“We can’t any of us strike a warm trail every time.”

“That’s right.” The cool, hard eyes of Sheriff Matson rested quietly in those of the cattleman. “Wonder if I’m on one now. I’ve been asked to arrest a man eloping with another man’s wife, Mac.”

“I reckon Tait phoned you from Wagon Wheel.”

“You done guessed it.”

“He’s gone crazy with the heat. False alarm, sure.”

“Says his wife is aboard this train. Is she?”

“Yes.”

“Says you took him by surprise and knocked him cold on the depot as the train was leaving.”

“He’s made a record and told the truth twice running.”

“Where’s she going? Mrs. Tait, I mean.”

“To Laramie. Her sister lives there.”

“Running away from Tait?”

“Looks like it.”

Again the sheriff’s hard gaze searched McCoy. “Came down from Bovier’s camp with you in your car, I understand.”

“Yes. I gave her a lift down.” Rowan’s voice was as even as that of the officer.

“Suppose you give me a bill of particulars, Mac.”

The cattleman told a carefully edited story. When he had finished, Matson made one comment: “Tait says she hadn’t a dollar. Wonder where she got the money for a ticket.”

“I wonder.”

The eyes of the two men met in the direct, level fashion of the country.

“Going anywhere in particular in those glad rags, Mac?”

The sheriff’s question was dropped lightly, but McCoy did not miss its significance. He knew that for the sake of Norma’s reputation he must remove all doubt from the mind of the officer.

“Why, yes, Aleck. I’m going to Cheyenne,” he assented.

“A cattle deal?”

“Not exactly—object-matrimony, Sheriff.”

Matson shot a direct, stabbing look at him. “You’ve told me too much or too little.”

“The young lady is named Trovillion. She spent two months at the Dude Ranch this summer.”

The sheriff rose. “Nuff said, Mac. I wasn’t elected to do Tait’s dirty work for him. I get off at this crossing. So long, old scout—and good luck to you on that object-

matrimony game.”

Left to himself, Rowan did not at once return to his magazine. His mind drifted to the girl he was on his way to marry. It was likely these days, whenever he was not busy, to go back to her, magnetized by the lure of her dark-eyed beauty. The softness and fragility of his sweetheart moved him to awe. That her fancy had selected him out of so many admirers was to him still an amazing miracle. He did not know that the mystery back of his silence had captured her imagination just as the poignancy of her piquant charm had laid a spell on his.

CHAPTER IX

A RIFT IN THE LUTE

THEY were married. And in swift procession the months followed the weeks.

At the Circle Diamond, Ruth queened it with a naïve childishness from which her youth had not yet escaped. Eagerly she played at housekeeping for a fortnight under the amused eyes of Mrs. Stovall, who had been employed by McCoy to do the cooking, her term as postmistress having expired. The next game that drew her was the remodelling of the house. Carpenters and decorators from Wagon Wheel came up, filled the place with litter and confusion, and under the urge of the young mistress transformed the interior of the unsightly dwelling into a delightful home. An absorbing period of needlework followed. New and pretty dresses took shape and were exhibited to Rowan, who did not have to feign admiration. For if she had been Paris gowned the slender grace of the girl could not have been enhanced in his eyes. She had a native instinct for style, a feeling for the harmonies and values of dress. Whatever she wore became an expression of her personality.

Ruth's husband confessed to himself with a sinking heart that she did not really belong on a frontier ranch. The girl wife brought to her new home all the fastidiousness that had charmed him. Her sewing room was cheerful with Indian paint brushes and columbines, her little bedroom a study in delicate blues. He was glad of that. He did not want the dust of the commonplace to dull her vividness.

It pleased him that she accepted lightly all responsibility except that of having a good time. She had shipped her own piano to Wyoming, and she played a good deal. Sometimes she read a little, more often rode or hunted. Occasionally Rowan joined her on these excursions, but usually she went alone. For business more and more absorbed his time. The war between the sheep and cattle interests was becoming acute. Ranchmen, watching the range jealously, saw themselves being pushed closer to bankruptcy by Tait and his associates. Already there had been sheep raids. Cattle had been found dead at the water holes. Bullets had sung back and forth.

But though Rowan could spend little time with the girl he had married, a deep tenderness permeated his thought of her. It was still a miracle to him that she had come to the Circle Diamond as his wife.

When he rode the range he carried with him mental etchings of her little graces—the swiftness of the ready smile, the turn of the small, beautifully poised head, the virginal shyness that always captivated him. He missed sheer joy because he was profoundly unsure of holding her. Ruth, he felt, was in love with life, and he was merely a detail of the Great Adventure. Some day she might grow weary, take wings, and fly. Meanwhile a certain diffidence born of reticence sealed his lips. He found it impossible to express the emotion he knew so poignantly. It was of the hill code that a man must not show his naked soul.

On an August morning Ruth, dawdling over breakfast alone, glimpsed through the dining-room window a rider galloping toward the ranch. Since Rowan had been in the saddle and away long before she was awake, the young woman answered the hail from

without by going to the door.

The horseman had dismounted, flung the bridle rein to the ground, and was coming up the porch steps when Ruth appeared. He lifted the broad hat from his curly head and bowed.

“Rowan at home?” he asked.

“No, he isn’t.”

Swift anger blazed in the eyes of the girl. She had seen this slender, black-haired stranger twice before, once in the orchard of the Dude Ranch, again astride a volcanic bronco in the arena at Bad Ax.

Some wise instinct warned him not to smile. He spoke gravely. “Sorry. I’ve got news for him. It’s important. Where is he?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did he say when he would be back?”

“No.” Ruth cut short the conversation curtly. “I’ll send one of the boys to talk with you.”

She turned and walked into the house, leaving him on the porch. Out of the tail of her eye she caught sight of her husband riding into the yard with his foreman. From the dining-room window she presently watched McCoy canter away in the company of Silcott.

Ruth was annoyed, even though she recognized that her vexation at Rowan was not quite fair. It was true that he had lately fallen into a habit of disappearing for a day at a time without explanation of his absence. He was worried about something, and he had not made a confidante of her. This was bad enough, but what she resented most was the fact that he was on the best of terms with the handsome young scamp who had kissed her so blithely in the orchard. Of course she had no right to blame her husband for this, since she had never told him of the episode. Yet she did. For her mind moved by impulse and not by logic.

She wandered into the kitchen and whipped together a salad for luncheon. She knitted two rows on a sweater at which she was working, and flung it aside to plunge into one of Chopin’s waltzes at the piano. But Ruth was not in the mood for music. Restlessly she turned to a magazine, fingered the pages aimlessly, read at a story for a paragraph or two, then with a sudden decision tossed the periodical on the table and walked out of the house to the garage. Yet a minute, and she was spinning down the road toward Bovier’s Camp.

It was such a day in late summer as comes only to the Rockies. From a blue sky, flecked with a few mackerel clouds, poured a bath of sunshine. Her lungs drank in an air like wine, pure and strong. The sunny slopes of the high peaks pushed up into the rare, untempered light of Wyoming. The scent of the pines was in her nostrils. Once, when she stopped to look at a doubtful tire, the murmurous voices of the desert whispered in her ears. In spite of herself Ruth’s heart answered the call of the distant, shining mountain to rejoice and be glad.

The car topped the rim of the saucer-shaped valley and swept down toward the little village. What Ruth saw quickened her blood. Beyond the post office a great huddle of sheep was being driven forward. At the head of them rode a man with a rifle in one hand lying across the horn of the saddle. On the porch of the store sat Larry Silcott and her

husband watching the man steadily. Neither of them carried any arms exposed to view.

The young wife drove the car down the basin and stopped near the store, leaving the engine still running. None of the men even glanced her way. Their eyes were focused on each other with a tenseness that made her want to scream. She waited, breathless, uncertain what to expect. The pulse in her throat beat fast with excitement. That a collision of some sort impended she did not need to be told.

The man with the rifle spoke thickly in a heavy, raucous voice: "I've been looking for you, Rowan McCoy. First off, I'll tell you something. I'm here with my sheep like I promised, on the way to Circle Diamond. I'm going right past the door of the ranch to Thunder Mountain. If any man tries to stop me, I'll fix his clock. Get that?"

Rowan's eyes were like chilled steel, his body absolutely motionless. "Better turn back while you can, Tait," he advised quietly.

"I'll see you in hell first. I'm going through. But there's another thing I've got to settle with you, Rowan McCoy. That's about my wife. Stand up and fight, you white-livered coyote!" A sudden passionate venom leaped into the voice of the sheepman. He cursed his enemy savagely and flung at him a string of vile names.

Ruth, terror-stricken, believed the man was working himself up to do murder. She wanted to cry out, to rush forward and beg him to stop. But her throat was parched and her limbs weighted with heavy chains.

"Your wife left you because you are a bully and a drunkard. I had nothing to do with her going," retorted McCoy.

"You're a liar—a rotten liar! You got her to run away with you. You took her in your car to Wagon Wheel. You gave her money to buy a ticket. You were seen on the train with her. I swore I'd kill you on sight, and I'm going to do it. Get out of the way, Silcott!"

The energy flowed back into Ruth's limbs. She threw in the clutch and drove forward furiously. There was the sound of a shot, then of another. Next moment she was pushing home the brake and shutting off the gas. The car slammed to a halt, its wheels hard against the porch. She had driven directly between the sheepman and his intended victim.

Out of the haze that for a moment enveloped Ruth's senses boomed a savage, excited voice:

"Turn me loose, Mac! Lemme go! I'll finish the damned sheepman while I'm on the job."

The scene opened before her eyes like a moving-picture film. On the porch her husband was struggling with a man for the possession of a gun, while young Silcott was sagging against a corner pillar, one hand clutched to his bleeding shoulder. Thirty yards away Tait lay on the ground, face down, beside his horse. From the corral, from the store, from the adjoining doctor's office men poured upon the scene.

The place was suddenly alive with gesticulating people.

Rowan tore the rifle from the man with whom he was wrestling. "Don't be a fool, Falkner. You've done enough already. I shouldn't wonder if Tait had got his."

"He had it coming to him, if ever a man had. If I'd been two seconds later you'd have been a goner, Mac. I just beat him to it. Good riddance if he croaks, I say."

McCoy caught sight of Ruth. He moved toward her, his eyes alive with surprise and

dismay.

“You—here!”

“He didn’t hit you!” She strangled a sob.

“No. Falkner fired from the store window. It must have shaken his aim. He hit Larry.”

Rowan turned swiftly to his friend, who grinned feebly up at him.

“’S all right, Mac. I’ll ride in a heap of round-ups yet. He punctured my shoulder.”

“Good! Let’s have a look at it.”

A fat little man with a doctor’s case puffed up to the porch as McCoy was cutting away the shirt of the wounded man from the shoulder.

“Here! Here! Wha’s the matter? Lemme see. Get water—bandages,” he exploded in staccato snorts like the engine of a motor cycle.

Ruth flew into the house to obey orders. When she returned with a basin of water and towels the doctor had gone.

“Doc is over looking at Tait,” explained her husband. “Says Larry has only a flesh wound. We’ll take him home with us in the car. You don’t mind?”

“Of course we’ll look after him till he’s well,” Ruth agreed.

“I wouldn’t think of troubling you, Mrs. McCoy,” objected Silcott. “All I need is——”

“Rest and good food and proper care. You’ll get it at the Circle Diamond,” the girl interrupted decisively. “We needn’t discuss that. You’re going with us.”

She had her way, as she usually had. After Doctor Irwin had dressed the shoulder the young ranchman got into the back seat of the car beside Ruth. McCoy asked a question point-blank of the fussy little physician:

“What about Tait? Will he live?”

“Ought to. If no complications. Just missed lower intestines—near thing. Lot of damn fools—all of you!” he snorted.

“Sure thing,” grinned Silcott. “Come and see me to-night, Doc.”

“H’mp!”

“I’ll be looking for you, Doctor Irwin,” Ruth called back from the moving car.

The doctor growled out what might be taken for a promise if one were an optimist.

From the rim of the valley McCoy looked down and spoke grimly: “I notice that Tait’s herders have changed their minds. They’re driving the sheep back along the road they came.”

“Before we’re through with them they’ll learn where to head in,” boasted Larry querulously, for his wound was aching a good deal. “Next time they cross the dead line there’ll be a grave dug for someone.”

“I wouldn’t say that, Larry,” objected Rowan gently. “We’d better cut out threats. They lead to trouble. We don’t want to put ourselves in the wrong unnecessarily. Take Falkner now. I was just in time to keep him from finishing Tait.”

“Oh, Falkner! He’s crazy to be a killer. But at that I don’t blame him this time,” commented the younger man.

Silcott went to bed in the guest chamber between clean sheets, and sank back with a sigh of content into the pillow. The atmosphere of home indefinably filled the room. The

cool tints of the wall paper, the pictures, the feminine touches visible here and there, all were contributing factors, but the light-footed girl, so quiet and yet so very much alive in every vivid gesture, every quick glance, was the centre of the picture.

He knew that she had something on her mind, that she was troubled and distraught. He thought he could guess the reason, and felt it incumbent upon him to set himself right with her. When, toward evening, she brought him a dainty tray of food he could keep away from the subject no longer.

“I was a sweep,” he confessed humbly.

For an instant she did not know what he meant. Then: “Yes,” she agreed.

“I’m sorry. You’ve made me ashamed. Won’t you forgive me?” he pleaded.

Ruth had plenty of capacity for generosity. This good-looking boy was ill and helpless. He appealed strongly to the mother instinct that is alive in all good women. He was the central figure, too, of an adventure which had excited her and intrigued her interest. Moreover, she was cherishing a new and more important resentment, one which made her annoyance at him of small moment.

“Do you mean it? Are you really sorry?” she asked.

He nodded. “I think so. I know I ought to be. Anyhow, I’m sorry you’re angry at me,” he answered with a little flare of boyish audacity.

She bit her lip, then laughed in spite of herself. She held out her hand a little hesitantly, but he knew he was forgiven.

Young Silcott’s fever mounted toward evening, but when Doctor Irwin arrived he gave him a sleeping powder and before midnight the wounded man fell asleep. Ruth tiptoed about the room while she arranged on a little table beside the bed his medicines and drinks in case he awakened later. After lowering the light she stole away silently to her own bedroom.

Rowan knocked a few minutes later. He heard her move across the floor in her soft slippers. She wore a dainty crepe-de-Chine robe that lent accent to the fresh softness of her young flesh. She had just been brushing her hair, and the long, heavy, blue-black braids were thrown forward over her shoulders.

All day McCoy had been swept by waves of tenderness for this girl wife of his who had risked her life to save him by driving into the line of fire so pluckily. He had longed to open his heart to her, and he had not dared. Now there was a new note about her that puzzled him, one he had never seen before. The eyes that flashed into his were fierce with defiance. Her slim figure was very erect and straight.

“What do you want?” she demanded.

He was taken aback. Never before had her manner been less than friendly to him. While she was in this mood he could not voice his surcharge of feeling for her.

“You are tired,” he suggested.

A sudden gusty passion flared in her face. “Did you come to tell me that?”

“No. To thank you.”

“What for?”

“For risking your life for me this morning. It was splendid.”

She dismissed his thanks with a contemptuous little snap of finger and thumb.

“If that’s all you have to say——”

“That’s all, except good-night, dear.”

Definitely she refused his wistfulness, definitely withdrew into herself and met his appeal icily.

“Good-night.” Her voice rejected flatly the love he offered.

Always he had been chary of embraces with her. To him she was so fine and exquisite that her kisses were a privilege not to be claimed of right. Now he merely hid his hurt with a patient smile.

“I hope you’ll sleep well.”

Her eyes flamed with scorn. She closed the door. He heard the key turn in the lock. Rowan knew that she was locking him out of her heart as well as out of the room.

CHAPTER X

THE RIFT WIDENS

ACROSS the breakfast table next morning Rowan faced a hostile young stranger. The gay comrade who was so dear to him, the eager, impulsive girl all fire and flame and dewy softness, had vanished to give place to a cold and flinty critic. Abruptly and without notice she had withdrawn her friendship. Why? Was it that she had grown tired of him and what he had to offer? Or had he done something to displease her?

Manlike, he tried gifts.

"I've decided to have that conservatory built for you off the living room as soon as I can get the glass. Better draw up your plans right away."

"I've changed my mind. I don't want it."

Her voice was like icy water.

"I'm sorry," he said gently, and presently he finished his breakfast and left the room.

Ruth bit her lip and looked out of the window. Tears began to film her eyes. She went to her room, locked the door, and flung herself down on the bed in a passion of weeping.

Ever since the first days of her acquaintance with Rowan she had known the story of how Norma Davis had jilted him. Mrs. Flanders, of the Dude Ranch, was a gossip by nature and had told Ruth the history of the affair with gusto. The girl had been merely interested. She had had too many transient affairs herself to object to any dead and buried ones of Rowan. But yesterday afternoon she had ridden over to the summer resort and asked Mrs. Flanders some insistent questions. The mistress of the Dude Ranch was a reluctant witness, but a damning one. It was true that Mrs. Tait had run away with McCoy in his car and that they had taken the train together. There were witnesses to prove that he had paid for the sleeper berth she used and that it was in his name. For once Joe Tait had told the truth.

The thing which hit Ruth like a sudden slap in the face from a friend was that this escapade had taken place while McCoy had been on his way to marry her. It was not an episode of the past, but a poisonous canker that ate into the joy of her life. If he could do a thing so vile there was no truth in him.

All the golden hours they had spent together were tainted by his infidelity. Never in all her life had she met a man who had seemed so genuine, so wholly true. She had offered him her friendship and love, had given her young life into his keeping. His reverence for her had touched her deeply. Now she knew there was nothing but hypocrisy to it.

She must leave him, of course. She must crawl away like a wounded wild creature of the forest and suffer her hurts alone. The sooner she left the better.

On the very heel of this resolution came Mrs. Stovall with bad news about their patient.

"His fever's mighty high. Looks like someone will have to nurse that boy regular for quite a while," she said.

"I'll look after him—anyhow till the doctor comes," Ruth volunteered in swift compunction because she had not been in to see him that morning.

“H’m! Been crying her eyes out. What’s *she* got to worry about—with the best man in the Fryingpan country crazy about her?” wondered the housekeeper. “Trouble with her is that Rowan’s too good to her. She needs to bump up against real grief before she’ll know how well off she is.”

Once installed in the sick room, Ruth did not find it easy to get away. For three days Silcott needed pretty constant attention. After the delirium had passed he lay and watched her, too weak to wait upon himself.

“You’ll not leave me,” he whispered to her once, and there was something so helpless and boyish about his dependence upon her that Ruth felt a queer little lump in her throat. Just now at least there could be no doubt of the genuineness of *his* need of her.

“Not till you’re better,” she promised.

And if there were tears in her eyes they were less for him than for herself. She was thinking of another man who had told her how greatly he needed her and how her coming had filled his life with sunshine, of another man whose whole relation to her had been a lie.

It was like Larry to take her emotion and her kindness as evidence of her special interest in him, just as it had been characteristic of him a few days before to jump to the conclusion that her worry was on his account. He was a debonair young fellow, picturesque and good-looking. Nor did Ruth resent it that he claimed it as a privilege of his invalidism to pass into immediate friendship with her. His open admiration of her was balm to the sick heart of the girl.

In the days that followed Rowan caught only glimpses of his wife. She was never up now in time for his early breakfast. All day he was away, and she contrived to be busy with her patient while Mrs. Stovall served his supper.

Whenever they did meet Ruth incased herself instantly in a still white armour of reserve. She treated him to no more of her winsome vagaries, never now mocked him with her dear impudence. He noticed that she never called him by name and that her manner was one of formal politeness. In his presence her joy was struck dead.

A less sensitive man might have come to grips with her and fought the thing out. Once or twice Rowan tried in a halting fashion to discover the cause of the change in her, but she made it plain to him that she would not discuss the matter. At the bottom of his heart he had no doubt as to the reason. She had found out that his ways were not hers. He held no resentment. It was natural that her eager youth should weary of the humdrum life he offered.

Sometimes, as he passed Silcott’s room, Rowan heard the gay laughter of the young people. Later, when Larry was strong enough, McCoy met them driving, on their way to a picnic for two. If the sight of their merriment was a knife in his heart, Rowan gave no sign of it. His friendly smile did not fail.

“Better come along, Mac. You’ll live only once, and then you’ll be dead a long time,” suggested Larry.

McCoy shook his head. “Can’t—business.”

He noticed that Ruth had not seconded the invitation of her companion.

Though he never intruded, it was impossible for Rowan to live in the same house without running into them occasionally. Sometimes she would be accompanying Larry on

the piano while he sang "Mandalay." Or they would be quarrelling over a verse in a volume of recent poems. Rowan was not of a jealous disposition, but their good-fellowship stabbed him. He neither sang nor read poems. What was worse, he was not on good enough terms with Ruth for her to quarrel with him. The most he could get from her was frigid politeness.

Ruth was in the grip of one of the swift friendships to which she was subject. She liked Larry a lot. They had many common interests. But she plunged into her little affair with him only because misery made her reckless. Quite well she knew that Larry's coaxing smile, his dancing eyes, his boyish winsomeness, cloaked a purpose of making love to her as much as he dared. She felt no resentment on that account. Indeed she was grateful to him for distracting her from her woe. To her husband she owed nothing. If she could hurt him by playing his own game so much the better. For conventions she never cared. As for Larry, when the time came, she told herself, she would know how to protect her heart. She was willing to flirt desperately with him, but she had no intention of really caring for him.

Because she was such a child of impulse, so candid and so frank, Rowan worried lest her indiscretions should be noticed. He did not like to interfere, but he considered dropping a hint to Larry that he was needed at the Open A N C.

It was not necessary. Over the telephone one morning came the news that Miss Morgan, who was still stopping at the Dude Ranch, had suffered a relapse and was not expected to live. Ruth fled at once to join her and Larry discovered a few hours later that he was well enough to go home.

As Ruth nursed her aunt through the silent hours of the night her mind was busy with her own shattered romance. She confessed to herself that she had not really been having a good time with Larry. She had turned to him as an escape and to punish her husband. But all the while her heart had been full of bitterness and desolation. It was unthinkable that Rowan could have treated her so. Her young, clean pride had been dreadfully humiliated. It seemed to her that her heart was frozen, that she never again could pulse with warm life. The thing that had fallen upon her was a degradation. In her thoughts she held herself soiled irretrievably.

Miss Morgan died the third day after the arrival of her niece. In accord with a desire she had once expressed, she was buried in a grove back of the pasture at the ranch.

Ruth accepted the invitation of Mrs. Flanders to stay a few days at the Dude Ranch as her guest. The days lengthened into weeks, and still she did not return to the Circle Diamond. Larry made occasions to come to the hotel to see Ruth. Sometimes Rowan came, but not often. The gulf between him and his young wife had widened until he despaired of bridging it. He felt that the kindest thing he could do was to stay away. The whole passionate urge of his heart swept him toward her, but his iron will schooled his impulses to obedience.

But as Rowan rode the range he carried with him the memory of a white face, fragile as a flower, out of which dark eyes looked at him defiantly. His heart ached for her. In his own breast he carried a block of ice that never melted, but he would gladly have taken her grief, too, if that had been possible.

CHAPTER XI

LARRY GOES CALLING

RUTH and Mrs. Flanders sat on the porch at Elkhorn Lodge and watched a rider descend a hill trail toward the ranch. It was late in the season. Except a hunting party, only a few stray boarders remained, and these would soon take flight for the cities. But in spite of the almanac the day had been hot. Even after sunset it was pleasant outdoors.

The rider announced his coming with song. For a fortnight he had been on the round-up, working sixteen hours a day, and now that it was nearly over he was entitled to sing. The words drifted down to the women on the porch:

“Foot in the stirrup and hand on the horn,
Best damned cowboy that ever was born.”

“It’s Larry Silcott,” announced Mrs. Flanders, brightening. She was a born gossip. When the owner of the Open A N C was with her there was a pair of them present.

“Yes,” assented Ruth. She had known for some moments that the approaching rider was Larry.

He offered for their entertainment another selection.

“Sift along, boys, don’t ride so slow.
Haven’t got much time but a long round to go.
Quirt him on the shoulders and rake him down the hip,
I’ll cut you toppy mounts, boys, now pair off and rip.”

After a few moments of silence the wind brought more song to the women on the porch:

“Bunch the herd at the old meet,
Then beat ’em on the tail;
Whip ’em up and down the side
And hit the shortest trail.”

The young man appeared to catch sight of the women and waved his pinched-in felt hat at them, finishing his range ditty with a cowboy cheer for a rider to the last stanza:

“Coma ti yi youpy, youpy ya youpy ya,
Coma ti yi youpy, youpy ya.”

He cantered up to the ranch, flung himself from the saddle without touching the stirrups, grounded the reins, and came forward to the porch with jingling spurs. Ruth did not deny that he was a most engaging youth. The outdoor bloom on his cheeks, the sparkle in his eyes, the nonchalant pose that had just a touch of boyish swagger, all carried their appeal even with women old enough to be his mother.

“Is the round-up finished?” asked Mrs. Flanders.

“They’ve got to comb Eagle Creek yet and the Flat Tops.” He fell into the drawl of the old cowman. “But I’m plumb fed up with the dust of the drag driver. Me, I’m through. Enough’s plenty. The boys can finish without Larry Silcott.”

“Oh, I’m going home
Bullwhacking for to spurn,
I ain’t got a nickel,
And I don’t give a dern.”

“You seem to have quite an attack of doggerel to-night,” suggested Ruth.

“Doggerel nothing. Every one of ’em is a range classic. I got them from old Sam Yerby, who brought them up from Texas. I’ve been giving you the genuwine, blown-in-the-bottle ballads of the man who wears leathers,” defended Larry.

“Who is boss of the round-up this year?” asked Mrs. Flanders.

“Rowan is, and believe me he worked us to a fare-you-well. He’s some driver, Mac is; one of your sixty-horsepower dynamos on two legs. He is good for twenty-four hours a day himself, and he figures the rest of us are made of leather and steel, too. I’m a wreck.”

“What’s that I hear about Falkner and Tait having some more trouble?”

“Trouble is right, Mrs. Flanders. They met over by the creek at Three Willows. One thing led to another, and they both got down from their horses and mixed it. Tait had one of his herders with him, and he took a hand in the fracas. The two of them gave Falkner an awful beating. He was just able to crawl to his horse.”

“Tait ought to be driven out of the country,” pronounced Mrs. Flanders indignantly. “He’s always making trouble.”

“Joe is certainly a bad actor, but it would be some job to drive him away. He hasn’t got sense enough to realize what is going to happen to him. If Falkner ever gets him at the wrong end of a gun——” He left his sentence unfinished. The imagination could supply the rest.

“They say Tait has driven his sheep across the dead line again.” Mrs. Flanders put her statement as if it were a question.

Larry, recalling a warning he had been given, became suddenly discreet. “Do they?”

“Will the Hill Creek cattlemen stand for it?”

There was a sullen, mulish look on his face that suggested he knew more than he intended to tell. “Maybe they will. Maybe they won’t.”

Business called the Mistress of Elkhorn Lodge into the house.

Ruth, with a slant of dark eyes toward her guest, asked him a question: “Do you call this two weeks?”

“I call it a month, reckoning by my feelings.”

She scoffed. “It’s a pity about your feelings. I told you not to come again for two weeks.”

“I thought as I happened to be passing——”

“On your way to nowhere.”

“—that I’d drop in and say ‘*Buenas tardes.*’ ”

“Good of you, I’m sure.”

He settled himself comfortably on the porch against a pillar. “I want to ask your advice. I’m just a plain cow-puncher and you’re a wise young lady from a city. So you can tell me all about it. I’m getting old and lonesome, and my mind has been running on a girl a heap.”

Her glance took in the slim, wiry youth at her feet. She smiled. “You’d better ask Mrs. Flanders. I’m too young to advise you.”

“No. You’re just the right age. I’ll tell you about her. There never was anybody prettier—not in Wyoming. She’s fresh and sweet, like those wild roses we picked in Bear Creek Cañon. Her eyes are kind o’ rippled by a laugh ’way down deep in them, then sometimes they are dark and still and—sort of tender. She has the kindest heart in the world—and the cruelest. I wouldn’t want a better partner, though she’s as wild as an unbroken bronc sometimes. You never can tell when she’s going to bolt.”

There was a faint flush of pink in her cheeks, but her eyes danced. “You don’t make her sound like a really *nice* girl.”

“Oh, she’s nice enough, when she isn’t a little divvle. The trouble is she isn’t foot-loose.”

“Of course she is tremendously in love with you.”

“She likes me a heap better than she pretends.”

“I’m sure she would adore you if she knew how modest you are,” Ruth answered with amiable malice.

Silcott’s gaze absorbed her dainty sweetness. He spoke with an emphasis of the cattleman’s drawl.

“I’d like right well to take her up on my hawss and ride away with her like that Lochinvar fellow did in the poetry book y’u lent me onct—the one that busted up the wedding of the laggard guy and went a-fannin’ off with his gyurl behind him, whilst the no’count bridegroom and her paw hollered ‘Help!’ ”

“Lochinvar. Oh, he’s out of date.”

“Maybe so. But it’s a great thing to know when to butt in.” He watched her covertly as he spoke.

“And when not to,” added Ruth, with the insolent little tilt of her chin that made men want to demonstrate. “Come on. Let’s go over to the mesa and look at the desert in the moonlight.”

Beneath the stars this land of splintered peaks and ragged escarpments always took on a glory denied to it by day. The obscuration of detail, the vagueness of outline, lent magic to the hills. Below, the valley swam in a sheen of gleaming silver.

Ruth drew a deep breath of sensuous delight and lifted her face to the star-strewn sky. Her companion watched her, his eyes shining. She was standing lance straight, everything forgotten but the beauty of the night. In the air was a faint, murmurous stir of desert denizens.

“The world’s going to bed,” she whispered. “It always says its prayers first—wonderful prayers full of the fragrance of roses and the sough of wind just touching the

pinetrees, and the far, far song of birds. You have to listen—oh, so still!—before you can hear them. The world is sad because the lovely day is dead and because life is so short and so filled with loss, and it's just a wee bit afraid of the darkness. So God lights up millions of candles in His sky as a sign that He's up there and all's well with the universe."

Larry had another Ruth to add to his list of portraits of her. It was amazing how many women were wrapped up in her slim young body, not to mention the Ruth that was a naughty child and the one that was all eager boy. He had known her in the course of a morning grave and gay, whimsical and coquettish, sulky and passionate. She was given to generous impulses and unjust resentments. At times her soul danced on the hilltops of life, and again she beat with her fists indignantly at the bars that prisoned her. Of late he had more than once surprised her with the traces of tears on her face.

He knew that all was not well between her and Rowan, but he did not know what was amiss. Only Mrs. Flanders guessed that, and for once she kept her own counsel.

Larry slipped his big brown hand over her little one.

"But you're not happy just the same," he told her.

He was one of those men whose attitude toward a young and attractive woman is always that of the lover potential or actual. He was never quite satisfied until the talk became personal and intimate, until he had established an individual relationship with any woman who interested him.

Ruth nodded agreement.

She let her hand lie in his. Since her break with Rowan she was often the victim of moods when she craved a sympathy such as Larry offered, one that took her trouble for granted without discussing it. There were other times when her spirit flared into rebellion, when she was eager to punish her husband's faithlessness by letting Silcott make veiled love to her with only a pretense of disapproval.

"Why don't you chuck it all overboard and make a new start?" he asked her abruptly.

She looked at him, a little startled. He had never before made so direct a reference to her situation.

"I don't care to talk about that."

"But you'll have to talk about it some time. You can't go on like this for ever, and—you know I love you, that I'd do anything in the world for you."

"I know you talk a lot of foolishness, Larry," she retorted sharply. "I may be a goose, but I'm not silly enough to take you seriously all the time. Let's go back to the house."

"I don't see why you can't take me seriously," he said sulkily.

"Because you're only a boy. You think you want the moon, but you don't; at least the only reason you want it is because it's in somebody else's yard."

"It doesn't need to stay there always, does it?"

"That isn't a matter for you and me to discuss," she flashed at him with spirit. "Whenever I need your advice I'll ask for it, my friend."

She led the way to the house, her slender limbs moving rhythmically with light grace. Larry walked beside her sullenly. What was the matter with her to-night? Last week she had almost let him kiss her. If she had held him back, still it had been with the promise in her manner that next time he might be more successful. But now she had pushed him back

into the position of a friend rather than a lover.

Larry had no intention of being her friend. It was not in his horoscope to be merely a friend to any charming woman. Moreover, he was as much in love with Ruth as he could be with anybody except himself.

Just before they reached the porch she asked him a question: “When will they be through with the round-up?”

“In two or three days. Why?”

“I just wondered.”

Her eyes evaded his. His annoyance flashed suddenly into words.

“If it’s Rowan you want, why don’t you go back to him like a good little girl and say you’re sorry? I expect he would forgive you.”

Anger, sudden and imperious, leaped into her eyes. “I wish you’d learn, Larry Silcott, to mind your own business.”

She turned and fled into the house.

CHAPTER XII

ACROSS THE DEAD LINE

NOWHERE outside of Cattleland would such a scene have been possible. The air was filled with the fine dust of milling cattle, with the sound of bawling cows and blatting calves. Hundreds of them, rounded up on the Flat Tops and driven down Eagle Creek, were huddled in a draw fenced by a score of lean brown horsemen.

Now and again one of the leggy hill steers made a dash for freedom. The nearest puncher wheeled his horse as on a half dollar, gave chase, and headed the animal back into the herd. Three of the old stockmen rode in and out among the packed cattle, deciding on the ownership of stray calves. These were cut out, roped, and branded on the spot.

Everybody was busy, everybody cheerful. These riders had for weeks been in the saddle eighteen hours out of the twenty-four. They were grimy with dust, hollow-eyed from want of sleep. But every chap-clad, sun-baked horseman was hard as nails and tough as leather. To feel the press of a saddle under his knees in all this clamour and confusion was worth a month of ordinary life to a cow-puncher.

McCoy, since he was boss of the round-up, was chief of the board of arbiters. An outsider would have been hopelessly at a loss to decide what cow was the mother of each lost and bewildered calf. But these experts guessed right ninety-nine times out of a hundred.

“Goes with the big bald-faced cow—D Bar Lazy R brand,” was the verdict of Rowan as to one roan stray.

“You done said it, Mac!” agreed Sam Yerby, chewing his quid of tobacco lazily.

The third judge, Brad Rogers, of the Circle B R, nodded his head. Duncan King, whose father owned a ranch near the headwaters of Hill Creek, cut out the bawling little maverick for the branders.

While the outfit was at supper after the day’s work a man rode up to the chuck wagon and fell into the easy, negligent attitude of the range rider at rest.

“Hello, Larry! Come and get it,” shouted the cook, waving a beefsteak on the prongs of a long fork.

Silcott slid from the saddle and joined the circle. He found a seat beside McCoy.

“I want to see you alone, Mac,” he said in a low voice.

Rowan nodded, paid no more attention to him, and joined again in the general conversation. But presently he got up and strolled toward the remuda.

Larry casually joined him.

“Tait has been across the dead line for two days, Mac. He’s travelling straight for the Circle Diamond with fifteen hundred sheep. About a third of them belong to Gilroy. Joe has two herders with him.”

“Where are they camped to-night?”

“At the foot of Bald Knob.”

“Is Gilroy with them?”

“No. He was this morning, but he telephoned his wife from Westcliff that he would be home to-night.”

The boss of the round-up looked away at the purple hills, his close-gripped jaw clamped tight, his eyes narrowed almost to slits.

“Drift back to the wagon, Larry, and tell Yerby and Rogers to drop out of the crowd and meet me here quietly.”

“Sure.” The younger man hung in the wind. “What are you going to do, Mac?”

“What would you do?”

Silcott broke into a sudden angry oath. “Do? I’d meet Joe Tait halfway. I’d show him whether he can spoil the range for us at his own sweet will. He wants war. By all that’s holy, I’d carry it right into his camp!”

Rowan did not deny to himself the seriousness of the issue as he waited for the coming of the two men. He faced the facts squarely, as he always did. Tait had again declared war. To let the man have his own way meant ruin to the cattle interests on the Fryingpan. For if one sheepman were permitted to invade the range, dozens of others would drive across into the forbidden territory. The big, fearless bully had called for a show-down. Let him win now, and it would be a question of months only until McCoy and his neighbours were sold out at a sheriff’s sale.

Out of the darkness sauntered Yerby, followed presently by Rogers.

“What’s on yore mind, Mac?” drawled Yerby, splattering expertly with tobacco juice a flat rock shining in the moonlight.

Sam Yerby was an old cowman from Texas. As a youth he had driven cattle on the Chisum Trail. Once, a small boy, he had spoken with Sam Bass, the outlaw. In the palmy days of Dodge City and Abilene, while still in his early teens, he had been a spectator of the wild life that overflowed into the frontier towns. Physically he was a wrinkled little man with a merry eye and a mild manner that was apt to deceive.

“Tait has crossed the dead line again. He is headed for the Thunder Mountain country.”

Yerby rubbed a bristling cheek slowly with the palm of his hand. “Well, I’ll be dog-goned! Looks like he’s gone loco,” he commented mildly.

The owner of the Circle B R broke into excited threats. “He’ll never take his sheep back again—never in the world. I’ll not stand for it; none of the boys will. Right now is when he gets all the trouble he wants.”

“That your opinion, too, Sam?” asked Rowan quietly.

The faded blue eyes of the Texan had a far-away look. His fingers caressed a chin rough with gray stubbles. He was thinking of his young wife and his year-old baby. Their future depended upon his little cattle ranch.

“I reckon, Mac. We got to fight some time. Might as well be right now.”

“To-night,” agreed McCoy decisively. “We’ll settle this before daybreak. We don’t want too many in this thing. Five or six are enough.”

“Here are three of your six,” suggested Rogers.

“Larry Silcott is four. We’ve got to take Larry. He brought me the news.”

“How about Dunc King? He’s a good boy—absolutely on the square.”

Rowan shook his head. "Let's keep Dunc out of this. You know what a good old lady Mrs. King is. We'll not take her only son into trouble. Besides, Dunc talks too much."

"Well, Jack Cole. He'll go through and padlock his mouth, too. I'd trust Jack to a finish."

"Cole is all right, Brad. You feel him out. Five of us are all that's needed. We'll meet at the Three Pines at midnight. Sam, you and Brad can decide to spend the night at home since we're camping so near your places. I'll drive my bunch of cows down to the Circle Diamond as an excuse to get away. I can take Jack and Larry with me to help. Probably you had better hang around till after we've been gone a while."

The Circle Diamond cattle were cut out from the bunch and started homeward. Rowan, with Silcott and Cole to help him on the drive, vanished after them into the night.

"Funny Mac didn't start at sunset. What's the idea of waiting till night?" asked King of Falkner, who sat beside him at the campfire.

"Beats me." Falkner scowled at the leaping flames. His face was still decorated with half a dozen ugly cuts and as many bruises, souvenirs of his encounter with Tait. Just now he was full of suspicions, vague and indefinite as yet, but none the less active. For Larry had told him the news he had brought.

"Sing the old Chisum Trail song, Sam," demanded a cow-puncher.

A chorus of shouts backed the request.

"Cain't you boys ever leave the old man alone?" complained Yerby. "I done bust my laig to-day when I fell off'n that pinto. I've got a half a notion to light a shuck for home and get Missie to rub on some o' that white liniment she makes. It's the healin'est medicine ever I took."

"Don't be a piker, Sam. Sing for us."

"What'll I sing? I done sung that trail song yesterday."

"Anything. Leave it to you."

The old Texan piped up lugubriously, a twinkle in his tired eyes:

"Come, all you old cow-punchers, a story I will tell,
And if you'll be quiet I'm sure I'll sing it well,
And if you boys don't like it, you sure can go to hell!"

A shout of laughter greeted this unexpected proposition. "Fair enough." "Go to it, Sam!" "Give us the rest!" urged the chap-clad young giants around the fire.

Yerby took up his theme in singsong fashion, and went through the other stanzas, but as he finished he groaned again.

"My laig sure is hurting like sixty. I'm going home. Wish one of you lads would run up a hawss for me. Get the roan with the white stockings, if you can."

"I'll go with you, Sam," announced Rogers. "I'm expecting an important business letter and I expect it's waiting at the house for me. Be with you to-morrow, boys."

After they had gone Falkner made comment to young King satirically: "What with busted laigs and important letters and night drives, we're having quite an exodus from camp, wouldn't you say?"

“Looks like,” agreed King. “Tha’s the way with married men. They got always to be recollectin’ home ties. We been on this round-up quite a spell, an’ I reckon they got kinda homesick to see their better halves, as you might say.”

“Tha’s yore notion, is it?” jeered Falkner.

“Why, yes, you see——”

“Different here. They got a hen on. Tha’s what’s the matter with them.”

“Whajamean, a hen on?” King leaned forward, eyes sparkling, cigarette half rolled. If there was anything doing he wanted to know all about it.

“Larry let it out to me at supper. He was so full of it he couldn’t hold it in. Tait has done crossed the dead line again.”

“No?” The word was a question, not a denial. Young King’s eyes were wide with excitement. This was not merely diverting news. It might turn out to be explosive drama.

“I’m tellin’ you, boy.” Falkner rapped out an annoyed impatient oath. “They left me out of it. Why? I got as good a right to know what’s doing as any of ’em. More, by God! I’ve still got to settle with Joe Tait for these, an’ I aim to pay him interest aplenty.” He touched the scars on his face, and his eyes flamed to savage anger.

“What do you reckon Mac aims to do?” asked King.

“I reckon he means to raid Tait’s herd. Can’t be anything else. But I mean to find out. Right now I’m declarin’ myself in.”

The campfire circle broke up, and the cow-punchers rolled into their blankets. Falkner did not stay in his long. He slipped out to the remuda and slapped a saddle on one of his cow ponies. The explanation he gave to the night herders was that he was going to ride down to Bovier’s Camp to get some tobacco.

He struck the trail of McCoy’s bunch of cows and followed across the hills. Falkner rode fast, since he knew the general direction the driver must take. Within the hour he heard the lowing of cattle, and felt sure that he was on the heels of those he followed. From the top of the next ridge he looked down upon them in the valley below.

This was enough for Falkner. Evidently Rowan intended to get the cattle to his corral before any move was made against Tait. The range rider swung to the right across the brow of the hill, dipped into the next valley, struck a trail that zigzagged up the shale slope opposite, and by means of it came, after a half hour of stiff riding, to the valley where the Triangle Dot Ranch had its headquarters.

He tied his horse in a pine grove and stole silently down to the bunk house. This he circled, came to the front door on his tiptoes, and entered noiselessly. A man lay sleeping on one of the farther bunks, arms flung wide in the deep slumber of fatigue.

Falkner reached for a rifle resting on a pair of elk horns attached to the wall, and took from one of the tines an ammunition belt. He turned, knocked over in the darkness a chair, and fled into the night with the rifle in one hand, the belt in the other.

Reaching the pine grove, he remounted, skirted the lip of the valley, and struck at its mouth the trail to the Circle Diamond. Three quarters of an hour later he was lying on the edge of a hill pocket above that ranch with his eyes fastened to the moonlit corral in which stood two saddled horses.

CHAPTER XIII

THE NIGHT RAID

THE moon was just going under a cloud when Rowan and his two companions rode away from the Circle Diamond. They had plenty of time before the appointed hour at the Three Pines. Since they expected to ride hard during the night, they took now a leisurely road gait in and out among the hills.

There was little conversation. Cole was not friendly toward Silcott, though he had had no open break with him. He still remembered with resentment that night when Larry had flirted so outrageously with Kate. To Jack Cole's simple mind the thing had carried the earmarks of treachery. The two had been rather close. They had slept under the same tarp many a time. He could not understand the vanity which had driven Larry to a public exhibition of his power with women. But he and Kate had talked the thing out, had quarrelled and made up. His sense of dignity kept him from settling the matter with Silcott by the simple primitive method of fisticuffs. Therefore he bottled up his sense of injury under a manner of cool aloofness.

Yerby and Rogers were waiting for them beneath the largest of the big pines.

"Better 'light, boys," suggested the Texan. "I reckon we might as well kinder talk things over. We aim to bend the law consid'able to-night. If any of you lads is feelin' tol'able anxious he'd better burn the wind back to camp. Old Man Trouble is right ahaid of us on the trail. Now's the time to holler. No use bellyachin' when it's too late."

"Think we're quitters?" Larry demanded indignantly.

"No, son, I don't allow you are. If I did you can bet them fifteen-dollar boots of yours that you or Sam Yerby one wouldn't be here. What I'm sayin' is that this is serious business. Take a good, square look at it before you-all go ahaid."

"Sam's quite right," assented McCoy. "We're going on a sheep raid, and against a desperate man. We're going to kill his sheep—ride them down—stampede them. It's not a nice business, and the law is dead against us. I don't like it a bit, but I'm going because it is the only way to pound sense into Tait's fool head. We've got to do it or shut up shop."

Rowan spoke with a gravity that carried conviction. He was a man notable even in that country which bred strong men. His steel-gray eyes looked out unafraid upon a world still primitive enough to demand proofs of any man who aspired to leadership among his fellows. McCoy had long since demonstrated his fitness to lead. No man in the Fryingspan country doubted this. Hence his words now carried weight.

"I stand pat," said Silcott.

Cole nodded agreement.

"Good enough. But understand this: We're not man-killers. Tait is a bad lot, all right, but we're not out to get him. We're going to mask, surprise the camp, hold it up, do our business, then get out. Is that plain?"

"Plain as the Map of Texas brand," assented Yerby with a grin. "Listens fine, too. But what have you arranged for Tait to be doing while you-all is making him a prisoner?"

"He'll be sleeping, Sam. Here's the layout. One of the herders and the dogs will be

with the sheep. We'll slip right up to the wagon and capture Tait first thing. He's a heavy sleeper—always was. Once we get him the rest will be easy."

The Texan nodded. "Ought to go through as per plan if the sheep are far enough from the wagon."

"They'll be far enough away so that the dogs won't bark at us."

"Who is that?" cried Rogers, pointing to the trail below.

All of them with one consent stopped to watch the horseman riding up out of the darkness.

"It's Hal Falkner," Cole cried in a low voice.

"Falkner! What's he doing here?" demanded McCoy. He whirled on Silcott. "Did you tell him where we were to-night, Larry?"

"No, I didn't."

"You told him something—that Tait had crossed the dead line and was heading for Thunder Mountain."

"I might have said that," admitted Silcott a little sulkily.

"Did you tell any one else?"

"No. What's ailin' you, Mac?"

"Just this. I don't want to go to the penitentiary because you can't keep your mouth shut, Larry. Falkner is the last man you ought to have told. I don't want him with us to-night. He's too anxious to get at Tait."

"Oh, well, I guess he'll be reasonable."

Falkner rode up the trail out of the shadowy gloom. "Thought you'd lose me, did you? Fine stuff, boys. How's yore busted laig, Sam? And did you get that important letter, Brad? I know you other lads got the cattle to the Circle Diamond because I saw them there."

"What do you want, Hal?" asked Rowan curtly.

"Me, Mac? Same as you. I want to shoot some pills into Mary's little lambs. Did you think I was riding for my health?"

"We don't want you along with us. Our party's made up."

"Short and sweet, Mac. What's the objection to my company?" demanded Falkner frostily.

"No personal objection whatever, Hal. But we don't want any one along that has a grudge at Tait. We're fighting for the range, and we don't intend to settle any individual scores."

"Suits me. I expect I can square accounts with Joe Tait at the proper time without lugging all you fellows along."

McCoy looked directly at him. "This party is ducking trouble, not looking for it, Hal. We intend to get the drop on Tait and hold him prisoner till we're through. Our only targets will be sheep."

"Fine! I'll take orders from you to-night, Rowan."

"That makes everything all right then," put in Larry cheerfully.

McCoy still hesitated. He knew of Falkner's gusty and ungovernable temper, and

suspected the bilious rancour of his ill will toward Tait.

“Oh, let him go,” decided Rogers impatiently. “One more won’t do any harm, and we might need him. Falkner is not a fool. He knows we can’t afford to shoot up Tait or his men.”

“Sure I know it. What’s the use of so much beefing? I’m going with you, whether or no.”

“Looks like our anxious friend has elected himself one of us,” Sam assented amiably.

Rowan was outvoted. He shrugged, and, against his better judgment, gave up the point.

They rode hard across a rough, hilly country. The moon had gone under scudding clouds. It had turned a good deal colder, and there was a feel of rain in the air.

They were following no trail, but were cutting as near a bee-line as possible over mountains, through gulches, and along washes. McCoy led them with the sure instinct of the hillsman. The night was dark, and the hill pockets they traversed were like one another as peas in a pod. But there was never a moment when he hesitated as to direction.

The time was half-past two when Rogers struck a match and looked at his watch.

“Bald Knob is less than a mile from here,” said McCoy. “We’ll mask now in case we should bump into the camp sooner than we expect. Think we’d better cut out talking. We’ve got to surprise them. If we don’t, Tait will fight and that isn’t what we want.”

He drew from his pocket half a dozen bandannas. Each man made and fitted his own mask from a handkerchief.

“The wind is from the north. That’s lucky, because we’ve got to get at the camp from the south. The dogs couldn’t scent us even if they are close to the wagons,” Rowan explained.

“The dogs will be with the sheep. I ain’t worried about them,” answered Rogers.

They rode cautiously now, one after the other in single file. From a ridge McCoy pointed out the sheep camp at the foot of Bald Knob.

“We’ll leave our horses in that clump of pines and creep forward to the wagons,” he gave directions. “Remember, boys. No shooting. We’re going to get the drop on Tait and take him prisoner. If we can’t do that, the raid is off. We’re not killing human beings. Get that, Hal.”

Falkner nodded sulkily. “I told you I was taking orders from you to-night, Mac.”

Under cover of a hill they rode into the pines and tied their horses. McCoy deployed his men in such a way that they could move toward the camp in a half circle. He put Cole on the extreme left, and next to him Yerby, Rogers, Silcott, and Falkner in the order named. Rowan chose the place on the right for himself, because it was nearest the wagons. He stationed Falkner next to him so that he could keep an eye on him.

The raiders crept forward slowly through the brush. It was a damp, cold night. Clouds in battalions were sweeping across the sky. McCoy, as he moved forward, took advantage of all the cover he could find. He could see Falkner as a dark shadow over to his left. Silcott was lost in the gloom.

The sound of a shot shattered the stillness. Falkner, the rifle in his hand smoking, let out the exultant “Yip—yip!” of a cowboy.

“Back to cover, boys!” yelled Rowan instantly.

He stumbled on a clump of grass and went down. Before he reached his feet again the tragedy was under way. Another shot rang out—a third—and a fourth.

Tait, revealed by a fugitive moon which had escaped from behind scudding clouds, was in the door of the wagon, as he had often promised. The rifle in his hand was pumping lead at the foes advancing toward him from the brush. Flashes in the darkness told Rowan that the cattlemen were answering his fire.

The head of the big sheepman lurched forward, and the rifle slid from his hands out of the wagon to the ground. At the same moment another man leaped from the wagon and started to run.

“Stop firing!” ordered McCoy sharply.

He ran forward to protect the retreat of the sheepman, but he was too late. Falkner fired. The running figure doubled up like a jack-rabbit and went down headfirst.

McCoy plunged straight for the second wagon. He could hear a herder tumbling hastily out of it, and he stood directly between the man and Falkner. The runner was, he knew, scuttling into the brush for safety.

“Let him go. Don’t shoot, Hal!” shouted McCoy.

Falkner, panting, eyes burning with the lust of battle, pulled up beside Rowan.

“Whad you get in my way for?” he cried excitedly. “We got to make a clean sweep now. Got to do it to save ourselves.”

“No. You can’t get the others without getting me first.” McCoy’s voice rang sharp and dominant.

“But, man, don’t you see we’ve got to destroy the evidence against us? Leggo my arm.”

Rowan’s fingers had fastened upon the wrist of the other like steel clamps. His steady eyes were deadly in their intentness.

“You’ve got to kill me before you kill them. Understand?”

Yerby had reached the wagon. He spoke up at once: “Mac is right. We’ve done too much killing already. Good Lord, how did it start?”

Falkner opened his lips to speak, then closed them again. He looked at McCoy and waited savagely for the accusation. But none came. Rowan said nothing.

“First I knew Tait was in the wagon door with his gun and we were all shooting. But someone fired first and brought him out from the wagon. It came from the right. Who was it, Mac?” demanded Rogers.

Cole and Silcott joined them. They had been examining the fallen men.

“Both of them are dead,” said Cole. “I can’t hardly believe it. But it’s so. A bullet got Gilroy right through the heart.”

Rowan looked up quickly. He was white to the lips. “Gilroy? Did we kill Gilroy?” He turned to Larry. “I thought you said he went home to-day.”

“He telephoned his wife he would be home to-night. Must have changed his mind.”

“It cost him his life, poor devil!” Rogers broke out.

“I ain’t so sure it won’t cost us ours,” added Yerby quietly. “If I’d known Gilroy was

here to-night, Sam Yerby wouldn't have gone raiding."

"That's right," agreed Cole. "Tait is one proposition; Gilroy is another. This whole country is going to buzz now. He has hundreds of friends."

All of them recognized the truth of this. The death of Tait alone would have stirred no resentment. But Gilroy was an old-timer, a quiet, well-respected man who had many friends. He had been sheriff of the county some years before, and at the last election had been chosen county commissioner.

"Who killed him?" asked Rogers again. "Who started this shooting? That's what I want to know."

Rowan answered quietly: "The less we know about that the better, boys. We're all tied up together in this. In the excitement some of us have gone too far. That can't be helped now. We've got to see it out together—got to stand back of each other. Before the law we're all guilty. The only thing to do is to let to-night's work be a mystery that is never solved. We'll fix up a story and all stand by it."

Yerby broke a long silence. "Well, boys, we better make our get-away. A whole passell of sheriffs will be combing these hills for us soon. Posses will be pouring in like buzzards to a water hole in the desert. I reckon we had better fix up our alibis and then burn the wind for home."

"Can't start pushing on our reins any too quick to suit me," Cole assented.

"That's the only thing to do," agreed McCoy. "Sam, you and Brad had better get back to your homes, where you've been sleeping all night if any one asks you. Falkner, you go back with us to the ranch. We'll fix up a story about how you joined us there and bunked with Jack and Larry."

"What about these?" Rogers indicated with his hand the sprawling bodies of the sheepmen. His voice was a whisper.

"We can't do anything for them," answered Rowan. "We've got to think of ourselves. If we talk, if we make any mistakes, we're going to pay the price of what we've done. We can't explain we didn't intend to kill any one. We're all in this. The only thing to do is to stand together and keep our mouths shut."

Everybody was in a sudden hurry to be gone. They tramped back to the pine grove, and hurriedly mounted, eager to put as many miles as possible between them and what was lying at the foot of Bald Knob.

A light snow was already falling. They welcomed it for the protection it offered.

"We've bumped into good luck to start with," said Larry to Cole. "The snow will blot out our tracks. They can't trail us now."

Cole nodded. "Yep. That's so."

But the thing that had been done chilled their spirits, and the dread as to what was to come of it rested like a weight upon their hearts. Mile after mile they rode, swiftly and silently. More than once Larry glanced over his shoulder with a shudder. He could see the snow sifting into the sightless eyes that stared up at the breaking dawn. Always he had laughed at the superstitions which rode ignorant people, but now he was careful not to bring up the rear of the little procession.

Once an elk crashed out of some brush fifty feet from them. The sudden clamour

shook their nerves with dread.

Falkner laughed, but there was only bravado in his voice. "I could 'a' brought that elk down if it hadn't been the closed season," he said.

The man riding next him did not speak aloud the thought that flashed through his mind—that it had been an open season on sheepmen an hour before.

The party broke up at the Three Pines after a hurried agreement as to plans. They were all to meet at the round-up. None of them was to know anything about the raid until news of it came to the camp from outside.

Yerby and Rogers rode into the hills, the rest down to the Circle Diamond.

They covered the ground fast, so as to get into the house before any one was astir with the coming day. Already gray was sifting into the sky, a warning that the night was ending.

Larry, riding beside McCoy, looked furtively at him and asked a question just as they came in sight of the ranch.

"Who shot Gilroy, Mac?"

Rowan looked at him with bleak, expressionless eyes. "We all did."

"Yes, but——" His whisper died away.

"None of us know who fired the shot. It doesn't matter. Never forget one thing, Larry. We're all in the same boat. We sink or swim together."

"Sure. But whoever it was——"

"We don't know who it was," McCoy lied. "We're not going to try to find out. Forget that, Larry."

They stabled their horses and stole into the bunk house. Fortunately it was empty, Rowan's men being at the round-up. McCoy left them there and returned to the house.

He met Mrs. Stovall in the corridor. She was on her way to the kitchen to begin the day's work.

"I've been out looking at one of the horses," McCoy explained. "Colic, looks like."

The housekeeper made no comment. It passed through her mind that it was odd he should take his rifle out with him to look at a sick horse.

CHAPTER XIV

THE DAY AFTER

ROWAN closed the door of his bedroom with a sick heart. It was characteristic of him that he did not debate his responsibility for the death of the two sheepmen. It did not matter that he had repeatedly warned his friends not to shoot nor that from the beginning to the end of the affair he had not fired his rifle. He could not escape the conviction of guilt by pleading to himself that but for the heady folly of one man the raid would have worked out as planned. Nor did it avail to clear him that he had tried to save the life of Gilroy and had protected the herders from the blood lust of Falkner. Before the law he was a murderer. He had led a band of raiders to an attack in which two men had died.

The rock upon which the venture had split was Falkner's uncontrolled venom. But for that first shot and the triumphant shout of vengeance Tait could have been captured and held safely a prisoner. Now they all stood within the shadow of the gallows.

The shock of Gilroy's death was for the time deadened to McCoy by the obligation that lay on him to look out for the safety of his associates. The cattleman did not deceive himself for an instant. The days when men could ride to lawless murder in Wyoming were past. Tom Horn had been hanged in spite of a tremendous influence on his behalf. So it would be now. Shoshone County would flame with indignation at the outrage. A deep cry for justice upon the guilty would run from border to border.

Beyond doubt suspicion would be directed toward them on account of their absence from the round-up camp at the time of the raid. But unless some of them talked there could be no proof. The snow had turned out only a flurry of an inch or two, but it was not likely Matson could reach Bald Knob before night. This would give them till to-morrow morning, by which time the trail would be obliterated. There was the taste of another storm in the air. Unless McCoy was a poor prophet, the ground would be well covered with snow before midnight.

Rowan had collected all of the bandannas used as masks. He intended to burn them in the kitchen stove as he passed through to breakfast. It could not be proved that Rogers and Yerby had not slept at home unless their wives got to gossiping, nor that the others had not spent the night at the Circle Diamond. On the whole they were as safe as men could be who stood over a powder mine that might be fired at any moment.

When the breakfast bell sounded McCoy descended by the back stairs to the kitchen. Mrs. Stovall was just putting a batch of biscuits into the oven.

"Would you mind stepping outside and ringing the bell, Mrs. Stovall?" Rowan asked. "Three of the boys are sleeping in the bunk house. They stayed there last night after we drove the bunch of cows home."

As soon as his housekeeper had left the room McCoy stepped to the stove, lifted a lid, and stuffed six coloured handkerchiefs into the fire. When Mrs. Stovall returned he was casting a casual eye over the pantry.

"Not short of any supplies, are you, Mrs. Stovall?"

"I'm almost out of sugar and lard."

“Better make out a list. I’ve got to send one o’ the boys to Wagon Wheel with the team to-morrow.”

The burden of keeping up a pretense of conversation at breakfast rested upon the host and Jack Cole. Silcott was jumpy with nerves, and Falkner was gloomy. As soon as he was alone with the men on the trail to the round-up camp McCoy brought them to time.

“This won’t do, boys. You’ve got to buck up and act as usual. You look as if you were riding to your own funeral, Hal. You’re just as bad, Larry. Both of you have ‘criminal’ written all over you. Keep yore grins working.”

“What am I to do with this gun?” demanded Falkner abruptly. “I got it last night from the bunk house at the Triangle Dot.”

“Did anybody see you get it?”

“No.”

“We’ll have to bury it. You can’t take it into camp with you.”

With their knives they dug a shallow ditch back of a big rock and in it hid the rifle. The ammunition belt was put beside it.

It was perhaps fortunate that by the time they reached camp the riders had scattered to comb Plum Creek for cattle. Rowan sent his companions out to join the drive, while he waited in camp for a talk with Rogers and Yerby, neither of whom had yet arrived.

About noon the two hill cattlemen rode into the draw. The men met in the presence of the cook. They greeted each other with the careless aplomb of the old-timer:

“ ’Lo, Mac!”

“ ’Lo, Sam—Brad! How’s every little thing?”

“Fine. Missie done fixed my game laig up with that ointment good as new. I want to tell you-all that girl is a wiz,” bragged Yerby, firing his tobacco juice at a white rock and making a centre shot.

McCoy breathed freer. Yerby and Rogers could be depended upon to go through the ordeal before them with cool imperturbability. Cole, under fire, would be as steady as a rock. Falkner and Silcott were just now nervous as high-bred colts, but Rowan felt that this was merely the reaction from the shock of the night. When the test came they would face the music all right.

Late in the afternoon the bawling of thirsty cattle gave notice that the gathered stock were nearing camp. Not until the stars were out was there a moment’s rest for anybody.

Supper was eaten by the light of the moon. During this meal a horseman rode up and nodded a greeting.

Young King caught sight of him first. “Hello, Sheriff!” he shouted gaily. “Which of us do you want? And what have we been doing now?”

Rowan’s heart sank. Matson had beaten the time he had allowed him by nearly twenty-four hours. But he turned a wooden face and a cool, impassive eye upon the sheriff.

“ ’Lo, Aleck! Won’t you ’light?”

“Reckon I will, Mac.”

The sheriff swung from his horse stiffly and came forward into the firelight. At least

six pairs of eyes watched him closely, but the tanned, leathery face of the officer told nothing.

“Anything new, Matson?” demanded a young cow-puncher. “Don’t forget we’ve been off the map ’most three weeks. Who’s eloped, absconded, married, divorced, or otherwise played billiards with the Ten Commandments?”

Matson sat down tailor fashion and accepted the steak, bread, and coffee offered him.

“The only news on tap when I left town was that the Limited got in on time—yesterday. Few will believe it, but it’s an honest-to-goodness fact. We had it sworn to before a notary.”

CHAPTER XV

A HOT TRAIL

IT happened that Sheriff Matson was in the hills on official business and slept at Bovier's Camp the night of the sheep raid. He was by custom an early riser. The sky was faintly pink with the warning of a coming sun when he stepped out of the house to wash in the tin basin outside the kitchen. As he dried his face on the roller towel there came to him the sound of dragging steps and laboured breathing.

Matson turned. A pallid little man sank down on the step and buried his face in his hands.

"What's up?" demanded the officer.

The panting man lifted to him eyes which still mirrored the fear of death.

"They—they've killed Tait and Gilroy."

"Who?"

"Raiders."

"When?"

"This morning—two hours ago." A shiver shook the fellow like a heavy chill. "My God—it was awful!" he gasped.

The sheriff let fall a strong brown hand on his shoulder. "Tell me about it, Purdy. You were there at the time?"

The man nodded assent. He swallowed a lump in his dry throat and explained: "I been herding for Tait. We bedded at Bald Knob last night. Joe was aiming to go to Thunder Mountain. They—shot up the camp and killed Tait and Gilroy. Jim and me just escaped. We got separated in the brush."

"Just where was the camp?"

"Right at the foot of Bald Knob."

"Did you recognize any of the raiders?"

"No. They wore masks."

"How many were there?"

"About twenty; maybe twenty-five."

"You're sure they killed Tait and Gilroy?"

"Don't I tell you I saw them dead?" quavered the unstrung man with weak irritability.

The cool, hard eyes of the sheriff narrowed to slits. Matson belonged to the class of frontier man hunter which sleeps on the trail of a criminal until he is captured. Not hardship nor discouragement nor friendship would stand in his way. He had a fondness for his work that amounted to a passion and an uncanny capacity for it.

With the news that had just come to him he was a changed man. The careless good nature was sponged from his face. His features seemed to have sharpened. His body had grown tense like a coiled spring. There was in his motions the lithe wariness of the panther stalking its prey for the kill.

A few more sharp, incisive questions told him all Purdy knew. He ordered his horse to be saddled and asked for breakfast at once. Meanwhile he got Wagon Wheel on the long-distance, and rang his deputy up from sleep.

“There has been a big killing at Bald Knob, Lute. Drop everything else. Get together half a dozen good men and ride up to Bovier’s Camp. Bring with you supplies enough for several days. Wait at the camp until you hear from me. Tait and Gilroy killed. By cattlemen, looks like. I’ll know more about that later.”

He ate a hurried breakfast, gathered together a couple of sandwiches for lunch, and struck across country for the raided sheep camp. He plunged into the gray desert, keeping the rampart of hills at his left. In the early-morning light the atmosphere gave to the panorama in front of him an extraordinary effect of space.

As soon as he came in sight of the sheep camp Matson dismounted and tied his horse. He had to pick up a cold trail covered with snow. The fewer unnecessary tracks the better.

The bodies of the sheepmen lay where they had fallen, a light mantle of snow sheeting the still forms. Three empty shells lay close to the rifle of Tait, but Gilroy’s gun had not been fired. It was lying in the wagon, where he had left it when he made his dash to escape.

The contour of the country was such that the attack must have been made from in front. Matson put himself in place of the raiders, and guessed with fair accuracy their plan of operations. The sun had already melted most of the snow, and for hours he quartered over the ground, examining tracks that the untrained eye would never have seen. Sometimes a bit of broken brush, sometimes a leaf trampled into the ground, told him what he wanted to know. Again, it was a worn heel plate that stood out to him like a signpost on the road. Twice he picked up an empty shell that had been thrown out of a rifle during the rush forward.

The boot tracks, faint though they were, led him to the pine grove where the horses had been tethered. Here he went down on his hands and knees, studying the details of every hoofprint that differentiated it from others. The care with which he did this, the intentness of his observation, would have surprised and perhaps amused a tenderfoot. An unskilled tracker, though he might be a Sherlock Holmes in the city, could have discovered nothing here worth learning. Matson found registered marks of identification for horses as certain as those of the Bertillon system for criminals.

With amazing pains he traced the retreat of the raiders to the Three Pines. It was a very difficult piece of trailing, for the snow had wiped out the tracks entirely for stretches of hundreds of yards. Once it was a splash of tobacco juice on a flat rock that told him he was still on the heels of those he wanted. In Shoshone County men will still tell you that Aleck Matson’s feat of running down the night raiders in spite of an intervening snowstorm was the best bit of trailing they ever knew.

From the Three Pines the tracks of most of the party took the sheriff straight to the Circle Diamond Ranch. He dropped in just in time to join Mrs. Stovall at her midday dinner.

They exchanged the casual gossip of the neighbourhood. Presently he steered the talk in the direction he wanted.

“Mac is up at the round-up, I reckon.”

“Yes. He drove a bunch of cattle down last night.”

“So? Any of the boys with him?”

“Three of them. They stayed in the bunk house.”

“I’ve been wanting to see Art Philips. Was he one of them?”

“No. Young Silcott and Jack Cole and Hal Falkner.”

“Went back this morning, did they?” asked Matson casually. He gave rather the impression that he was making conversation to pass the time.

“Right after breakfast.”

“Jack Cole was talking about trading me a Winchester. Don’t suppose he had it with him.”

“No. Hal Falkner had one. A deer had been seen near camp, and he brought it on the chance he might see it again.”

“I like a .30-30 for deer myself. Didn’t happen to notice what Falkner carried?”

Mrs. Stovall shook her head. “A gun is a gun to me.”

“When it comes to guns I reckon a man and a woman are made different. I never see one without wanting to look it over. Mac was going to show me one of his next time I came up to the ranch. I don’t suppose——”

“All his guns are in that little room off the living room, as Mrs. McCoy calls the parlour. Go in and look ’em over if you like.”

The sheriff thanked her and availed himself of the chance. When he came out he found Mrs. Stovall clearing off the table.

“Expect the boys were glad to come down and eat a home-cooked meal at a real table. I’ll bet they were so frolicsome at getting away from camp that they kept you up all hours of the night.”

“They woke me when they first came, but I soon fell asleep. Likely they were tired and turned right in.”

“Sounds reasonable. Well, I’ll be moving along, Mrs. Stovall. Much obliged for that peach cobbler like Mother used to make.”

On his way to the stable Matson dropped in at the bunk house. He made the discovery that at least one of McCoy’s guests had lain on top of the blankets and not under them. Nor had he taken the trouble to remove his boots. The mud stains of the heels were plainly printed on the wool.

The officer smiled. “Just made a bluff of lying down; figured it wasn’t worth while taking off his boots for a few minutes. I’ll bet that was Falkner. He’s a roughneck, anyhow.”

Matson rode back to the Three Pines, and from there followed the trail of the two horses that had turned into the hills at this point. By the middle of the afternoon it brought him to the Circle B R, a ranch which nestled at the foot of the big peaks in a little mountain park.

It took no clairvoyant to see that Mrs. Rogers was not glad to see him. Unless her face labelled her, she had been weeping. Her eyes flew a flag of alarm as soon as they fell upon him.

“G’afternoon, Mrs. Rogers. Brad home?”

“No. He’s at the round-up.”

“Gone back, has he?”

She considered a moment before a reluctant “Yes” fell from her lips.

“Reckon I’ll ride over to the camp. Is it still at the foot of the Flat Tops?”

“Yes.” Then, as if something within forced the words out in spite of her, she added: “Are you looking for Brad?”

“I want to have a talk with him.”

His eyes told him that she was in a flutter of apprehension. He guessed that the dread which all day had weighed on her heart was no longer a dull, dead thing in her bosom. Her lips were ashen.

“Maybe—maybe I could tell him what it was.”

“Oh, I’ll ride over. When did he leave?”

“I don’t rightly know just when,” she faltered.

It was clear that she feared to arouse his suspicion by refusing to talk and that she was equally afraid of telling too much.

The sheriff smiled grimly as he rode across the hills. He had five of the raiders identified already—five out of either six or seven, he wasn’t quite sure which. He glanced across toward Bald Knob, and judged from the sky that it was already snowing over there. If he had been at Wagon Wheel instead of at Bovier’s Camp when Purdy panted in with the news of the killing he could not have arrived in time to pick up the trail. His luck had stood up fine. That the evidence against the lawbreakers would sift in to him now he had no doubt. He intended that this should be the last night raid ever made in Shoshone County. Unless the district attorney fell down on his job, more than one of the Bald Knob raiders would end with a rope around his throat.

Matson admitted to himself a certain surprise that McCoy and Rogers should be involved in such an affair. Sheep raids were one thing; murder was quite another. The sheriff liked Rowan. The cattleman was straight as a string. His word was good against that of any man in the district. It was known that he would fight, but it was hard to think of him as planning the cold-blooded murder of an enemy.

The sheriff knew how high the feelings ran between the sheep and cattle interests. The cattlemen knew they were facing ruin because Tait and his associates maintained the right to run sheep upon any range just as others ran stock. To them it seemed that the intruders had no right whatever to the range. It belonged to cattle by right of a long-time prior occupancy. Moreover, under the leadership of Tait the sheepmen had been particularly obnoxious. They had refused to recognize any dead line whatever and their attitude had been in the nature of a boastful challenge.

It was generally known that several of the cattlemen had personal grievances against Tait. First there was McCoy, with one that dated back several years. Silcott had been wounded by the sheepman and Falkner had been badly beaten by him. Cole, too, had quarrelled with him. One of these four might have started the shooting, Matson reasoned, or Tait might have done so himself. Legally, the question was not a vital one, since Tait had been shot down while defending his property against attack. Those who had ridden on

the raid were guilty of murder no matter who fired the first shot.

Yet Matson was puzzled. McCoy had been the leader of the group. There could be no doubt about that. His was far and away the strongest personality. And McCoy usually thought straight. He did not muddle his brain with false reasoning. How, then, had he come to do such a thing?

As the sheriff sat by the campfire at the round-up later, it was even more difficult to think of this clean, level-eyed boss of the rodeo as an ambusher by night. The whole record of the man rose up to give the lie to the story that he had ridden out to kill his foe in the dark. While Sam Yerby entertained the boys with one of his trail songs, Matson's mind was going over the facts he had gathered.

“Whoopee ti yi yo, git along, little dogies,
It's your misfortune and none of my own.
Whoopee ti yi yo, git along, little dogies,
For you know Wyoming will be your new home.”

Sam looked around carefully, selected a flat rock at the edge of the fire, and splashed the centre of it accurately with tobacco juice. Give him a chew of tobacco as a weapon and the Texan was the champion shot of Wyoming.

His singsong voice took up the next stanza:

“Oh, you'll be soup for Uncle Sam's Injuns!
'It's beef, heap beef!' I hear them cry.
Git along, git along, git along, little dogies,
You're going to be beef steers by and by.”

Matson did not listen to the song. He was no longer thinking of McCoy. From the shadow where he lounged his narrowed eyes watched Yerby intently. He had not moved a muscle of his big body, but every nerve had suddenly grown taut. For he guessed now who the sixth man was that had ridden on the sheep raid. Sam's habit of selecting a rock target for his tobacco juice had betrayed him.

CHAPTER XVI

MATSON MAKES HIS GATHER

LIKE wildfire the news spread through western Wyoming that Tait and Gilroy had been shot down in their sheep wagon by night raiders. Soon there was no ranch so deep-hidden in the hills, no herder's camp so remote that the story had not been carried there. The tale was a nine-days' wonder, a sensation that gave zest to colourless lives. The identity of the raiders was a mystery that promised much pleasant gossip.

Furtive whispers of names began to be heard. That of Falkner was mentioned first. He had made threats against Tait, and he was known to be quarrelsome and vindictive. Then the murmured gossip took up the name of McCoy, added shortly to it those of Cole and Silcott. It was known that all four of the suspected men had been absent from the round-up the night of the killing. Two of them were enemies of Tait, the others had been mixed up in the cattle-sheep feud. By their own statements they had all been together during the hours when the raid took place.

The gossipers had no direct evidence, but a great deal of opinion was whispered back and forth in corrals, on porches, and in the saddle. The sentiment was general that Tait had for a long time laid himself open to such an end. But Gilroy was a good citizen, not turbulent, friendly to his neighbours. His murder stirred a deep but not too loudly expressed resentment.

Meanwhile Sheriff Matson moved about his business of gathering evidence with relentless singleness of purpose. He, too, heard whispers and followed them to sources. He rode up and down the country piecing this and that together until he had a net of circumstance encircling the guilty ones.

From one of the herders whom McCoy had saved he gathered valuable information. The man had been awakened by the sound of firing. He had run to the door of the wagon in time to see Gilroy shot down. Tait was already down. The herder had been saved by one of the attackers who had stood between him and another and prevented the second man from murdering him. The first man had called the other one Hal. The raiders were all masked and he had not recognized any of them.

"I ain't lost any of them raiders, Mr. Sheriff," the man said with a kind of dogged weakness. "If I know too much, why someone takes a shot in the dark at me an' that's the last of Johnnie Mott. No, sir, I done told you too much already. I was plumb excited, an' maybe I ain't got it jest the way it was. He mighta called the other fellow Hardy instead of Hal."

"He might have, but he didn't, Mott. Keep yore mouth shut and you don't need to worry about gettin' shot. I'll look after you if you'll stay right here in town. You can hold down that job I got you as janitor at the court house. Nobody's gonna hurt you any."

One of the whispers Matson heard took him to Dunc King. That young man had, as usual, been talking too much. The sheriff found him at his mother's ranch mending a piece of broken fence.

"'Lo, Dunc. How's everything?" the officer asked by way of greeting.

The young man looked at him with suspicion and alarm. "Why, all right, I reckon.

How's cases with you, Sheriff?"

"I hear you had a little talk with Hal Falkner the night of the raid. Do you remember exactly what he said to you?"

"Why, no. I don't remember a thing about it," the young man returned uneasily. He knew his tongue had once more tripped him up.

"You will if you think hard, don't you reckon? You remembered it well enough to tell Flanders and Mrs. Henson. I'll start you off. Falkner an' you were discussing the reason why so many men left camp after supper. He told you Larry Silcott had told him Tait was across the dead line again. Recollect that?"

"Why, no. I don't guess I do, Sheriff."

"You'd better, Dunc, unless you want to get into mighty serious trouble."

"Sho! Nothing to that, Sheriff. Nothing a-tall. I might've got to shootin' off my mouth the way I sometimes do. Kinda playin' like I was on the inside, y' understand."

"Or, on the other hand, you might be trying to duck out from responsibility, Dunc. Don't make any mistakes, boy. You're going to come through with what you know."

"But I'm tellin' you I don't know a thing," the boy protested.

"Not what you told several other people. How about it, Dunc? You want to be an accessory to this crime?"

"No, sir, an' I ain't aimin' to be either. If I knew anything I'd tell you, but I can't tell you what I don't know, can I?"

The young man was no match for the sheriff. Before Matson had left the place he knew all that King did.

Forty-eight hours later the sheriff with a posse rode up to the Circle Diamond Ranch. Rowan McCoy was sitting on the porch oiling a gun. The first glance told him that Matson had two prisoners, the second that they were Falkner and Silcott.

Matson swung from the saddle and came up the steps to the porch.

"I've got bad news for you, Mac," he said bluntly. "You're under arrest."

The cattleman did not bat an eye. "What for?" he asked evenly.

"For killing Gilroy and Tait."

"The damn fool's going around arrestin' everybody he knows, Mac," broke in Falkner. McCoy observed that Falkner was hand-cuffed and that Silcott was not.

He asked the sheriff a question. "Do I understand that you've arrested Hal an' Larry for this, too?"

"Yes, Mac. Larry behaved sensible an' promised not to make any trouble, so I aim to be as easy on him as I can. Falkner had other notions. He tried to make a gun play."

"You takin' us to Wagon Wheel, Aleck?"

"Yes."

"You have a warrant for my arrest?"

The officer showed the warrant and Rowan glanced over it.

"All right," said McCoy. "I'll saddle up an' be ready in a jiffy."

"No need for that, Mac. Fact is, I'm not quite ready to start. Got a little more business

to do first. If you don't mind I'll make the Circle Diamond my headquarters for a few hours," Matson proposed amiably.

The owner of the ranch answered pleasantly but perhaps with a touch of sarcasm. "Anything you say, Aleck. If yore boys are here at dinner time I expect Mrs. Stovall can fix you-all up."

"Sure, Mac, an' if he needs horses or guns probably you can lend him a few," Falkner added with an oath. "An' maybe a puncher or two to join his damned posse."

"No use gettin' annoyed, Hal," the ranch owner said quietly. "This looks like a silly business to us, but Aleck has to make his play. He's not arrestin' us for pleasure. I reckon he thinks he's got some evidence, or maybe he wants to scare us into thinkin' he has some so he can pick up something against someone else."

"You'll find I've got evidence aplenty, Mac," the sheriff answered mildly. "No hard feelings, you understand. All in the way of business. Have I got yore word if I don't put the cuffs on you that you'll go with me to Wagon Wheel quietly?"

"Yes. We're not desperadoes, Aleck. We are just plain hill ranchmen. If you'd just mentioned it we'd have come in without any posse to guard us."

"H'mp!" The sheriff made no other comment. He glanced at Falkner by way of comment on McCoy's criticism. "I'm leavin' three of the boys here, Mac. Be back here myself in a few hours, I reckon. If I don't get back I've arranged for you to make a start for town about two o'clock. That agreeable to you?"

"Any time that suits you," McCoy answered.

The sheriff was back within the specified time limit. He brought with him Rogers and Yerby. From a remark he dropped later McCoy learned that Cole had been arrested earlier in the day at Wagon Wheel.

"You are makin' quite a gather, Aleck," said Rogers. "There are several other ranchmen up here you've overlooked. How about them?"

"I've got all I want for the present, Brad," the sheriff replied.

His manner was not reassuring, nor was the fact that he had picked out and arrested just the six men who had been engaged in the night raid.

Silcott, temperamentally volatile, was plainly downhearted. McCoy manœuvred so that he rode beside him when they took the road.

"Don't you worry, Larry," the older man said in a cheerful voice, but one so low that it carried only to the ears of the man it addressed. "He can't make his case stick, if we all stand pat on our story."

"I'm not worried, Mac, but he must know something or he wouldn't be arresting us. That's a cinch."

"He knows a little, an' guesses a lot more, an' figures probably that there's a quitter among us. That's where his case will break down. All we've got to do is to keep mum. In a week or so we'll be ridin' the range again."

"Yes," agreed Larry, but without conviction.

CHAPTER XVII

PADLOCKED LIPS

YET though the public was in a measure prepared there was a gasp of surprise when the word spread that Sheriff Matson had arrested and brought to Wagon Wheel six cattlemen from the Hill Creek district. McCoy and Rogers were so well and favourably known that the charge of murder against them set tongues buzzing far and wide. Yerby had not been so long in the district, but he, too, bore the best of reputations. By reason of his riding and his gay good-fellowship Larry Silcott was a favourite with the young people. In the cattle country, where he was best known, Jack Cole's character was as good as a letter of credit. Of the six, Falkner alone bore a rather doubtful reputation.

When the news of the arrests reached the Dude Ranch, Ruth was out on the mesa doing a sketch of the sunset. She was not really painting to any purpose, but had come out to be alone. It had been a wonderful autumn day of purple hills and drifting mists that wrapped the cañons in a gossamer scarf of gray. Just below the mesa the valley lay in a golden harmony of colour beneath a sky soft with rain clouds. It was a picture that just now filled Ruth with deep peace. The brush lay idle in her fingers, and on the face of the girl was a soft and rapt exaltation.

She had a secret. Sometimes it filled her with a wild and tremulous delight. Again she stood before it with awe and even terror. More than once in the night she had found herself weeping with poignant self-pity. There were hours when her whole soul cried out for Rowan, and others when she hated him with all the passionate intensity of her untutored heart. Life, which had been so familiar and easy, took on strange and inexplicable phases. She had become a mystery to herself.

A chill wind from the snow peaks swept the mesa. Ruth gathered up her belongings and walked back to the house. She slipped in quietly by the back door, intent on reaching her room unnoticed. As she passed the door of the big lounging room the voice of Tim Flanders boomed out:

"I tell you that if McCoy led that raid there was no intention of killing Tait and Gilroy. I've known Mac twenty-five years. He's white clear through."

Ruth wheeled into the room instantly. She went straight to Flanders.

"Who says Rowan led that raid?" she demanded, white to the lips.

There was a long moment of silence. Then: "He'll clear himself," Flanders replied lamely.

The young wife had not known her husband was even suspected. She caught the back of a chair with a grip so tight that the knuckles lost their colour.

"Tell me—tell me what you mean."

He tried to break it gently, but blundered out that the sheriff had to arrest somebody and had chosen McCoy among others.

"Where is he?" And when she knew: "Take me to him!" she ordered.

Flanders wasted no words in remonstrance. He agreed at once, and had his car waiting at the door before Ruth had packed her suitcase. Through the darkness he drove down the

steep mountain road to Wagon Wheel.

By the time they reached town it was too late to get permission of the sheriff to see her husband that night, but Tim made arrangements by which she was to be admitted to his cell as soon as breakfast was over next morning.

Ruth slept brokenly, waking from bad dreams to a realization of the dreary truth. One of the dreams was that they were taking Rowan out to hang him and he refused to say good-bye to her.

When she came to breakfast at the hotel it was with no appetite. Tim insisted on her eating, but the toast she munched at stuck in her throat.

“You drink your coffee, anyhow, honey. You’ll feel better,” he urged.

The limbs of the girl trembled as she followed the jailer. The pulse in her throat was beating fast.

At sight of her standing in the shadow of his cell, Rowan drew a deep, ragged breath. The tired eyes in the oval of her pale face held the weariness of woe. Always the clear-cut, delicate face of his sweetheart had touched him nearly, but now it seemed to have the poignant, short-lived charm of a flower. The youth in her was quenched. He had ruined her life.

His impulse was to sweep her into his arms and comfort her, but he lacked the courage of his desire. Every fibre of him was hungry for her, but he looked at her impassively without speaking. The tragic gravity of her told him that she had come as a judge and not as a lover.

When the guard had gone she asked her question: “You didn’t do it, did you?”

His throat ached with tightness. There was nothing he could say to comfort her. He could not even, on account of the others, tell her the truth and let her decide for herself the extent of his guilt.

“Tell me you didn’t do it!” she demanded.

Beneath the tan he was gray. “I’m sorry. I wish I could tell you everything. But I can’t talk—even to you.”

“Can’t talk!” she echoed. “When you are accused of—of this horrible thing, aren’t you going to tell everybody that it is a lie?”

He shook his head. “It isn’t so simple as that. I can’t talk about the case because——”

“I’m not asking you to talk about the case. I’m asking you to tell me that you’re innocent—that it’s all an awful mistake,” she ended with a sob.

“If you’ll only trust me—and wait,” he began desperately. “Some day I’ll tell you everything. But now—I wish I could tell you—I wish I could.”

“You mean that you don’t trust me.”

“No. I trust you fully. But the charge against me lies against others, too. I can’t talk.”

“You can’t even tell me that you didn’t murder two men in their sleep?” Her voice was sharp. All the pain and torture of the long night rang out in it.

He winced. “I’ll have to trust to your mercy to believe the best you can of me.”

“What can I believe when you won’t even deny the charge? What else is there to think

but that——” She broke off and began to whimper.

He took a step toward her, but a swift gesture of her hand held him back. “No—no! You can’t trust me. That’s all there is to it—except that you’re guilty. I’d never have believed it—never in the world—not even after what I know of you.”

Rowan longed to cry out to her to have faith in him. He wanted desperately to bridge the gulf that was growing wider between them, to have her see that he had closed the door behind him and must follow the course he had chosen. But he was dumb. It was not in him to express his feeling in words.

Into the delicate white of her cheeks excitement had brought a stain of pink. Eagerly she poured out her passionate protest:

“You don’t mean me to think—surely you can’t mean—that—that—you did this horrible thing! You couldn’t have done it! The thing isn’t possible. Tell me you had nothing to do with it.”

He felt himself trapped in a horrible ambush. He would not lie to her. He could not tell the truth. If she would only have faith in him——

But there was no chance of that. To look at the hostile, accusing gaze of this girl was to know that he had lost her. She had demanded of him a confidence that was not his to give, a pledge of innocence he could not make.

“I’m sorry,” he said again.

Her affronted eyes stabbed him. “That’s all you have to tell me?”

“If you only knew.”

The dumb appeal of him might have moved her, but it did not. She was too full of her wrongs.

“But I don’t know, and you won’t tell me. So there’s nothing more to be said.”

Suddenly she broke down, turned away with a sob, and through the blindness of her tears groped to the door. She had rushed to him—to tell him that she knew he was innocent, and he had repulsed her, had made a stranger of her. In effect, he had told her that he did not want her help, that he would go through his trouble alone. If he had really loved her—ah, if he had loved her, how differently he would have acted! A great lump filled her throat and choked her.

Rowan watched her go, his fingers biting into the palms of his hands. The hunger of his soul stared out of his eyes.

CHAPTER XVIII

“I RECKON I’LL HANG”

MATSON nodded a pleasant good-morning, offered his prisoner a cigar, and sat down on the bed.

“How’s everything, Mac?”

The cattleman smiled ironically. “Fine as silk, Aleck. How are they a-coming with you?”

“If there’s anything you want, Mac, if the grub don’t suit you or anything, just say the word.”

“I’m not complaining. You run a good hotel, Sheriff.”

Matson looked out of the barred window at the warm sunshine flooding the yard. From where he sat he could not see the blue, unclouded sky, but he knew just how it looked. When his gaze returned to McCoy it was grave and solicitous.

“I’m going to give you straight talk, Mac. Don’t fool yourself. Shoshone County has made up its mind. The men that killed Dan Gilroy are going to hang.”

“Sounds cheerful, Aleck.”

“I’m here for the last time to ask you to come through. If you’ll give evidence for the State I can save you, Mac.”

McCoy looked straight at him from cold, bleak eyes. “We discussed this subject once before, Sheriff. Isn’t once enough?”

“No,” returned the officer doggedly. “I’ve been talking with Haight. Inside of twelve hours he’s going to get a confession out of—well, never mind his name. But the man’s weakening. He’ll come through to save his skin. Mac, beat him to it.”

The cattleman laughed without mirth. “I reckon this confession talk is come-on stuff. Even if any of the boys knew anything, he wouldn’t tell it.”

“Wouldn’t he? You ought to know that there’s always a weak link in every chain. In every bunch of men there’s a quitter.”

“So you’re offering me the chance to be that quitter. Fine, Aleck! You’ve got a high opinion of me. But why give me the chance? By your way of it, I led the raid. There was bad blood between me and Tait. I outfitted some of the boys with guns, you say. According to your theory, I’m the very man that ought to be hanged.”

“I’m not a fool, Mac. I know you didn’t set out to kill. If you ask me who started the gun play I can come pretty near giving his name. It’s a cinch you didn’t. One of your party has been talking, and the rumour is that you saved the herders. Anyhow, I don’t want to see you hang if I can help it.”

“Good of you,” derided the prisoner.

“But that’s what is going to happen if you don’t take my offer. You are going to trial first—and for the killing of Gilroy. You’ll be convicted. The Governor daren’t commute the sentence. Last call, Mac. Will you come through?”

“No, Aleck. I don’t admit I have anything to tell, but if I had I expect I’d keep my

mouth shut.”

“Then you’ll hang.”

“Maybe I will; maybe I won’t,” answered Rowan coolly. “I can throw a cat through some of your evidence.”

“Don’t you think it. I’ve got you tied up in a net you can’t break. One of the herders will testify he heard you called ‘Mac’ just after the shooting.”

This was news to McCoy, but he did not bat an eye.

“Heard someone called Mac, you mean, Sheriff. There are quite a few Macs in Shoshone County.”

“Perhaps you don’t know that we have a witness who saw Falkner take a rifle out of the Triangle Dot bunk house a few hours before the raid.”

“I heard Hal was anxious to shoot a deer for meat for the camp.”

“The gun was a .35 Winchester.”

“He used judgment. I always liked a .35 for deer,” commented the prisoner.

“A .35 will kill a man, too,” said Matson significantly. “The shells I picked up in front of the camp at Bald Knob would fit the gun taken from the rack at the Triangle Dot.”

“If I had an imagination like you, Aleck, I’d go in for writing these moving pictures. You’re plumb wasting it here.”

Matson rose. “No use spilling words. Are you going to be reasonable or not?”

The men looked at each other with direct, level gaze.

“I aim always to try to be,” replied McCoy.

“Well, will you come through with what I want, or will you hang?”

“Since you put it that way, Sheriff, I reckon I’ll hang.”

“You damn fool!” exploded the sheriff.

But there was no censure in his voice. The cattleman had done what he would have done under the same test—come clean as a whistle from the temptation to betray his accomplices.

“I knew you wouldn’t do it,” continued Matson. “But I’ve given you your chance. Don’t blame me.”

McCoy nodded. It was the business of a sheriff to run down crime. The cattleman was too good a sportsman to hold a grudge on that account, even if the officer fastened a rope around his neck.

Though Rowan had been under no temptation to turn State’s evidence, the sheriff left him worried at what he had predicted as to a confession. He might of course be telling the truth. The sheriff had said that there is a weak link in every chain. If so, who was the weak one among the prisoners?

Rogers and Yerby were married. It was likely that Haight and Matson might have been at their wives to harry them into a confession. Women did not always have the same point of view about honour when their feelings were involved. They might have insisted on their husbands saving themselves if they could. But, somehow, neither Rogers nor Yerby seemed the type of man to save himself at the expense of others. Rogers he had known a long time and had never found him anything but reliable. Yerby had been in the

neighbourhood six or seven years. McCoy sized up the Texan as a simple man, frank and direct in his thinking. On all the evidence at hand he would live up to the code by which he guided his life.

The other three were single men. There would be less excuse for one of them if he betrayed his friends.

Larry Silcott! No, certainly not Larry. Rowan had tied the young fellow to him by a hundred favours. Moreover, Larry lived in the sunshine of popular applause. He could not go into the witness box to testify against his companions without for ever forfeiting the good opinion of all decent people. It could not be Larry.

Jack Cole! He felt confident it was not Jack. The young fellow was of the stuff that carries through.

This left Falkner. Rowan considered Falkner with no assurance of his loyalty. The man was wild, reckless, and undisciplined. It was hard to predict what he would do under any set of circumstances. He had the reputation of being game, but he was given to suspicions and resentments. It was possible that if they plied him in just the right way he might burst out in invectives against his companions. Suppose, for instance, Haight persuaded him that the others were planning to deliver him as the sacrifice. On the other hand, Falkner was in a different class from the others. He had fired the first shot. He had killed Gilroy and knew that McCoy knew it. If he went on the stand against the others his accomplices would be free to fling the onus of the murders upon him. No, Falkner would not dare weaken.

Rowan's thoughts drifted from the problem Matson had left with him and reverted to his wife. He was more unhappy about his relationship with her than about the danger to his life. She had asked for his confidence and he had refused it. What else could he do? But his sick heart told him that she had opened a door to the chance of a better understanding between them and he had been forced to shut it again.

Life was full of little ironies that embittered and made vain the best intentions.

CHAPTER XIX

SAM YERBY SINGS

LATER in the day the sheriff tried out another of his prisoners. He had told McCoy the truth. One of the six was weakening. Matson had his own favourites and wanted to give them a chance before the State's attorney was pledged. By sunset a confession would be in the hands of Haight, and it would be too late to save his friends.

He found Yerby whittling out a boat for his baby. The Texan looked up with a faint, apologetic smile in his faded blue eyes.

"I was making a pretty for my little trick at home, Sheriff. He's the dad-blamedest kid you ever saw—keeps his old dad humping to make toys for him to bust. Don't you blame Steve for loaning me this two-bit Barlow. He takes it back every night. Steve's a good jailer all right."

The Southerner was a shabby little man, tobacco-stained, with a week's growth of red stubble on his face. But it was impossible to deny him a certain pathetic dignity.

"I've come to talk to you for that little kid, Sam. You don't want him to be an orphan, do you?"

"I reckon that don't rest with me."

Matson cut straight to business. "That's just who it rests with. Sam, it's a show-down. Will you come through with the evidence I want, or won't you?"

"I won't-you. We done talked that all out, Aleck. I wisht you-all wouldn't bother me if it's not inconvenient for you to let me alone."

He offered the officer a chew of tobacco to show that he was not peevish about the matter.

The sheriff waved the plug aside impatiently.

"One of the boys can't stand the gaff. He's breaking, Sam. But you've got a wife and a kid. He hasn't. I want you to have first chance. Come clean and I'll look out for you. After the trial I'll see you get out of the country quietly. You can take your folks back to Texas."

Sam looked out of the window. The little boat and the jackknife hung limp in his hands. In a cracked, falsetto voice he took up a song of the range that he had hummed a hundred times in the saddle:

"I woke one mo'ning on the old Chisum Trail,
Rope in my hand and a cow by the tail."

He thought of the rough and turbulent life that had come at last to the peaceful shoals of happy matrimony. A vision rose before him of his smiling young wife and crowing baby. They needed him. Must he give them up for a point of honour? If someone was to go clear, why not he?

"We have evidence enough. It isn't that. I'm giving you a chance, Sam. That's all."

The lips of the Texan murmured another stanza, but his thoughts were far afield:

“Oh, a ten-dollar hoss and a forty-dollar saddle—
And I’m goin’ to punchin’ Texas cattle.”

“Never again, Sam. Not unless you take your chance now.” The sheriff put a hand on his shoulder. “For the sake of the wife and the little man. You’re not going to throw them down, are you?”

“We hit Caldwell and we hit her on the fly,
We bedded down the cattle on the hill close by.”

The faded eyes were wistful. It was his chance for freedom, perhaps his chance for life, too. What would Missie and the baby do without him? Who would look after them?

“No chaps, no slicker, and it’s pourin’ down rain,
And damn my skin if I night-herd again!”

Matson said nothing. The Texan was building up for himself a vision of the life he loved in the wind and the sunshine of the open range. The old Chisum Trail song he sung must bring to his memory a hundred pictures of the past. These would be arguments more potent than any the sheriff could use.

“Stray in the herd and the boss said kill it,
So I shot him in the rump with the handle of the skillet.”

The cracked voice became clearer:

“I’ll sell my outfit soon as ever I can,
I won’t punch cattle for no damned man!”

“You don’t want your kid to grow up and learn that his dad was hanged,” insinuated Matson. “That would be a fine thing to leave him.”

“Foot in the stirrup and hand on the horn—
Best damned cowboy that ever was born!”

The voice of the singer rang like a bell at last. He turned serene eyes on the tempter.

“What do you think I am, Aleck? If I hang I hang, but I’m damned if I’ll be a traitor.”

The sheriff gave him up. “All right, Sam. It’s your say-so, not mine. Got everything you want here so you’re fixed comfortable?”

“You’re treating me fine. I ain’t used to being corralled so close, but I reckon it would be onreasonable to ask for a hawss and a saddle and an open range in your calaboose.”

As the sheriff passed down the corridor he heard Sam’s tin-pan voice chirruping bravely:

“There’s hard times on old Bitter Creek
That never can be beat;
It was root, hog, or die,
Under every wagon sheet.
We cleared up all the Indians,
Drank all the alkali,
And its whack the cattle on, boys—
Root, hog, or die!”

CHAPTER XX

“YOU DAMNED JUDAS”

NOT for years had Shoshone County been so interested in any public event as it was in the trial of Rowan McCoy for the murder of Dan Gilroy. Scores of ranchmen had driven in from the hills to be present either as witnesses or spectators. North of town was a camp with two chuck wagons where the cattlemen kept open house for all the range riders who had ridden down to Wagon Wheel. A beef had been killed and a cook engaged. Everybody was welcome to help himself. At the opposite end of town the sheepmen also had a camp, for the two small hotels were entirely inadequate to hold those in attendance.

The sentiment of the people was strong for a conviction. Rowan had many friends, and the cattle interests were anxious to see him acquitted. But the killing of Gilroy had been so unprovoked that it had aroused a bitter and widespread resentment. The feeling of those not involved in the cattle and sheep war was that an example must be made. Shoshone County had irrigated lands for sale. Its oil fields were on the market for exploitation. Its citizens were eager to prove to the world of investment that the wild, turbulent days were past, that Wyoming had arrived at a responsible sobriety which would not tolerate lawlessness. Once for all they meant to show the night raiders that they were within reach of the courts.

Haight, the new district attorney, was a young man, almost a stranger in the county, and he wanted a record for convictions. Therefore he brought McCoy to trial for the murder of Gilroy rather than Tait. Gilroy had many friends and no personal enemies. He was a quiet, peaceable man. Apparently he had been shot while unarmed and trying to escape. His killing had been wanton and unprovoked. It might be claimed that Tait had always wanted trouble and that he had been struck down while firing at his enemies. But in the case of Gilroy this plea would not stand.

The courtroom was crowded to the windows. Two bailiffs stood at the door and searched every man that entered; for the feeling was so intense that the authorities did not want to take the chance of any possible outbreak. A gun in a hip pocket was too easy to reach.

In his opening statement the district attorney told the story of the sheep and cattle war. He traced the source of the bad feeling between the prisoner and Tait, and showed that the bitterness extended to Silcott and Falkner, two others charged with this murder, one of whom had been wounded and the other beaten up by the sheepman. The prosecution would prove that both Silcott and Falkner had made threats against Tait, that Falkner had been seen to take a rifle from a ranch bunk house in the dead of night, and that McCoy had led the party which killed the two sheepmen. It was, he claimed, immaterial to the case of the State whether McCoy had or had not fired the shot that killed Gilroy. He would introduce evidence tending to show that the prisoner actually had fired the shot, but his honour would tell the jury that this was not necessary to prove guilt. The testimony would show that McCoy with three of his companions rode back to the Circle Diamond Ranch, pretended to the housekeeper that they had spent the night there, and after

breakfast returned to the round-up camp, burying on the way the rifle that Falkner had been seen to take the night before.

Bit by bit, with the skill of the trained lawyer, Haight used his witnesses to spin a web around the accused man. He showed how, after the arrival of Silcott at the camp the night before the raid, McCoy decided unexpectedly to drive the Circle Diamond cattle home and took with him Cole and Silcott. Shortly afterward Rogers and Yerby had departed with flimsy excuses. Falkner had stolen away without any assigned reason. They had not been seen again at camp until late next morning. Hans Ukena, a rider for the Triangle Dot, testified that he had been sleeping in the bunk house the night in question and was wakened by a noise. By the light of the moon he saw Falkner pass through the open door, carrying a rifle in one hand and an ammunition belt in the other.

The interest grew tense when Sheriff Matson took the stand. The big tanned Westerner made a first-class witness. He gave his evidence with a quiet confidence that carried weight. As he told the story of how he had followed the trail of the raiders foot by foot from the scene of the crime to the Circle Diamond Ranch the hopes of the defense sank. For the best part of a day he was put through a grueling cross-examination in an attempt to show that it would have been impossible to identify hoofprints and boot marks after they had been covered with snow. Not once did he contradict or falter as to his facts. He left the stand with the jury convinced that he had told the plain truth.

It had taken three days to select a jury and four more to examine witnesses to date. Wagon Wheel buzzed with gossip. The rumour would not down that one of the prisoners had turned State's evidence and was to be put on the stand next morning.

A wise curbstone prophet mentioned the names of Silcott and Yerby. "It's one of them sure. Shouldn't wonder if it's both of them," he announced at the bar of the Silver Lode.

"You got another guess," interrupted a hillman roughly. "I know 'em both. Won't either of them squeal. They'll go through."

"That's all very well. But if McCoy dragged them into this thing——"

"He didn't. They're not kids. If they went in it was with their eyes open."

Ruth, torn by conflicting emotions, had been present with Mrs. Flanders all through the trial. The testimony of Matson had left her shaken with dread. She felt now that Rowan was guilty, and she believed he would be convicted. But it was impossible for her not to admire his courage under fire. His nerve was so cool and steady, his frank face so open and friendly. One might gather from his manner that he was greatly interested, but not at all anxious.

Immediately after court was declared in session next morning, Haight turned to the bailiff.

"Call Larry Silcott."

A murmur swept like a wave through the courtroom. Men and women craned their necks to see the young cowman as he passed to the witness stand. Ruth noticed that Larry's face was gray and that he kept his eyes on the floor. But even then she had no premonition of what he was about to do.

But Rowan knew. While Silcott answered nervously the first routine questions of the lawyer, the prisoner watched him steadily with a scornful little smile. Rowan had taught him the practical side of his business, had looked after his cattle, given him his friendship.

Once he had dragged him out of the Fryingpan when he was drowning. His feeling for the younger man was like that of an older brother. He had felt an affectionate pride in his pupil's skill at roping and at riding. Now Larry, to save his own skin, was betraying him and the rest of his companions.

Haight was very gentle and considerate of his star witness. But Silcott was in hell none the less. Dry-lipped and pallid, with tiny sweat beads on his damp forehead, he faced row upon row of tense, eager faces all hanging on what he had to tell. Not one of them all but would despise him. His stripped and naked soul writhed, the vanity for once burned out of him. He shivered with dread. It was being driven into him that though he had bought his life he must pay for his treachery with years of isolation and contempt.

The prosecuting attorney led him over the story of the night when he had ridden with the sheep raiders. Step by step the witness took the party from the round-up to the camp at Bald Knob.

"Who had charge of your party?" continued Haight.

"McCoy."

"Did you elect him leader?"

"No. He just took command. He was boss of the round-up."

"Who assigned you positions before the attack?"

"McCoy."

"In what order did he place you?"

"Counting from the left, Cole, Yerby, Rogers, myself, Falkner, McCoy."

"Will you show on the map just how you were placed with reference to the camp and each other?"

Silcott took the pointer and illustrated the position of each man.

"Which of you was nearest the camp?"

"McCoy was closer than the rest of us."

"When was the first shot fired?"

"I judge we were about a hundred yards from the wagons."

"Did it come from the camp or was it fired by one of your party?"

"By one of us."

"Were any of the sheepmen then in sight?"

"No."

"Was it fired to draw them from cover so as to get at them?"

The chief lawyer for the defense was on his feet instantly with an objection. The court ruled the question out of order.

Haight rose, took a step toward the witness, and paused a moment.

"Who fired that shot, Mr. Silcott?"

Larry's eyes went furtively about the room, met those of McCoy, and dropped to the floor. "It—it came from the right."

"How do you know?"

"By the smoke and the sound."

“Did you see who fired it?”

“Falkner or McCoy; I wasn’t sure which.”

Again Rowan’s lawyer objected and was sustained. The judge cautioned the witness to tell only what he knew.

Silcott went over the story of the shooting of Tait with great detail. The prosecuting attorney made another dramatic pause to let the audience get the significance of his next lead.

“Were you where you could see Dan Gilroy when he ran from the wagon?”

“Yes.”

“Will you tell exactly what happened when Gilroy ran from the wagon?”

“He ran out from the back and started for the brush.”

“Was he armed?”

“No.”

“Proceed. What happened?”

“He had run about thirty feet when somebody fired. He fell.”

“Were any more shots fired?”

“No. That was the last.”

“From what direction did it come?”

“From my right.”

“How do you know?”

“By the sound and the smoke.”

“Where did the smoke rise with relation to the defendant?”

Silcott moistened his dry lips with his tongue. He was sweating blood.

“It was close to him.”

Haight threatened him with his forefinger. “Won’t you swear that the defendant fired that shot? Don’t you know he fired it?”

“I—I can’t swear to it.”

“Weren’t you convinced that it was McCoy who——”

The defense objected angrily: “The witness has answered the question. Is the prosecuting attorney trying to bully him to change that answer?”

When at last Haight was through with him the witness dripped with perspiration. But his troubles were only beginning. The lawyers for the defense took him in hand, made him confess his obligations to McCoy, brought out that he himself had proposed the raid, and wrung from him that he was turning State’s evidence to save his own life at the expense of his friends. Two points they developed in favour of their client—that he had repeatedly warned his friends against shooting and that he had saved the lives of the herders from Falkner.

But though Silcott was left a rag, his story stood the fire of cross-examination. When he stepped down from the stand he left behind him a net of evidence through which McCoy could not break.

As Larry moved down the aisle someone in the back part of the room broke the

silence: “You damned Judas!”

Instantly echoes of the word filled the courtroom. The judge pounded with his gavel for silence, but that low-hissed “Judas! Judas!” pursued the young cowman down the stairs. It would be many years before he could recall without scalding shame that moment when the finger of public scorn was pointed at him in execration.

CHAPTER XXI

A COMPROMISE

MURDER in the first-degree.

Not a muscle of the prisoner's face moved as the clerk of the court read the verdict. He gave no sign whatever of emotion. Since Silcott's testimony he had expected nothing less. Now his grave eyes rested on the face of the clerk with steady composure.

The reporters, watching him for copy, would have been disappointed if they had had to depend upon him for it. But into the dead silence of the courtroom was lifted the low, sobbing wail of a woman. Ruth had collapsed into the ample bosom of Mrs. Flanders.

The face of the convicted man twitched, but he did not look around. Without the evidence of his eyes he knew who had broken down under the strain, whose game will had weakened at the blow. In that moment he thought wholly of her, not at all of himself.

A grizzled old cattleman pushed his broad shoulders through the crowd toward the condemned raider. "This ain't the end, boy. We'll work like sixty to get you a new trial. This will never go through—never in the world!" His strong arm fell with frank affection across the shoulders of his friend. "It don't matter what names they call you, son. You're the same old Mac to all of us."

"This is when a fellow finds out who his friends are, Roswell," answered Rowan simply.

He had many of them. They rallied to him by scores—long, loose-jointed, capable men with leathery brown faces, men who had fought with him against Wyoming blizzards for the lives of driven cattle, men who had slept beside him under the same tarp by many a campfire. From Rawlins and Casper and Cheyenne, and even far-away Denver, came words of good cheer. They stressed the point that the fight for his life was just beginning and that the verdict of the jury would not be accepted as final.

A telegram from Pendleton, Oregon, touched him deeply. It was signed by four bronco busters whom he had beaten for the championship at Bad Ax:

Stick to the saddle, Mac. Don't you pull leather, old scout. We're here hollering our heads off for the best rider that ever slapped a saddle on an outlaw. Clamp your knees and hang on tight. Say, Mac, we got a little pile of chips to shove into the game any time you're shy of blues.

ROADY DUNN.
J. C. MORGAN.
SLATS HOFFMAN.
TEX GREEN.

Mrs. Stovall, who had been a very unwilling witness for the prosecution, brought a cake and a cherry pie to the jail for him. Incidentally, she delivered a message with which she had been commissioned.

“Norma says for me to tell you that this trial doesn’t fool her any. She knows you’re being punished for some of the other boys. She wanted I should tell you that she knows you didn’t intend to kill Joe.”

This was an opinion becoming every day more widespread. Men began to say that McCoy was the victim of evil chance. Shoshone County was still determined to see justice done the murderers of Dan Gilroy, but it hoped Rowan would escape the gallows. He had been so game throughout the trial, so careful to bring out nothing to the prejudice of his fellow prisoners that the hearts of men turned toward him.

The financial side of the affair was troubling the officials of the county. The trial had been a long and expensive one. It had cost many thousand dollars, and there was talk of grounds for an appeal. With four other trials yet to come, it became apparent that Shoshone County would be bankrupt long before the finish.

Roswell, acting for a group of friends, went to the prosecuting attorney.

“Look here, Haight. You’re up against it. Maybe you’ve got evidence to convict these boys. Maybe you haven’t.”

“There’s no maybe about that—I have,” Haight broke in grimly.

“Well, say you have. That ain’t the point. The county can’t stand the expense of all those trials. You know that. What are you going to do about it?”

“Going right ahead with the trials. We begin with Brad Rogers to-morrow.”

“Oh, well! We got to be reasonable—all of us. Now here’s my proposition: Let me talk with the boys and their lawyers. If I could get them to plead guilty it would save a heap of trouble all around.”

Haight had looked at the matter from this angle before. He nodded. “All right. See what you can do, Mr. Roswell. If they will save us the expense of trying them, I think I can arrange for life imprisonment.”

“For all of them?” demanded the cattleman shrewdly.

“For all the rest of them.”

“How about Rowan?”

“He’s not included. We’ve got to make an example of him. He led the raid.”

Roswell fought it out with the lawyer for an hour, but on this point Haight stood firm. McCoy had to pay the extreme penalty for his crime. That was not even open to argument.

The old cattleman called at once upon the leading lawyer for the defense, and with him visited the cell of Yerby. The Texan was greatly depressed at the issue of the trial. He could not get over his bitterness at the part Silcott had played.

“I reckon he’s up at the ho-tel eating fried chicken and watermelon. Well, he’s welcome. I wouldn’t swap places with him. Neither would Mac. We all had our chance to do like he done.”

“No, Silcott’s still in jail. He asked Matson to keep him there till the trials are over and he can light out. I expect he don’t like to trust himself outside. Some of the boys are a mite vexed at him.” Roswell came abruptly to the object of his call. “Sam, we got to face facts. Haight has the goods on you boys. He’ll sure convict you.”

“Looks like,” agreed the Texan dejectedly.

“We’ll have to fix up a compromise. If you’ll all plead guilty Haight is willing to call

it life imprisonment.”

“What do the other boys say?”

“They are willing, I reckon, to take the best terms they can get.”

“I’d as lief be dead as locked up in jail for the rest of my life.”

“We’ll get you out on parole in two or three years. The worst of it is that Mac ain’t included in the arrangement. Haight swears he has got to hang.” Eyes narrowed to slits, Roswell watched the Texan while he fired his next shot. “Mac was the leader. There wouldn’t ’a’ been any killing except for him. He’s the responsible party. So Haight says that——”

“Got it all figured out, have you? Mac did the killing. Mac was to blame. I’ll tell you this: If Mac had had his way there wouldn’t have been any killing. Just because he shuts his mouth and stands the gaff—— Dog-gone it, you and Haight can take yore compromise plumb to hell!” decided the Texan, his anger rising.

Roswell gave a low whoop and fell upon him. “That’s the way to talk, old-timer. We’ve got Haight on the hip. The county’s busted high and dry. Folks are beginning to holler already about the expense of the trials. If Haight were to come up for reelection along with a special tax levy to pay for the trials the dear pee-pul wouldn’t do a thing to him. He’s ready to talk turkey. If you lads will stand pat, it’s an even bet that he’ll have to crawfish about Mac.”

“I ’low we’ll stay hitched—all of us that haven’t a big yellow streak up our backs. Why-for should we let Mac get the worst of the deal? You go tell Haight he can’t stack the cards that-a-way.”

Rogers, coming up for trial next day, was anxious to get the matter settled. But he, too, declined the terms.

“I’ll take my chance before a jury unless Haight agrees to lump Mac in with the rest of us. Mac would see Haight in blazes before he would agree to any such raw deal if he were in my place. You can let Mr. Prosecuting Attorney start the fireworks soon as he’s a mind to. I’m willing to go as far as I can. I reckon all the boys are. But I’m too old and tough and stubborn to whine out of it like Larry Silcott. What’s sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. When I see Mac’s name at the head of the list, I’ll sign a compromise.”

Cole and Falkner in turn were visited. The former refused flatly to consider any arrangement which did not include McCoy.

In the interest of psychology or to satisfy his own curiosity Roswell ventured on debatable ground with Falkner.

“Course you don’t owe Mac anything. He led you into this trouble. The whole thing is his fault. Silcott as good as admitted that Rowan did the actual killing himself. Naturally you would be sore on him. Now by accepting Haight’s proposition Mac will be hanged and you other lads——”

“Mac will be hanged, will he?” growled Falkner.

“Sure thing. Nothing can save him if you accept Haight’s terms. But, after all——”

The prisoner looked at the old cattleman blackly. Whatever faults he had, Falkner was not a sneak. McCoy had kept quiet when he might have told the others who had done the killing. McCoy had stood pat from start to finish. He had taken his share of blame when

he might fairly enough have shifted it to other shoulders. If Mac had given the word, it would have been Falkner who would have been hanged while the others got off with prison sentences. The young cow-puncher knew he was to blame for the predicament in which they all stood. His ungovernable rage at Tait was responsible for the killings. Hard citizen though he was, the man was game to the core.

“Who in Mexico wants to accept Haight’s offer?” he snarled. “I’ve lived a wolf, by some folks’ way of it. I reckon I’ll die one. But I’m no coyote. Make another crack like that and there’ll be trouble right here in Cell Fifteen.”

Roswell grinned. To the prosecuting attorney he carried back word that his proffer had been rejected. No compromise would be considered which did not include McCoy.

The hotel where Roswell and his friends stayed became active as a hive of bees. From it cow-punchers and cattlemen issued to make a quiet canvass of the leading citizens of Shoshone County. The result was that Haight and his political friends were besieged for twelve hours by taxpayers who insisted on a compromise being arranged. The long-distance telephone called him up three times that night to carry protests against his policy.

“What’s the idea, Haight?” asked a prominent irrigation engineer in charge of a project under construction. “We stand for the law. We want to see every man punished that was in the sheep raid. But there’s no object in starting trouble with the cattlemen, and that’s what it will amount to if you hang Rowan McCoy. Tait and Gilroy weren’t blameless. They knew what they were going up against. They didn’t have to cross the dead line and ruin the ranchmen on the Fryingpan. A prison sentence all around hits me as about right. I’ve talked with lots of people, and that’s the general sentiment.”

Just before Rogers was to be brought into the courtroom for trial Haight gave way. He had a long conference with the lawyers for the defense and the presiding judge. As a result of this it was announced that the prisoners would plead guilty.

Before sunset each of the five had been sentenced to life imprisonment.

CHAPTER XXII

FALKNER TALKS

WITH the news that Rowan would not have to pay with his life, Ruth's anxiety took on another phase. Their happiness had come to grief. It was likely that the tentative separation caused by her anger at his unfaithfulness would prove to be a final one. But her imperative need was to demand the truth about the sheep raid killings. At the bottom of her heart was still a residuum of deep respect for him. It was impossible to believe that this clean, lean-flanked Westerner with the steadfast eyes was a common murderer who had stolen up at night to compass the death of his enemy from cover. Moreover, there was a reason—a vital, urgent, compelling one—why she must think the best she could of the man she had married.

This reason took her to Sam Yerby's cell at the county jail. She and the Texan had struck up one of the quick, instinctive friendships that were scattered along Ruth's pathway. They had a common sense of humor. When she poked friendly fun at his speech he did not resent it. The girl had completed her conquest of him by taking a great interest in Missie and the baby. She had embroidered for the little fellow a dress which Sam thought the daintiest in the world.

The tired eyes of the old cattleman lit when she came to the door of his prison.

"It's right good of you, Miss Ruth, to come and see the old man before he goes over the road."

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Yerby." She choked up. "But everybody tells me you won't have to stay in very long, and I'm going to look out for Missie and Boy."

Tears filmed his eyes. The muscles of the leathery face worked with emotion.

"I cain't thank you, Miss Ruth, but I reckon you know what I'm thinking."

"Missie is going to teach Boy what a good man his father is, and when you come out you and he will be great friends."

He nodded. Speech at that moment was beyond him.

"All the boys are going to look after your stock just as if it belonged to them. They'll take care of your brand at the round-up and make the beef cut for you just the same."

"That's right kind of them. I sure do feel grateful." He looked shyly at his visitor. Sam knew that all was not well between her and Rowan. "What about you, Miss Ruth? You-all are losing a better man than Missie ever had. He's a pure, Mac is."

Her live eyes fixed themselves on him. "There's something I want to know, Mr. Yerby—something I have a right to know. It's—it's about the sheep raid."

"Why don't you-all go to Mac and ask him?"

"I've been to him. He wouldn't tell me; said he couldn't."

A puzzled expression of doubt lifted his eyebrows. "I don't reckon I can tell you then."

"You've got to tell me. I've a right to know. I'm going to know." She said it with an imperious little accent of feminine ferocity.

“O’ course in regards to what took place——”

“Did you start that night intending to kill Joe Tait?”

“No, ma’am, we didn’t. Rowan told the boys time and again there wasn’t to be any killing. He planned it so it wouldn’t be necessary.”

“Then how was it?”

“I’ll tell you this much: Someone went out of his haid and began shooting. Inside of three minutes it was all over.”

“Did—did Rowan kill either of them?” she whispered.

“I don’t know who killed Tait. Several of the boys were firing. Mac didn’t kill Gilroy. I’m ’most sure of that.”

“You’re not dead sure,” she insisted.

“I’m what you might call morally certain. But there’s one man can set yore mind at rest, if you can get him to talk.”

“Who?”

“Hal Falkner. He knows who started the shooting and who killed Dan Gilroy.”

“I’ve hardly met him. Do you think he would tell me?”

“Maybe he would.” He smiled a little. “I notice you mostly get yore way. Hal’s rough-and-ready. Don’t you mind it if he acts gruff. That’s just his way.”

“I’ll go see him.”

“I reckon it won’t do any harm. But I can tell you one thing, anyhow. If you give Mac the benefit of all the doubts, it will be about what’s right. He saved the herders from Falkner. Silcott testified to that. Before Gilroy was shot I heard yore husband holler to stop firing. Now wouldn’t it be onreasonable to figure that he gunned Dan himself right away? If Mac wouldn’t tell you-all what happened it was because we had all made a solemn agreement not to talk.”

“Do you think that is it?”

“I shorely do.”

“I’m so glad.”

“An’, Miss Ruth?”

“Yes, Mr. Yerby?”

He hesitated before he made the plunge. “I won’t see you-all again for a long time, maybe never. You’re young and proud and high-heeled, like you-all got a perfect right to be. But I want to say this: If you live to be a hundred, yo’ll never meet any one that’s more of a man than Rowan McCoy. He’s white clear through. I’ve seen a right smart of men in my time. Most o’ them had a streak of lean and a streak of fat, as the old saying goes. But yore husband, he assays ’way up all the time. Good luck or bad makes no difference with him. He’s the real stuff.”

A wistful little smile touched her face. “He has one good friend, anyhow.”

“He has hundreds. He deserves them, too.”

“I’ve got to say good-bye now, Mr. Yerby.” She gave him both hands. Tears blurred her eyes so that she could scarcely see him. “Good-bye. Heaps of luck—oh, lots of it! And don’t worry about Missie and Boy.”

“I’ll not worry half so much now, little friend. And I’m hoping all that luck will come to you, too.”

From Sheriff Matson Ruth secured a permit to see Falkner.

The cow-puncher was brought, hand-cuffed, into the office of the jailer. It was an effect of his sudden, furious temper that his guards never took any chances with him. None of the friendly little privileges that fell to the other prisoners came his way.

“Mrs. McCoy wants to talk with you, Hal,” explained Ackerman, the jailer. “Don’t make any mistake about this. I’ll be in the outer room there with a gat. I’ve got a guard under the window. This is no time to try for a get-away.”

Falkner looked at him with an ugly sneer. “Glad you mentioned it, Steve. I’ll postpone any notions I may have in that line, but, take it from me, they are merely postponed. When the time comes I’m going.”

Ackerman shrugged his shoulders and left the room. He thought it altogether likely that some day Falkner would have the top of his head blown off, but he did not want to have to do the job.

“I’ve come to ask a favour of you, Mr. Falkner,” Ruth blurted out.

Her courage was beginning to ebb. The man looked so formidable now that she was alone with him. His reputation, she knew, was bad. More than once, when she had met him on horseback in the hills, the look in his burning black eyes had sent little shivers through her.

“A favour of me, Mrs. McCoy! Ain’t that a come-down? Didn’t know you knew I was on the map. You’re sure honouring me,” he jeered.

It was his habit to take note in his sullen fashion of all good-looking women. When he had seen her about the ranch or riding with her husband or Larry Silcott he had resented it that this slender, vivid girl who moved with such quick animal grace, whose parted lips and shining eyes were so charmingly eager, had taken him in apparently only as a detail of the scenery.

Now his dark eyes, set deep in the sockets, narrowed suspiciously. What did she want of him? What possible favour was there that he could give her?

“I want to know about the Bald Knob raid,” she hurried on. “Maybe I oughtn’t to come to you. I don’t know. But I’ve got to know the truth of what happened that night.”

“Why don’t you go to your husband, then?” he demanded. “Mac knows as much about it as I do.”

“I went to him. He wouldn’t tell me; said it wouldn’t be right to tell anything he knew.”

“That so?” From his slitted eyelids he watched her closely, not at all certain of what was her game. “Then if it wouldn’t be right for Mac to tell you, it wouldn’t be right for me, would it?” The strong white teeth in his coffee-brown face flashed in a mocking grin.

“That was before the trial. Mr. Yerby said he wouldn’t talk then because you had agreed not to.”

“Oh! So you’ve been to Yerby?”

“Yes. He couldn’t tell me what I want to know.”

“And what is it you want to know particularly?”

“You know what Mr. Silcott testified about—about where the shooting started from and about where the shot came from that killed Mr. Gilroy. I want you to tell me that it wasn’t Rowan fired those shots.”

He considered her a moment warily, his mind loaded with suspicions. Was this a frame-up of some sort? Was she trying to trap him into admissions that would work against him later?

“Well, the trial is past now. Mac can talk if he wants to. Why don’t you go to him?” he asked.

“I’d rather you would tell me.”

He grinned. “Nothing doing to-day, my dear.”

Then Falkner met one of the surprises of his life. Fire flashed from this slim slip of a girl. Her eyes attacked him fearlessly.

“You wouldn’t dare say that if you and Rowan were free,” she blazed.

He let slip a startled oath. “That’s right. I wouldn’t.” The cow-puncher laughed hardily. He could afford to make this admission. Nobody had ever questioned his courage. “All right, ma’am. Objection sustained, as the judge said when Haight kicked on any answer to one of his fool questions. I’ll take back that ‘my dear.’ ”

“And will you tell me what I want to know?”

“That’s another proposition. You got to give me better reasons than you have yet why I should. Do you reckon I’m going to put my cards down on the table while you pinch yours up close? What’s the game? What are you aiming to do with what I tell you?”

“Nothing. I just want to know.”

“What for?”

A little wave of pink beat into her cheeks. “I don’t want—if I can help it—to think of my husband as—as a——”

“A murderer. Is that it?” he flung at her brutally.

She nodded her head twice. The word hit her, in his savage voice, like a blow in the face.

“Then why don’t you ask Mac? Are you afraid he’d lie to you?”

“I know he wouldn’t,” she answered with spirit.

“Well, then?” He watched her with hard eyes, still doubtful of her.

“I’m his wife. Isn’t it natural I should want to know the truth?”

“What are you trying to put over on me? Why don’t you go to Mac and ask him?”

She threw herself on his mercy. “We—we’ve quarrelled. I can’t go to him. There’s nobody else to tell me but you.”

There were dark shadows under the big eyes in the colourless face. She had suffered, he guessed, during these last weeks as she never had before. Life had taken toll of her pride and her gaiety. She looked frail and spent.

Something in the dreariness of her stricken youth touched him. He spoke more gently:

“According to Silcott’s story it lies between me and Mac. If he didn’t fire those shots, I did. Do you reckon I’m going to tell you that he didn’t fire them? Why should I?”

Her eyes fell full in his. “Because I’m entitled to know the truth. I’m in trouble and

you can help me. You're no Larry Silcott. You're a man. You stood firm at the risk of your life. Even if it is at your own expense, you'll tell me. Rowan would do as much for your wife if you had one."

Ruth had said the right word at last, had in two sentences touched both his pride and his gratitude.

"I reckon that beats me, ma'am," he said. "I owe Mac a lot, and I'll pay an installment of it right now. Yore husband never fired his gun from start to finish of the Bald Knob raid."

The light in her eyes thanked him more than words could have done.

"While I'm at it I'll tell you more," he went on. "Mac laid the law down straight that we weren't gunning for Tait. He didn't want to take me along because he knew I was sore at the fellow, but when I insisted on going the others overruled him. After the killing Mac never once said 'I told you so' to the others for letting me go along. What's more, when they asked questions about who killed Gilroy and who started the shooting, he gave them no satisfaction. He let the boys guess who did it. If Mac had said the word, the rest would have rounded on me. I would have been hanged, and they would have got short sentences. Your husband is a prince, ma'am."

"Thank you."

"I got him and the other boys into all this trouble. He hasn't flung it up to me once. What do you know about that?"

"I'm so glad I came to see you. It's going to make a great difference to me." There was a tremor in her voice that told of suppressed tears.

Ackerman came to the door: "About through?"

The prisoner lifted his upper lip in a sneer. "Better throw your gat on me, Steve. I might make trouble, you know."

CHAPTER XXIII

RUTH WHISPERS A SECRET

ACKERMAN followed Rowan into the sheriff's office. Matson looked up from the desk where he was working.

"All right, Steve. You needn't wait."

When he had signed his name to the letter he was writing, Matson turned to his prisoner.

"We're going to start on the eleven-thirty, Mac. Your wife is down at the house with Mrs. Matson. She wants to say good-bye there instead of at the depot. I've got considerable business to clean up before train time, so I'll stay on the job. Be back here in an hour."

"You mean that I'm to go there alone?"

"Why not? I'll ask you to go through the alleys if you don't mind. I don't want the other boys to feel that I'm playing favourites."

"I'll not forget this, Aleck."

"Sho! You never threw a man down in your life, Mac. I don't reckon you're going to begin now. Hit the dust. I'm busy."

Rowan crossed the square to a street darkened by shade trees, and followed it to the alley. Down this he passed between board fences. He took his hat off and lifted his face to the star-strewn sky. It would be many years before he walked again a free man beneath the Milky Way. Society was putting him behind bars because he had broken its laws. He did not dispute the justice of its decision. His punishment was fair enough. When he and his friends decided to be a law to themselves, to right one wrong by doing another, they had laid themselves open to blame. A man must be held responsible for his actions, even when the result is different from what he anticipates.

Behind his self-containment McCoy was suffering poignantly. He was on his way to say good-bye to the girl wife he loved. It was his conviction that when he emerged from the shadow now closing in upon him Ruth would have passed out of his life. Already she had wearied of what he had to offer. There was no likelihood that she would waste her young years waiting for a man shut up in prison for his misdeeds. Far better for her to cut loose from him as soon as possible. He intended to advise her to sell the ranch, realize what she could in cash from it, and then file an action for divorce. The law would operate to release her almost automatically from a convict husband.

Mrs. Matson met him at the back door. She led the way to a living room and stood aside to let him pass in. Then she closed the door behind him, shutting herself out.

The parlour was lit only by shafts of moonlight pouring through the windows. Ruth stood beside the mantel. She wore a white dress that had always been a favourite of Rowan's.

Neither of them spoke. He noticed that she was trembling. From out of the darkness where she stood came a strangled little sob.

Rowan took the distance between them in two strides. He gathered her into his arms,

and she hid her face against his woollen shirt. She wept, clinging to him, one arm tight about his neck.

He caressed her hair softly, murmuring the sweetheart words his thoughts had given her through all the days of their separation. Not for many years had he been so near tears himself.

Presently the sob convulsions that shook her slight body grew less frequent. She dabbed at her eyes with a lace handkerchief.

“I’ve not been a good wife to you, Rowan,” she whispered at last. “You don’t know how sometimes I’ve—hated you—and distrusted you. I’ve thought all sorts of bad things about you, and some of them aren’t true.”

His arms tightened. The wild desire was in him to hold her against the world.

“I flirted with Larry Silcott,” she confessed. “I did it to—to punish you. I’ve been horrid. But I loved you all the time. Even while I hated you I loved you.”

The blood sang through his veins. “Why did you hate me?”

“I—I can’t tell you that. Not yet; some day maybe.”

“Was it something I did?”

“Y-yes. But I don’t want to talk about that now. They’re going to take you away from me. We’ve only got a few minutes. Oh, Rowan, I don’t see how I’m going to let you go!”

His heart overflowed with tenderness and pride. Every one of her broken little endearments filled him with joy. Her dear sweetness was balm to his wounded soul.

“Let me tell you this, Ruth. I’m happier to-night than I’ve been for a long time. They can’t separate us if we keep each other in our hearts. I thought I’d lost you. I’ve been through hell because of it, my dear.”

“You do—love me,” she murmured.

He did not try to tell her in words how much. His reassurance was in the lovers’ language of eyes and lips and the soft touch of hands.

They came again to the less perfect medium of words, and she told him of her visits to Yerby and Falkner.

“I knew all the time you couldn’t have done what Mr. Haight said you did; ’way down deep in my heart I knew it. But I wanted to hold a grudge against you because you didn’t confide in me. I wanted to think bad things about you, and yet they made me so dreadfully unhappy, Rowan. And all the time you were sacrificing yourself for the man who brought you into the trouble. I might have known it.”

He shook his head. “No, honey. I wasn’t doing any more than I had to do. We were all partners in the raid. What one did all did. I’ve had plenty of time to think it out, and I know that I’m just as guilty as Falkner. We ought never to have ridden on the raid. If I had set myself against it, the others would have given it up. But I led them. I’m responsible for what happened. So I couldn’t throw Falkner down just because he was the instrument. That wouldn’t have been square.”

“I don’t agree with you at all. If he had done as you said there wouldn’t have been any lives lost. They’ve no right to hold you for it, and I’m going to begin working right away to get you out. I went to school with the governor’s wife, you know. They have just been married—oh, scarcely a year. He’s a lot older than she is and very much in love with her,

Louise says. So she'll make him give you a pardon."

Rowan smiled. "I'm afraid it isn't going to be so easy as that, dear. The governor couldn't pardon me on account of public opinion even if he wanted to do it. I know him. He's a good fellow. But the Bald Knob raid has made too big a stir for him to interfere now."

"He's got to. I'll show you. I want you home." She broke down and sought again the sanctuary of his shoulder.

While she cried he petted her.

After a time she began to talk in whispered fragments.

"I'm going to need you so much. I can't stand it, Rowan, to have you away from me now. I want my man. I want you—oh, I want you so badly! It isn't fair. It isn't right—now."

Something in her voice startled him. He took her by the shoulders and held her gently from him while he looked into her eyes.

"You mean——"

She broke from his hands and clung to him. He knew her secret now. His heart beat fast as he held her in his strong arms. Joy, exultation, humility, fear, infinite tenderness—he tasted them all. But the emotion that remained was despair.

He had forfeited his right to protect and cherish her in her hour of need. She must go through the dark valley of the shadow alone, while he was shut up away from her. What kind of a husband had he been ever to let himself be put in such a position? All his strength and capacity would go for nothing. Because of his folly, her inexperience, her fragile youth would have to face the world unprotected, and even these were to be handicapped by the new life on the way. With what generous faith had she given herself into his keeping, and how poorly had he requited her! That very night he must take the journey at the end of which he was to be buried alive, must turn his back on her and leave her to make the fight alone.

He groaned. Ruth heard him murmur, "My love! My precious lamb!" She read the burning misery in his eyes. Womanlike, she flew to comfort him.

"I'm glad—oh, you don't know how glad I am—now that we are *tillicums* again! I wouldn't have it any other way, Rowan. If it weren't for what's going to happen—I couldn't stand it to wait for you. Don't you see? I'll have a pledge of you with me all the time. When I'm loving it, I'll be loving you."

What she said was true. There had been forged a bond irrevocable between them. He recognized it with a lifted heart. The cross-current of fate that was snatching him from her must at last yield to the sweep of the tide that would bring them together.

"I've made my plans," she went on. "I know just what I'm going to do—if you'll let me. I want to go back to the ranch and run it."

"I'm afraid that isn't possible. This trial has cost me a lot of money. I'm mortgaged and in debt. Besides, ranching takes expert knowledge. It's doubtful whether I could have held the ranch, anyhow. The government is creating forest reserves up in the hills. That will cut off the free range. Sheep are pushing in, and they'll get what is left. We'd better sell out and save for you what little we can. It won't be much, but if the stock brings a

good price it will be something.”

“Please, Rowan. I want so much to try it,” she pleaded. “I haven’t ever been any help to you—thought of nothing but having a good time. You were too good to me—let me spend far more money than I ought. You see, I didn’t realize how hard up you were. But now I’m going to be such a tiptop manager, if you’ll only let me.”

“I would, dear—if it were any use,” he told her gently. “But you would have all your worry for nothing. The new conditions make the old ways impossible. I’m sorry.”

Her coaxing smile refused to accept his decision. “My aunt left me her money, you know. I don’t know how much it is yet. Most of it is property that must be sold. But I can use it when it comes to save the ranch. I’d love to. I want to be helping you.”

“Ask Tim Flanders if I’m not right, sweetheart. He has a level head. He’ll tell you just what I’m telling you.”

“All right. I’ll ask him. We don’t need to decide my future now. There will be lots of time after you have gone.”

Rowan drew her to a chair, and sat down with her in his arms. For once his tongue was not tied. The ten minutes that were left he packed full of all the love that had so long been waiting in his heart for expression.

When she said good-bye to him it was with a wan, twitchy little smile on her face. But as soon as he was out of the room she flung herself down, weeping, beside the lounge.

She was still lying crouched there when McCoy climbed to the vestibule of the through train. He moved awkwardly because his left wrist was shackled to the right one of Cole.

CHAPTER XXIV

AT THE CIRCLE DIAMOND

ROWAN'S decision to sell the ranch was on the face of it a wise one. Ruth recognized this. She knew nothing of cattle, nothing of farming.

But she told herself she could learn. Her interest was very greatly engaged in saving the Circle Diamond for Rowan. Other women had done well homesteading. She knew one widow who raised cattle, another who made money on sheep. Why should she not do the same? It was all very well to say that she had no business experience, but she had as much as other people had when they began. If she did not succeed, the failure would hurt her rather than Rowan.

She talked it all over with Flanders, a long-headed business man who knew cattle from hoof to horn.

"The cattleman sure has his troubles aplenty," he told her. "Short summers, long winters, deep snows, blizzards, bad roads, heavy railroad rates, a packers' trust to buck, drought, and now sheep. A cowman has got to bet before the draw; he can't ever tell whether he's going to finish with a hand all blue or a busted flush."

"Yes, but I've heard you say yourself that cattle-raising used to be a gamble and that from now on it's going to be a business instead," she reminded him.

He took off his big white hat and rubbed a polka-dot handkerchief over his bald head.

"Tha's right, too. Government reports show there's several million fewer cattle in the country than there was five years ago. That spells good prices. There's a good side to this forest-reserve business, too. It keeps the range from being overcrowded, and it settles the sheep and cattle war. I've got a hunch there would be money in leasing the range and putting cattle to run on it."

"Well, then?" she demanded triumphantly.

"That ain't saying *you* could make money. Jennings is a good foreman, but it takes a boss to run any shebang right."

"When the boss is in doubt she could telephone to you."

Ruth always had been a favourite of Flanders's. It pleased him that he could help her in her affairs, and it flattered him to think that he could help her make a success of the Circle Diamond. The conspiracy she proposed intrigued his interest. She had some money. Why not use it to save the ranch for Rowan? Why not let her have the pleasure of showing her husband later how well she had done in his absence? It would give a zest to her life that would otherwise be lacking. Moreover, it would be another tie to bind her to McCoy.

He yielded to the temptation, fell into her plans, grew eager over them. There was a good deal of sympathy for her in the country, so that she had little difficulty in securing a permit for her cattle to range on the reserve at the usual price.

In a letter, Ruth wrote her husband that Flanders thought it better not to sell out just yet, but she gave no details of what she was doing in a business way. She left him to gather that they were watching their chance to get a good figure for the place. There was, she felt, no use worrying him about the venture she was making.

Her interest in the ranch developed amazingly. Jennings was an experienced cattleman and devoted to Rowan. It had been his curt opinion that McCoy was a fool for marrying this feather-footed girl from the East. Her gaiety and extravagance had annoyed him. The flirtation with Silcott had set him flatly against her. But now he began to revise his estimate. He liked the eagerness with which she flung herself into this exciting game of saving the Circle Diamond. He liked the deference she paid his judgment, and he admired the courage with which once or twice she decided flatly against him.

“Dinged if she ain’t got more sense than half the men you meet!” chuckled the foreman on one occasion when her verdict had proved more discriminating than his advice. “The little boss done right not to take that Cheyenne bid for the dogies.” He did not know that it was really Flanders who was responsible for vetoing the sale.

There were hours, of course, when the loneliness of her life swept over Ruth in waves, when she fought desperately for a footing against despair. It was her inheritance to tread the hilltops or the valleys rather than the dusty road. But in general she was almost happy. A warm glow flushed her being when she thought of Rowan. Some sure voice whispered to her that however long he might be kept from her the flame of love would burn bright in his heart.

He had sinned against her pride and self-esteem, and she had forgiven him. He had brought to her trouble and distress by breaking the law of the land. All her Eastern friends pitied her. They pelted her with letters beginning, “Poor dear Ruth.” But she refused to feel humiliated. Rowan was Rowan, the man she loved, no matter what wrong he had done. There burned bright in him a dynamic spark of self-respect that would never be quenched. She clung to this. She never let herself doubt it now, even though one memory of him still stung her to shame.

Ruth was coming through storm to her own. A shock, a sorrow, a sin that by reason of its consequence cuts to the quick—any of these may lead to spiritual crises resulting in a convulsively sudden soul birth. But growth is slow, imperceptible. The young wife had lived for her own pleasure. Now the self was being burned out of her. She came to her new life with humility, with a steadfast purpose, with self-abnegation no less real because it brought to her a great and quiet joy. For the first time in her life she lived with another in view rather than herself. It would be long before she could move in a universe of peace and serenity, but at least she was on the road to self-mastery.

CHAPTER XXV

SILCOTT DISCOVERS HE IS NOT WELCOME

RUTH lay snuggled up on the lounge in her sewing room, one foot tucked comfortably under her, half a dozen soft pillows piled at her back. She was looking rather indolently over the two days' old Wagon Wheel *Spoke* to see if it gave any beef quotations. The day had been a busy one. In the morning she had ridden across to Pine Hollow to inspect a drift fence. Later she had come home covered with dust after watching the men fan oats. Getting out of her serviceable khaki, she had revelled in a hot bath and put on a loose morning gown and slippers. To-night she was content to be lazy and self-indulgent.

A leaded advertisement caught and held her eye. It was on the back page and boxed to draw more attention:

The Open A N C Ranch, together with all cattle and personal property pertaining thereto, is offered for sale by me at a figure much below its value to an immediate purchaser.

I shall be at the ranch, ENTIRELY UNARMED, for a week beginning next Monday. Prospective buyers may see me there.

LAWRENCE SILCOTT

The young woman read the announcement with contemptuous interest. She had expected Silcott to leave the country. It was not to be looked for that a man weak enough to betray his friends would run the risk of living in the neighbourhood of those who had suffered from his treachery. At the two capitalized words she smiled bitterly. They were both a confession and a shield of defense. They admitted fear, and at the same time disarmed the righteous anger of his former neighbours. Ruth conceded the shrewdness of his policy, even while her pluck despised the spirit that had dictated it.

Inevitably she compared him with Rowan. Her imagination pictured McCoy as he had sat through the strain of the trial—cool, easy, undisturbed, master of whatever fate might be in store for him. She saw in contrast Silcott, no longer graceful and debonair, smiles and gaiety all wiped out, a harried, irritable wretch close to collapse. It was the first time she had ever seen two men's souls under the acid test. One had assayed pure gold; the other a base alloy.

Why? What was the difference between them? Both had lived clean, hard lives in the open. Neither of them had spurred their nerves with alcohol or unduly depressed them with overmuch tobacco. Externally both of them were fine specimens of the genus man. But in crisis one had crumpled up, his manhood vanished; the other had quietly stood his punishment. The distinction between them was that one had character and the other lacked it.

Yet all these years Silcott had been accepted in the community as a good fellow. His showy accomplishments, his shallow good looks, and his veneer of friendliness had won a place for him. Ruth was deeply ashamed that she had let him go as far with her as he had.

Her thoughts went back to Rowan. They never wandered very long from him these days. He was the centre of her universe, though he was shut up behind bars in a dingy prison. She knew she was not responsible for the thing he had done, but she reproached herself that she had not been a greater comfort to him in the dark days and nights of trial. She had thought of herself, of her grievances, too much; not enough of him and his needs.

No, that was not true. He had been in her mind enough, but she had not been able to forget the treason to love in which he had involved himself. It had risen like a barrier between them every time she had wanted to let him know how much she suffered with him. There was something about it almost unforgiveable, something that struck at the very roots of faith and confidence and hope. It negated everything she had believed him to be, since it proved that he could not be the man she had so tremendously admired.

Even now she would not let herself think of it if she could help. She thrust the memory back into the unused chambers of her mind and tried to forget.

What she wanted to see in Rowan, what she always did see except for this one incongruous aspect, was what others saw, too, the fineness and the strength of him.

Some sound on the porch outside attracted her attention. A loose plank creaked. It seemed to her she heard the shuffling of furtive feet. Then there was silence.

Ruth sat up. The curtains were drawn, so that she could not see out without rising.

Fingers fumbled at the latch of the French window she had had made. She was not afraid, but she felt a curious expectant thrill of excitement. Who could be there?

Slowly the casement opened. A man's head craned forward. Eyes searched the room warily and found the young woman.

Ruth rose. "You—here!"

Larry Silcott put his finger to his lips, came in, and closed the window carefully.

"What do you want?" demanded the girl, eyes flashing.

The man looked haggard and miserable. All his gay effrontery had been wiped out.

"I want to see you—to talk with you," he pleaded.

"What about?" Her manner was curt and uncompromising.

"I want to explain. I want to tell you how it was."

"Is that necessary?" asked Ruth, her scornful eyes full on him.

"Yes. I don't want you to blame me. You know how—how fond I am of you."

She threw out a contemptuous little gesture. "Please spare me that."

"Don't be hard on me, Ruth. Listen. They had the goods on us. We were going to hang—every one of us. They kept at me day and night. They pestered me—woke me out of my sleep to argue and explain. If it hadn't been me it would have been one of the others that gave evidence for the State."

"I don't believe it."

"It's true. Both Haight and Matson told me so. The only question was who would come through first."

"If that was the only question for you, then it shows just what you are. Did you never hear of such things as honour and decency and fair play? If anybody was entitled to the benefit of State's evidence it should have been the married men, poor Sam Yerby or Mr.

Rogers. They have children dependent on them. Anybody with the least generosity could see that. But you're selfish to the core. You never think of anybody but yourself."

"How can you say that when you know that I love you, Ruth?"

Her eyes blazed. "Don't say that. Don't dare say it," she cried.

"It's true."

"Nothing of what you say is true. You don't know the truth when you see it. They picked you, Haight and Matson did, because they knew you had no strength or courage. Do you suppose that the others didn't get a chance to betray their friends, too? All of them did. Every one of them. But they were *men*. That was the difference. So the prosecution focused on you. And you weakened."

"Why not? I didn't kill Tait or Gilroy. Why should I be hanged for it? I wasn't guilty."

"You are as guilty as Rowan was."

"I dunno about that. He shot Gilroy, if Falkner didn't," Silcott said sulkily.

"Never! Never in the world!" she cried. "Don't tell me so, you cowardly Judas!"

"You can talk. That's easy. But you've never had a rope round your neck. You've never awakened in the night from a dream where they were taking you out to hang you. You've never been hounded till your nerves were ragged and you wanted to scream out."

"I don't care to discuss all that. You had no business to come here. You made your choice to save yourself. That was your privilege, just as it is mine to prefer never to see you again."

His voice rose. "Why do you say that? I'm not a leper. I'm still Larry Silcott, your friend. Say I did wrong. Don't you suppose I've paid? Don't you suppose I've lived in hell ever since? Have I got to spend all the rest of my life an outcast?"

She would not let herself sympathize with his wretchedness. He had betrayed the man she loved, had struck at his life. The harsh judgment of youth condemned him.

"You should have thought of that before you sold out the men who trusted you," she told him coldly.

"I didn't sell them out. I didn't get a penny for it. I told the truth. That's all," he cried wildly.

"You had forfeited the right to tell the truth. And you did sell them out. You wouldn't be here to-night if you hadn't."

Silcott shifted his defense. "I'm sick and tired of things to-night, Ruth. Let's not quarrel," he begged.

"I'm not quarrelling. I don't quarrel with any one except my friends, and I'm trying to make it clear that Mr. Lawrence Silcott is not one of them. You are not welcome here, sir. I ask you to leave."

"Do you chuck your friends overboard when they make one mistake? Don't you ever give them a second chance?" he appealed. "Can't you make any allowance for circumstances? I was sick all the time I was in jail. They took advantage of me. I never would have done it if I'd been *well*. You've got to believe me, Ruth."

"Maybe it's true. I hope so." In spite of herself she was touched by his misery.

"You've got to forgive me, Ruth. I—oh, you don't know what I've been through!" He

broke down and brushed his hand across his eyes. "I haven't slept for a week. It's been hell every hour."

"You'd better go away somewhere," she suggested. "Leave your affairs with an agent. You ought not to stay here."

"No. My nerves are all jumpy. I've got to get away." He took a long breath and plunged on: "I'm going to begin all over again in Los Angeles or San Francisco. I've had my lesson. I'll run straight from now on. I'm going to work hard and get ahead. If you'd only stand by me, Ruth. If you'd——"

"I can't be a friend of the man who betrayed my husband, if that's what you mean."

"You'd have to choose between him and me. That's true. Well, Rowan is in the penitentiary for life. You're young. You can't wait for ever. It wouldn't be right you should. Besides, you and Rowan never did get along well. I'm not saying a word against him, but——"

"You'd better not!" she flamed, the lace on her bosom rising and falling fast with her passionate anger. "You say he is in the penitentiary. Who put him there?"

"That isn't the point, Ruth. Hear me out. You can get free from him without any trouble. The law says that a convict's wife can get a divorce any time——"

"I don't want a divorce. I'd rather be his wife, if he stays in prison for ever, than be married to any other man on earth. I—I never heard such insolence in my life. I've a good mind to call the men to throw you off the place. Every moment you stay here is an insult to me."

He moistened his parched lips with the tip of his tongue. "There is no use getting excited, Ruth. I came here because I love you. If you'd only be reasonable. Listen. I'm going to California. If you change your mind and want to come out there——"

Ruth marched past him and flung the door open. She turned on him eyes that blazed. "If you're not gone in five seconds, I'll turn the men loose on you. They've been aching for a chance."

His vanity withered before her wrath. For the moment he saw himself as she saw him, a snake in the grass, hateful to all decent human beings. It was a moral certainty that she would keep her word and call the Circle Diamond riders. What they would do to him he could guess.

He went without another word.

Presently she heard him galloping down the road and out of her life.

The anger died out of Ruth almost instantly. She was filled with a sense of desolating degradation. There had been a time in her life when she had put this weakling before Rowan, when her laughter and her friendliness had been for him instead of for the man to whom she was married. He had never of course been anything vital to her life, never one hundredth part as important to her as Rowan. Indeed, she had used him as an instrument with which to punish her husband. But the fact remained that she had offered him her friendship, had in resentment flirted with him and skirted the edge of sex emotion.

The feeling that flooded her now was almost a physical nausea.

CHAPTER XXVI

AN EXPLANATION

AS Tim Flanders had predicted, the establishment of government forest reserves changed the equation that faced the cattleman. The open range was doomed, but federal supervision brought with it compensations. One of these was that the man who ran cattle on the reserve need not fear overstocking nor the competition of "Mary's Little Lamb." The market was in a better condition than it had been for years. The price of beef was high, and was still on the rise. Nor was there any prospect of a slump, since the supply in the country was not equal to the demand.

Ruth had every reason to feel satisfied. Her shipment of beef steers had brought a top price at the Denver stockyards. The opportune sale of a house from her aunt's estate made it possible for her to pay the debts that had accumulated from Rowan's trial and to reduce a little the mortgage on the Circle Diamond. The hay-cutting in the meadow had run to a fair average, and already she had in one hundred acres of winter wheat.

She had worked hard and steadily, so that when one afternoon Jennings brought back from the post office a letter from Rowan his young mistress decided to ride up into the hills and read it where she could be alone among the pines. An earned holiday is a double delight. As the pinto—one that Rowan himself had gentled for his bride—picked his way into the cañon mouth through blue-spiked larkspur and rabbit bush in golden splashes the girl in the saddle was nearer happy than she had been for many a day. Her lover's letter lay warm against her breast, all the joy of reading it still before her. The sky was blue as babies' eyes except where a shoal of mackerel clouds floated lazily westward. A meadow-lark throbbled out its full-throated bliss. Robins and bluebirds exulted in the sunshine. Already the quivering leaves of a grove of young, quaking aspens that marched up from the trail to the rock wall were golden with the touch of autumn.

In a pine grove on a sunny slope Ruth read his letter, the tessellated light all about her in warm, irregular patterns. To read what he had written was to see the face of love. It filled her with deep joy, brought with it a peace that was infinitely comforting. She wept a little over it thankfully, though every word carried good cheer.

He was allowed to write only once a week, and everything he sent out was censored. But each letter told her a little more than she had known before of the man she had married. When she had vowed to cleave to him through good and ill fortune he had been a stranger to her. In some ways he still was, just as no doubt she was to him. For underneath the tricks of manner that had charmed him and captured his imagination, what had he discerned of the real woman sleeping in her? As for Ruth, she had married Rowan because of her keenness for the great adventure, Life, of which she supposed love to be a large part.

It had been a little cross to her that he was uneducated in the schools, that he could not parrot the literary patter to which she was accustomed. He spoke and he wrote fairly correctly. Once he had surprised her by a reference which showed her he knew his Scott intimately. But the moderns were closed books to him.

In the last paragraphs of his letter was a reference that showed her his mind went

straight to the relation that lies between literature and life. His letter concluded:

You must not worry about me, dear. Whatever happens, it is all right. From the night that we rode on the raid until I said good-bye to you, I was tied hand and foot in a web of lies. That is all past. I can't explain it, but somehow all the kinks have straightened out. I would give anything to be back home, so as to look after you. But except for that, I am at peace.

From the prison library I got some poems by a man called Browning. It's queer, mixed-up stuff. I couldn't make head or tail of some of it, but every once in a while he whangs out a verse that grades 'way up. Take this:

“The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made;
Our times are in His hand
Who said: ‘A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God; see all, nor be afraid.’ ”

Ever since I came here I had been thinking that myself, but I didn't know how to say it like he does. Most poets spill a heap of language, looks like to me, but this fellow throws a straight rope. Our times are in His Hands! I'm banking a heap on that, honey. No need to fear—just trust and wait. Some day our waiting will be over.

Dusk had fallen before Ruth rode down the trail to the ranch, her spirit still with Rowan up in the pines.

Mrs. Stovall was on the porch speeding a parting guest, a dark-eyed, trim young woman of unobtrusive manners.

“Mrs. McCoy, I want you should meet an old friend of mine—Mrs. Tait,” said the housekeeper by way of introduction.

It was like a blow in the face to Ruth. She drew herself up straight and stiff. A flush of indignation swept into her face. With the slightest of bows she acknowledged the presentation, then marched into the house and to her bedroom.

All the sweet gladness of the day was blotted out for her. Just as she and Rowan were coming together again the woman who had separated them must intrude herself as a hateful reminder of the past. She had forgiven her husband—yes; but her forgiveness did not extend to the woman who had led him into temptation. And even if she had pardoned him, she had not forgotten. It would be impossible ever quite to forget the sting of that memory with its sense of outrage at a wrong so flagrant.

She did not deny that she was jealous. All of Rowan she could hold fast would not be too much to carry her through their years of separation. Except for this one deadening memory, she had nothing to recall but good of him. Why must this come up now to torment her?

A knock sounded on the door. “Supper's ready,” announced Mrs. Stovall tartly.

“I don't want any to-night.”

After a moment's silence Ruth heard retreating footsteps. A few minutes later there

came a second knock.

“I’ve brought you supper.”

The housekeeper did not wait for an invitation, but opened the door and walked in. Never before had she done this.

Ruth jumped to her feet from the chair where she was sitting in the dusk. “I told you I didn’t want any supper,” she said, annoyed.

Mrs. Stovall had promised Rowan to look after Ruth while he was away. In her tight-lipped, sardonic fashion she had come to be very fond of this girl who was the victim of the frontier tragedy that had so stirred Shoshone County. Silently she had watched the flirtation with Larry Silcott and the division between husband and wife. It was her firm opinion that Ruth needed a lesson to save her from her own foolishness. But what had occurred on the porch a half hour since had given her a new slant on the situation. Martha Stovall prided herself on her plain speaking. She had a reputation for it far and wide. She proposed to do some of it now.

“Why don’t you want any supper?”

The housekeeper set the tray down on a little table and faced her mistress. Every angular inch of her declared that she intended to settle this matter on the spot.

Ruth was too astonished for words. Mrs. Stovall did not miss the opportunity.

“What ails you at the supper? Are you sick?” The thin lips of the woman were pressed together in a straight line of determination.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Fiddlededee! It’s Norma Tait that’s spoiled your appetite. What call have you to be so highy-tighty? Isn’t she good enough for you?”

“I would rather not discuss Mrs. Tait,” answered Ruth stiffly. “I don’t quite see why you should come into my room and talk to me like this, Mrs. Stovall.”

“Don’t you? Well, maybe I’m not very polite, but what I’ve got to say is for your good—and I’m going to say it, even if you order me off the place when I get through.”

The answer of Ruth was rather disconcerting. She said nothing.

“When I introduced you to Norma Tait you ’most insulted her. I’d like to know why,” demanded the housekeeper.

“I think I won’t talk about that,” replied the young woman with icy gentleness.

“Then I’ll do the talking. You’ve heard that fool story about Norma and Mac. I’ll bet a cooky that’s what is the matter with you.” The shrewd little eyes of Martha Stovall gimleted the girl. “It’s all a pack of lies. I ought to know, for it was me that asked Mac to drive Norma down to Wagon Wheel in his car.”

“You!” The astonishment of the girl leaped from her in the word.

The housekeeper nodded. “Want I should tell you all about it?” The acidity in her voice was less pronounced.

“Please.”

“You know that Mac used to be engaged to her and that after a quarrel Norma ran away with Tait and married him?”

“Yes.”

“Joe Tait was a brute. He bullied Norma and abused her. When she couldn’t stand it any longer she ran away and ’phoned me to get a rig to have her taken to Wagon Wheel, so’s she could go to Laramie, where her sister lives.”

It was as though a weight were lifting from Ruth’s heart. She waited, her big eyes fixed on those of Mrs. Stovall.

“But folks didn’t want to mad Joe Tait,” went on the housekeeper. “He was always raising a rookus with someone. Folks knew he’d beat the head off’n any man that helped Norma get away from him. So they all had excuses. When I was at my wit’s end Mac came along in his car, headed for Wagon Wheel. I asked him to take Norma along with him. Well, you know Mac. He said, ‘Where is she?’ And I told him. And he took her.”

Ruth nodded urgently, impatiently. She could not hear the rest too soon.

“Mac stands up on his own hind legs. He didn’t need to ask Joe Tait’s permission to help a woman when she was in trouble,” explained Mrs. Stovall. “So he took Norma down and fixed it with Moody so’s he lent her the money for her ticket. Mac had ’phoned down to the depot agent and got the last vacant berth to Cheyenne. He gave it up to Norma and went into the day coach. That’s exactly what he did. There’s been a lot of stuff told by them that ought to ’a’ known Mac and Norma better, and o’ course Tait spread a heap of scandal, but Bart Mason, the Pullman conductor, told me this his own self. Mac never even sat down beside Norma. He talked with her a minute, and then walked right through to the chair car.”

Not for an instant did Ruth doubt that this was the true version of the story she had heard. It was like Rowan to do just that, quietly and without any fuss. How lacking in faith she had been ever to doubt him!

Her heart sang. She caught Mrs. Stovall in her arms and kissed the wrinkled face.

“I’ve been such a little fool,” she confided. “And I’ve been so dreadfully unhappy—and it’s all been my own fault. I got to hating Rowan, and I was awfully mean to him. Before he went away we made it all up, but I wasn’t any help to him at all during the trial. I’m so glad you told me this.” She laughed a little hysterically. “I’m the happiest girl that ever had a lover shut up in prison for life. And it’s all because of you. Oh, I’ve acted hatefully, but I’ll never do it again.”

Mrs. Stovall, comforting the young wife after the fashion of her sex, forgot that she was the cynic of the settlement, and mingled her glad tears with those of Ruth.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE SYMBOL

THE long white fingers of winter reached down through the mountain gulches to the Circle Diamond. Ruth looked out of her windows upon a land grown chill and drear. She saw her line riders returning to the bunk house crusted with snow and sleet. The cattle huddled in the shelter of haystacks, and those on the range grew rough and thin and shaggy.

The short days were too long for the mistress of the ranch. She began to mope, and her loneliness was accented by the bitter wind and the deep drifts that shut her from the great world outside. A dozen times she was on the point of going to Denver for the winter, but her pride—and something finer than pride, a loyalty that held her back from pleasures Rowan could not share and tied her to interests which knit her life to his—would not let her give up the task she had set herself.

Through Louise McDowell, the wife of the governor, she ordered a package of new books sent in from Cheyenne. With an energy almost fierce she attacked her music again, and spent hours practising at the piano. When the winds died down she made Jennings show her how to travel on snowshoes, and after that there was seldom a day during which she could not be outdoors about the place for at least a little while.

Her fragility had always been more apparent than real. Back of her slenderness was a good deal of wiry strength. As the months passed she took on flesh, and by spring was almost plump. The open life she cultivated did not help her pink-and-white complexion, but brought solidity to her frame and power to her muscles.

The boy was born in early April. Norma Tait and Mrs. Stovall nursed her back to health, and in a few weeks she was driving over the ranch in consultation with Jennings.

She had a new venture in her mind, one of which he did not approve at all. She intended to raise head lettuce for the market.

Her foreman did his best to dissuade her from such a radical undertaking.

“This here is a cattle country, ma’am. Tha’s what the Lord made it for. O’ course it’s proper to put in some wheat an’ some alfalfa where we can irrigate from the creek. I got nothing to say against that, because with the price of stock good an’ the quality improved we can’t hardly afford to have ’em rough through the way they used to do. We got to feed. Tha’s reasonable. But why lettuce? Why not cabbages or persimmons or sweet peas, ma’am, if you come to that.”

Jennings softened his derision with a friendly smile.

“Because there is money in this head lettuce. I’ve been reading about it and corresponding with a farmer in Colorado who raises it. He has made a lot of money.”

“Prob’ly he ships to Denver. But Denver ain’t such a big city that it can’t be overstocked with a commodity. It ain’t any New York.”

“But he ships to New York and all over the country. It’s like this. By midsummer the lettuce crop of most of the country is exhausted. The weather is too hot for it. But up in the mountains it can be raised. It develops into a fine solid head, the crispest in the world.

Mr. Galloway, the ranchman I told you about, writes that there is no limit to the market and that this is going to be a permanent and a stable crop for the Rocky Mountain country. He is very enthusiastic about it.”

“Tha’s all right too. I don’t claim he ain’t right. But we’re cattlemen. The Circle Diamond is a cattle ranch. It ain’t any Dago truck farm. Me, I’d never make a vegetable-garden farmer, not unless my farmin’ could be done from the saddle. We know cattle; we don’ know lettuce.”

“If there’s money in it we can learn to know it.”

“How do we know there’s money in it here? This ain’t Colorado, come to that. Maybe it takes a particular kind of soil and temperature. Maybe this guy Galloway just happens to be in a lucky spot.”

“Not from what I read. Anyhow, we can put out a few acres and see how it does.”

“Why, yes, we could,” admitted Jennings. “If we knew how to fix the land for it an’ how to look after it. But we don’t. Why, we don’t even know what kind of seed to buy or what kind of ground to put it in. Honest, ma’am, it looks plumb ridiculous to me.”

“Not to me,” she dissented. “What’s the use of saying that this is a cattle country and not good for anything else when we haven’t tried other things? People have to be progressive to make money. As for your objection about us not knowing the kind of seed to get or the sort of land to use or how to prepare the land, why you’re wrong in all three of your guesses. You buy seed called New York or else the Wonderful, and you plant it in nice rich soil prepared the way you do a garden. I thought we’d use that twenty back of the pasture.”

“H’mpl!” he grunted. “You got yore mind made up, I see.”

“Yes,” she admitted, and added diplomatically, “if you approve.”

“Whether I approve or not,” he grinned. “A lot you care about me approv’in’. You’re some bull-haided when you get started, if you ask me.”

“If you can show me that I am wrong, of course——”

He threw up his hands. “I can’t. I wouldn’t ever try to show a lady she was wrong. All I can do is get ready to say, ‘I done told you so’ when you waken from yore dream about makin’ two haids of lettuce grow where there ain’t any growin’ now.”

“You think I won’t make it grow, and I’ll lose money?” she asked.

“Why, yes, ma’am. I hate to say so, but that’s sure how it looks to me.”

She gave him her vivid smile. “You’re going to live to take off your hat and apologize humbly, Mr. Jennings,” she prophesied.

“I sure hope so.”

Ruth made her preparations to go ahead and assumed that the foreman was as enthusiastic as she was. She did not have to assume that he was loyal and would support her project with a whole heart when it once got under way.

Though she had a healthy interest in making the most of the ranch, Ruth’s real absorption was in the baby. He was a continuous joy and delight.

Rowan, junior, was king of the Circle Diamond from his birth. He ruled imperiously over the hearts of the three women. It was natural that Ruth should love him from the moment that they put him in her arms and his little heel kicked her in the side. He was the

symbol of the love of Rowan that glowed so steadfastly in her soul. So she worshipped him for his own sake and for the sake of the man she had married. The small body that breathed so close to her, so helpless and so soft, filled her with everlasting wonder and delight.

His daily bath was a function. Ruth presided over it herself, but Norma, and often Mrs. Stovall, too, made excuses to be present. His plump legs wrinkled into such kissable creases as he lay on his back and waved them in the air, his smiling little mouth was such an adorable Cupid's bow that the young mother vowed in her heart there never had been such a boy since time began.

But she did not coddle him. His mother had read the latest books on the care of babies, and she intended to bring him up scientifically. He spent a large part of his time sleeping on a screened porch, and, as he grew older, Ruth took him with her when she drove over the place on business.

In every letter she wrote Rowan the baby held first place, but she was careful to show him that the boy was *his* son as well as hers, a bond between them from the past and a promise for the future. In one letter she wrote:

I took Boy up into the pine copse back of the house this afternoon. We were there, you and I and he, and we had such a lovely time.

Isn't it strange, dear, that the things we care about become so infinitely a part of all life that touches us? There is no beautiful thing of sound or vision or colour—no poignancy of thought or feeling—that does not become a sign, somehow, for the special gladness—as though, at bottom, all beauty and dearness rested on the same foundation. To-day the wind has blown swift and gray and strong, so that the hills are purple with it, and the marching pines are touched to a low, tremendous murmur. It is magnificent, as though something too vast and solemn for sight passed by and one could hear only the sweeping of its wings. And the thrill of it is one and the same with the gladness of your letter of yesterday. There is in the heart of them both something finer and bigger than I once could have conceived.

While I was putting Rowan, junior, to bed I showed him your picture—the one the Denver *Times* photographer took just after you won the championship last year—and he reached out his dimpled fingers for it and spluttered, “Da-da-da-da.” I believe he knows you belong to him. Before I put his nightie on I kissed his dear little pink body for you.

Do you know that we are about to entertain distinguished visitors at the Circle Diamond? Louise McDowell and the governor are going to stay with us a day on their way to Yellowstone Park. I can't help feeling that it is a good omen. Last year when I went to Cheyenne he would not give me any hope—said he could not possibly do anything for me. But there has been a great change of sentiment here. Tim Flanders talked with the governor not long since, and urged a parole for you. I feel sure the governor would not visit me unless he was at least in doubt.

So I'm eager to try again, with Rowan, junior, to plead for me. He's going to make love to the governor, innocently and shamelessly, in a hundred darling

little ways he has. Oh, you don't know how hard I'm going to try to win the governor this time, dear.

CHAPTER XXVIII

DISTINGUISHED VISITORS

Governor McDowell was a cattleman himself. His sympathies were much engaged in behalf of the Bald Knob raiders. All the evidence at the trial tended to show that Tait had forced the trouble and had refused all compromise. From his talk with the prisoners the governor had learned that the tragedy had flared out unexpectedly. Personally he liked Rowan McCoy very much. But he could not get away from the fact that murder had been done. As a private citizen, McDowell would have worked hard to get his friend a parole; as governor of the State of Wyoming he could not move in the matter without a legitimate excuse.

It was his hope of finding such an excuse that led him to diverge from the direct road to Yellowstone for a stop at the Circle Diamond Ranch. On the way he called at the ranches of several old-timers whom he had long known.

"It's like this, Phil," one of them told the governor. "The Government has stepped in and settled this whole sheep and cattle war. We don't aim to go night raiding any more—none of us. Sheep are here, and they're going to stay whether we like it or not. So we got to make the best of it—and we do. What's the use of keeping Mac and Brad and the other boys locked up for an example when we don't need one any more? Everybody would be satisfied to see 'em paroled; even the sheepmen would. You couldn't do a more popular thing than to free the whole passell of 'em."

The governor made no promises, but he kept his ears open to learn the drift of public opinion. Even before he reached Circle Diamond he knew that there would be no strong protest against a parole from the western part of the State.

Ruth did not make the mistake of letting the governor see her in the rough-and-ready ranch costume to which she was accustomed. She dressed her hair with care and wore a simple gown that set off the slender fullness of her figure. When she came lightly and swiftly to meet them as the car drew up at the Circle Diamond, her guests were impressed anew with the note of fineness, of personal distinction. There was, too, something gallant and spirited in the poise of the small head set so fastidiously upon the rounded throat.

Mrs. McDowell always admired tremendously her school companion. She was more proud of her than ever now, and as she dressed for dinner she attacked her husband.

"You've got to do something for her, Phil. That's all there's to it. I can't look that brave girl in the face if you don't let her husband out of prison."

He was wrestling with a collar and a reluctant button. "H'mp!" he grunted.

"And that baby—did you ever see such a darling? It's a crime to keep his father away from him."

"It's a crime to keep a lot of men in prison, but we do it."

"I'm not worrying about the rest of them. But Ruth's husband—you've just got to let him out." She came in and perched herself down on a couch beside him and cuddled him in a cajoling fashion she had.

"You can't bribe me, young lady," he blustered. "Don't you see that I can't let McCoy

out unless I parole his accomplices, too? This isn't a matter to be decided by personal friendship. I've got to do what's right—what seems right to the average sense of the community.”

“Do you think it's right to keep Ruth's husband shut up from her and the baby?” she demanded indignantly.

“I don't know. I wish I did.”

“You told me yourself that he's a fine man,” Louise reminded him triumphantly.

“I talk too much,” he groaned humorously. “But say he is. The penitentiaries are full of fine men. I can't free them all. He and his friends killed two men. That's the point. I can't turn them all loose in a year. Folks would say it was because I'm a cattleman and that Rowan and Brad Rogers are my friends. What's more, they would have a right to say it.”

Ruth and Tim Flanders showed the guests over the ranch, and afterward in the absence of the mistress, who was in the kitchen consulting with Mrs. Stovall about the dinner, the owner of the Dude Ranch sang her praises with enthusiasm:

“I never saw her beat, Phil. That slim little girl you could break in two over your knee has got more git-up-and-dust than any man I know. Mac wanted her to sell the ranch and live off the proceeds. Did she do it? Not so you could notice it. She grabbed hold with both hands, cleared off the debts of the trial, wiped off the mortgage, got a permit to run a big bunch of cattle on the reserve, and has made money hand over fist. Now she's in lettuce an' I'm blamed if I don't think she's liable to make some money out of it. Two or three others are aimin' to put some out next year.”

McDowell smiled dryly. “She's doing so well it would be a pity to let Mac come home and gum the works up.”

But in his heart the governor was full of admiration for this vital young woman who had thrown herself with such pluck and intelligence into the task of saving the ranch for her imprisoned husband. The situation troubled him. He wanted to do for her the most that he legitimately could, but he came up always against the same barrier. Rowan McCoy had been convicted of first-degree murder. He had no right to pardon him within fifteen months without any new, extenuating evidence.

The governor was a warm-souled Scotch Irishman. Until the past year he had been a bachelor. He was very fond of children. Rowan, junior, walked right into his heart. Children have an infallible instinct that tells them when they are liked. The young boss of the Circle Diamond opened up his mouth in a toothless grin and stretched his dimpled fingers to the governor. He rubbed noses with him, goo-gooed at him, clung mightily with his little doubled fist to his excellency's forefinger. Whenever Rowan was in the room he claimed the big man immediately and definitely. As for the governor, he surrendered without capitulation. He was a willing slave.

None the less, he was glad when the time came for him to go. It made the big, simple cattleman uncomfortable not to be able to relieve the sorrow of this girl whom his wife loved.

Ruth made her chance to see him alone and let him know at once what was in her heart. She stood before him white and tremulous.

“What about Rowan, Governor?”

He shook his head. “I wish I could do what you want. In a couple of years I can, but not yet.”

She bit her lip. The big tears came into her eyes and splashed over.

“Now don’t you—don’t you,” he pleaded, stroking her hand in his big ones. “I’d do it if I could—if I were free to follow my own wishes. But I’m not.”

Softly she wept.

“Get me some new evidence—something to prove that Mac didn’t shoot Gilroy himself—and I’ll see what I can do. You see how it is, Ruth. Someone shot him while he was unarmed. All five of them pleaded guilty. If Mac’s lawyers can find the man that did the killing I’ll parole the others. That’s the best I can do for you.”

With that promise Ruth had to be content.

CHAPTER XXIX

A DISAPPOINTMENT

DURING the second winter Ruth left the ranch only twice, except for runs down to Wagon Wheel. Late in January she went to Cheyenne with her boy to make another appeal to the governor. He was full of genuine homely kindness to her, and renewed at once his allegiance to Rowan, junior. With the large hospitality of the West, he urged her to spend the next few months as their guest, to postpone her return at least until the snow was out of the hills. But in the matter of a parole he stood firm against the entreaties of his wife, the touching wistfulness of her friend, and the tug of desire at his own big heart.

Her other visit was in April to the penitentiary. McCoy was away as a trusty in charge of a road-building gang near Casper. But it was not her husband that Ruth had come to see. She wanted to make a plea to the one man who could help her. She carried an order from Governor McDowell permitting her to see him.

The hour she had chosen was inauspicious. Falkner, sullen and dogged, was brought in irons to the office of the warden. His face was badly swollen and cut. He pretended not to recognize Ruth, but stood, heavy and lowering, his sunken eyes set defiantly straight before him.

"He's been in solitary for a week," explained the warden. "Makes us more trouble than any two men here. This time he hit a guard over the head with a shovel."

The prisoner had the baited look of a hunted wild animal.

"I'm so sorry," breathed Ruth.

It was plain to her at a glance that he was much more of a wild beast than he had been when she last saw him.

"You needn't be sorry for him. He brings it all on himself." The warden turned curtly to Falkner. "This lady wants to talk to you. See you behave yourself."

But when she was alone with this battered hulk her carefully prepared arguments all fell away from her. She felt instinctively that they would have no weight with him. She hesitated, uncertain how to proceed. The best she could do was to repeat herself.

"I'm sorry they don't treat you well, Mr. Falkner. Is there anything I can do for you—tobacco or anything like that?"

He gave her a sulky sidewise look, but did not answer.

"We're all hoping you'll get out soon," she went on bravely. "They are talking of getting up a petition for all of you."

She stuck again. His whole attitude was unfriendly and hostile.

"I—I've come to ask another favour of you. Perhaps you don't know that I have a little baby now. I'm trying to get Rowan out on parole, but the governor won't do anything unless we bring evidence to show that he did not kill Mr. Gilroy."

He clung still to his obstinate silence. His eyes were watching her now steadily. It came to her that her suffering pleased him.

“So I’ve come to you, Mr. Falkner. You are the only man that can help me. If you’ll make a statement that you shot Mr. Gilroy the governor will give me back my husband. I’m asking it for the sake of my little baby.”

A pulse beat fast in her throat. A tremor passed through her body. The eyes begged him to be merciful.

He laughed, and the sound of his laughter was harsh and cruel.

“I’d see the whole outfit of you rot first.”

“I’m sure you don’t mean that,” she said gently. “You haven’t been treated well here, and naturally you feel hard about it. Anybody would. But I’m sure you want to be fair to your friends.”

“My friends!” he jeered bitterly. “Tha’s a good one. My friends!”

“Isn’t Rowan your friend? You told me yourself that he had stood by you to the finish, though it almost cost him his own life. If he had lifted a finger and pointed it at you he and the others would have been given short terms and you would have been hanged. You said as much to me that day down at Wagon Wheel. Won’t you say as much to the governor now? It can’t hurt you, and it would bring happiness to so many people.”

“You want me to be the goat, eh?”

“I want you to tell the truth. Rowan would in your place. He’d never let women and children suffer for his wrongdoing. I don’t think you would if you thought of it.”

“You’re wastin’ yore breath,” he told her sulkily.

“I wish you could see Missie Yerby and her little boy. They get along somehow because the neighbours help with the cattle. She doesn’t complain. She’s brave. But she does miss Sam dreadfully. So does the little boy. He’s a nice manly little chap, but he needs a father. It isn’t right that he shouldn’t have one. He often asks when his dad is coming home.”

“I ain’t keepin’ him here,” he growled.

“And Mrs. Rogers will be an old woman soon if Brad doesn’t get out. I can see her fading away. It seems to me that if I could help them by saying a few words, by just telling the truth, that it would give me pleasure to make them happy.”

“Different here,” he snarled. “It’s every one for himself.”

“That isn’t what you told me that day at Wagon Wheel,” she said quietly.

“All right. I’ve changed my mind. Let it go at that.”

“Kate is still waiting for Jack Cole. She won’t look at any other man.”

“Makes no difference to me if she waits till Kingdom Come.”

“That’s three women who are unhappy, and Jack’s mother is another, and I’m the fifth. Five women and two children you could make glad by confessing that you started the shooting and killed Mr. Gilroy. Not many men have an opportunity like that. We would bless you in our prayers, Mr. Falkner.”

“Keep right on soft-soapin’ me. See where it gets you,” he taunted.

She ignored his retort.

“We’d do more for you than that. We’d all work for your pardon, too. We’d show how Joe Tait had beaten you up when you hadn’t a chance and how quarrelsome he was. Pretty

soon we'd get you out, too."

"The hell you would! Don't I know? I'd stand the gaff for all of 'em. Ain't I doing it now? Rowan's out somewheres bossin' a road gang. Rogers is in the warden's office. Sam Yerby putters around the garden. An' me—I live in that damned dark hole alone. They're warden's little pets. I'm the one that gets the whip. By God, if I ever get a chance at one of these slave-drivers——"

He broke off, to grind his teeth in a fury of impotent rage.

"Don't! Don't feel that way," she begged. "You get all the worst of it. Don't you see you do? And it makes you unhappy. Let me tell the warden that you'll try not to break the prison rules. It would be so much better for you."

"Tell him I'll cut his black heart out if I ever get a chance."

She was appalled at his venomous hatred. Vaguely she knew that prison discipline was often harsh. Occasionally some echo of it crept into newspapers. Falkner was refractory and undisciplined. No doubt he had broken rules and been insubordinate. It came to her that there had been some contest of stubborn will between this lawless convict and the guards who had charge of him. His face was scarred with wounds not yet healed. She did not know that ridges crossed and recrossed his back where the lash had cut away the skin with cruel strokes which had burned like fire. But she did know that he was untamed and unbroken, that nothing short of death could make that wild spirit quail before his tormentors.

"I wish I could help you," she said. "But I can't. All I can do is ask you to help me. Won't you think about it, please? I know you're a man. You're not afraid to take the blame that belongs to you. If you could only see this straight, the way you would see it if you were outdoors in the hills, I know you would help me."

"I don't need to think about it. I'm playin' my own hand."

"The governor says that if I can get any evidence, any proof that Rowan did not start the shooting or kill Gilroy, he will give him a pardon. It lies with you, Mr. Falkner."

"Well, I've done given you my answer. I'm for myself, an' for nobody else. Tha's the bed rock of it."

For Rowan's freedom Ruth would have gone a long way. She had humbled herself to plead with the convict. But she had known it would be useless. His environment had so deadened his moral sense, so numbed his sympathy, that she could strike no response from him. When she left the prison it was with the knowledge that she had not advanced her husband's cause one whit.

In front of the warden's house a convict was wheeling manure and scattering it on the lawn. Some trick of gesture caught the attention of Ruth. Her arrested eyes fixed themselves on the man. His shoulders drooped, and his whole attitude expressed dejected listlessness, but she was sure she knew him. Deserting the warden's wife, she ran forward with both hands outstretched.

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you!"

For an instant a puzzled expression lifted the white eyebrows and slackened the lank jaw of Sam Yerby. Then his shoulders straightened. He had been caught with his guard down, detected in the mood of hopelessness into which he often fell now.

He came gamely to time. "Well—well, Miss Ruth. I'm sure proud to see you, ma'am." "They told me you were at a road camp. One of the guards said so."

"I was, but I'm back. You're looking fine, ma'am. Missie writes me you-all done got a little baby of yore own now."

She nodded. "Yes, I'll tell you all about it. But how are you? Missie will ask me a hundred questions."

"I'm tol'able, thank you." Yerby, looking across her shoulder, saw a guard moving toward them. He did not mention to her that he was liable to ten days' solitary confinement for talking to a visitor without permission. "How's Missie—and Son?"

"Missie is prettier than ever. She's always talking about you. And the boy—he's the dandiest little chap—smart as a whip and good as gold. You'll be awfully pleased with him when you come home."

"Yes'm—when I come home."

His voice fell flat. Its lifelessness went to the heart of his friend. She saw that hope was dead within him. He was getting into the fifties, and the years were slipping away.

"That won't be long. We're getting up a petition to——"

The guard pushed between Ruth and the convict. "You know the rule, Yerby," he said curtly.

"Yes, sir, and I most generally aim to keep it. But when a lady speaks to me—an old friend——"

"Come along with me."

The old cowman dropped his shovel and shambled off beside the guard.

Ruth turned in consternation to the wife of the warden. "What have I done?"

"He oughtn't to have talked with you. That's the rule. He knew it."

"You won't let him be punished because I made a mistake, will you? He's a Texan, you know. He thinks it wouldn't be courteous not to answer a lady. It would make me very unhappy if I had got him into trouble."

The warden's wife smiled. "I think it can be arranged this time. We all like him. We're all sorry for him. He takes it to heart a good deal that he has to stay in prison. I talk with him when he pots my plants, and he tells me he wants to hear the whining of a rope and to taste the dust of the drag driver, whatever that is. I wish the governor would pardon him. If he stays much longer he'll become an old man with no hope in his heart."

"I'll tell his wife that you are good to him. It will be a great comfort to her. She's a good deal younger than he is, but she's very fond of him."

The meeting with Yerby depressed Ruth more even than her encounter with Falkner. She took home with her a memory of a brave man slowly having the zest of life pressed out of him.

But of this she said little when next she wrote to Rowan. Always her letters had running through them the red thread of hope. She told him that Flanders was getting up a petition for a parole which had been signed by half the county, including the judge who had tried him, every member of the jury, the prosecuting attorney, and the sheriff. Nor did she mention that Ruth McCoy was the motive power behind the petition, that she in person had won the signatures of Haight, Matson, and the judge, as well as hundreds of

others.

The clock struck midnight before she finished her letter:

It is very late, sweetheart—almost utterly quiet, save for a small wind among the leaves, and the night is black and soft, and abloom with stars. Stillness and stars and whispering wind—they are all astir with dreams and questions—yes, and answers, too. I feel sure of that, love—as sure as I do of you.

Will you take “good-night” born of the night’s voices, dear?

She signed her name, turned out the lights, and sat long at the low window, her fingers laced around her knee. The thoughts back of her hungry, shadowy eyes were gropings for the answers of which she had written so confidently.

CHAPTER XXX

THE BLIZZARD

A GAIN spring bloomed into summer and summer yellowed into autumn. A mellow, golden glow lay over the valleys, and in the foothills purple asters and pink thistles lent patches of colour to a brown land.

During the daytime Ruth was busy with business details of the round-up, of the fall beef shipment, of planting and of harvesting. The lettuce crop had been very successful and Jennings had long ago made the *amende honorable* for his doubts. She had experimented with pinto beans, and these were no sooner cut and stacked than the men were hard at it putting in winter wheat. As soon as dusk fell she devoted herself to the baby until he went to sleep for the night. In the evening she took up the accounts of the ranch, wrote to Rowan, held a conference with Jennings, or did a little desultory reading. The housekeeping she left almost entirely in the competent hands of Mrs. Stovall.

In addition to the business of the Circle Diamond and superintending the care of a year-old baby, Ruth had other claims upon her time that she could not ignore. One of these was her promise to Sam Yerby to look after Missie and the boy. It was her custom to have them down for a day every other month and to visit the Yerby place between times.

On a day in mid-November, with Rowan, junior, beside her, Ruth set out in the car for the little mountain ranch. It was a cool crisp morning. The sting of frost was in the air, and the indigo mountains were ribbed with white in the snow-filled gulches. To the nostrils came the tang of sage and later of pine.

After she had driven from the foothills into the cañon, Ruth stopped to wrap an extra blanket around the baby, for the sun was painting only the upper walls as yet, and down by the creek there was an inch-thick ice at the edges. The early fall snows were melting on the sunny slopes above, and Hill Creek was pouring down in a flood. The road crossed the creek twice, but after she was on it Ruth discovered that the second bridge was very shaky. The car got over safely, but she decided to take the high-line road home, even though it was a few miles longer.

Robert E. Lee Yerby came running down to the gate to meet them.

"Oh, Auntie Rufe!" he shouted. "Mumma's peelin' a chicken for dinner."

Ruth caught the youngster up and hugged him. He was an attractive little chap, with the bluest of eyes and the most ingenuous of smiles.

"I like you, Auntie Rufe. You always smell like pink woses," he confided with the frankness of extreme youth.

His r's were all w's, but the young woman understood him. She gave him another hug in payment for the compliment.

"I've brought budda to play with you, Bobbie." "Budda" was the nearest Robert could come to the word brother at the time Rowan was born, and the word had stuck with him, as is the way with children. "Now let me go. I must get out and shut the gate."

"No, it don't hurt if it's open. Mumma said so, tos everyfing's in the pasture."

As she went into the house with Missie, stripping the driving gauntlets from her hands,

Ruth noticed that clouds were banking in the sky over the summit of the range. It looked like snow.

The days she spent with Ruth were red-letter ones for Mrs. Yerby. Missie was a simple mountain girl, born and bred in the Wyoming hills. What little schooling she had had was of the country-district kind. It did not go far, and was rather sketchy even to the point she had gone. But this radiant, vital girl from the cities, so fine and beautiful, and yet so generous of her friendship, so competent and strong and self-reliant, but so essentially feminine—Missie accepted what she offered with a devotion that came near worship. She did not understand how anybody could help loving Ruth McCoy. To be elected one of her friends was a rare privilege. Perhaps this unquestioning approval of all she was and did, together with Mrs. Yerby's need of her, did more to win Ruth than any effort the other woman could have made. She was plentifully endowed with human failings, and flattery of this sort was no doubt incense to her self-esteem.

The women chatted and worked while the youngsters played on the floor. Just before dinner a cow-puncher from the Triangle Dot rode up and trailed into the house with spurs a-jingle. He had come to tell Mrs. Yerby about one of her yearlings he had rescued from a swamp and was keeping in the corral for a day or two. His nostrils sniffed the dinner in the kitchen, and it was not hard to persuade him to stay and eat.

"Wha' a' is?" demanded Robert E. Lee Yerby, pointing to the rowel on the high heel of the rider.

"It's a spur, son, for to jog a bronc's memory when it gits to dreamin'," explained the young man. "I reckon I'll step out and wash up for dinner, Mrs. Yerby."

When he came in, his red face glowing from soap and water, it was with a piece of news he had till that moment forgotten.

"Have you ladies heard about Hal Falkner?"

Ruth, putting a platter of fried chicken on the table, turned abruptly to him. "What about him?"

"He escaped from the pen four days ago—beat up a guard 'most to death and made his get-away. Four prisoners were in the jailbreak, but they've got 'em all but Hal. He reached the hills somehow."

The eyes of Ruth McCoy asked a question she dared not put into words.

"No, ma'am. None of the rest of our boys mixed up in it a-tall," he told her quickly.

The young woman drew a deep breath of relief. The hope was always with her of a day near at hand when the Bald Knob raiders would be paroled, but she knew if they joined such an undertaking as this it would be fatal to their chances.

"Do you think Mr. Falkner will get away?" Ruth asked.

"I reckon not, ma'am. You see, he's got the telephone against him. Whenever he shows up at a ranch the news will go out that he was there. But he got holt of a gun from a farmer. It's a cinch they won't take him without a fight."

Snow was already falling when the cow-puncher took his departure. He cast a weather eye toward the hills. "Heap much snow in them clouds. If I was you, Mrs. McCoy, I'd start my gasoline bronc on the home trail so's not to run any chances of getting stalled."

Ruth thought this good advice. It took a few minutes to wrap Rowan for the journey

and to say good-bye. By the time she was on the way the air was full of large flakes.

The storm increased steadily as she drove toward home. There was a rising wind that brought the sleet about her in sharp gusts. So fierce became the swirl that when she turned into the high-line drive she was surrounded by a white, stinging wall that narrowed the scope of her vision to a few feet.

The temperature was falling rapidly, and the wind swept the hilltops with a roar. The soft flakes had turned to powdered ice. It beat upon Ruth with a deadly chill that searched to the bones.

The young mother became alarmed. The boy was well wrapped up, but no clothing was sufficient protection against a blizzard. Moreover, there were dangerous places to pass, cuts where the path ran along the sloping edge of the mountain with a sheer fall of a hundred feet below. It would never do to try to take these with snow heavy on the ledge and the way blurred so that she could not see clearly.

Ruth stopped and tried to adjust the curtains. But her fingers were like ice, and the knobs so sleet-incrusted that she could not fasten the buttons. It was her intention to drive back to the Yerby ranch, and she backed the car into a drift while trying to turn. The snow was so slippery that the wheel failed to get a grip. She tried again and again without success, and at last killed the engine. Her attempts to crank it were complete failures.

It was a moment for swift decision. Ruth made hers instantly. She took the baby from the front seat, wrapped him close to her in all the blankets she had, and started forward toward a deserted miner's cabin built in a draw close to the trail.

Half a mile is no distance when the sun is shining and the path is clear. But near and far take on different meanings in a blizzard. Drifts underfoot made the going slow. The pelting wind, heavy with the sting of sleet, beat upon her, sifted through her clothes, and sapped her vitality. More than once her numbed legs doubled under her like the blades of a jackknife.

Ruth knew she was in deadly peril. She recalled stories of how men had wandered for hours in the white whirl, and had lain down to die at last within a stone's throw of their own houses. A young schoolteacher from Denver had perished three years before with one of her hands clutching the barbwire strand that led to safety.

But the will to live was strong in the young mother. For the sake of that precious young life in her arms she dared not give up. Indomitably she fought against the ice-laden wind which flung sleet waves at her to paralyze her energy, benumb her muscles, and chill the blood in her arteries. More than once she went down, her frozen legs buckling under her as she moved. But always she struggled to her feet again and plowed forward.

At last she staggered down an incline to a dip in the road. This might or might not be the draw that led to the cabin. There was no way of telling. But she had to make a choice, and life for both her and the baby hung upon it.

Her instinct told her she could go no farther. Ruth left the road, plunged into the drifts, and fought her way up the gulch. It was her last effort, and she knew it. When she went down it was all she could do to drag herself to her feet again. But somehow she crawled forward.

Out of the whirling snow loomed a log wall within reach of her hand. She staggered along it to the door, felt for the latch, found it, and stumbled into the hut.

CHAPTER XXXI

“COMPANY FOR EACH OTHER”

RUTH, weak and shaken from her struggle with the storm, stood in bewildered amazement near the door. A man was facing her, in his hands a rifle. He stood crouched and wary, like a wolf at bay.

The man was Falkner.

“Any more of you?” he demanded. Not for an instant had his eyes relaxed.

“No.”

“Sure of that?”

She nodded, too much exhausted for speech.

“Fine!” he went on, lowering his gun slowly. “We’ll be company for each other. Better shut the door.”

Instead, she staggered forward to the table and put down the bundle of shawls. Her arms were as heavy as though they were weighted. She sank down on the long bench in front of the table.

Like many deserted mining cabins, this one still held the home-made furniture the prospector had built with a hammer and a saw. In one corner was a rusty old stove, just now red-hot from a crackling wood fire.

“Storm-bound, I reckon,” suggested the man, watching her with narrowed lids.

“Yes,” she panted. “Going home from Yerbys’.”

From outside came the shriek of the rising storm.

“It’s an ill wind that blows nobody good, my dear,” he grinned, with a flash of his broken teeth.

Ruth looked round at him, her steady eyes fixed in his. There came to her a fugitive memory of meeting him on a hill trail with that look in his eyes that was a sacrilege to her womanhood. She remembered once before when he had used those words, “my dear.” Since then the wolf in him had become full grown, fed by the horrors of his prison life. He was a hunted creature. His hand was against society and its against him. The bars that had restrained him in the old days were down. He was a throwback to the cave man, and, what was worse, that primitive animal with enemies hot on his trail.

If this adventure had befallen her two years earlier the terror-stricken eyes of the girl would have betrayed her, the blood in her veins would have chilled with horror. But she had learned to be captain of her soul. Whatever fear she may have felt, none of it reached the surface.

A little wail rose from the bundle of shawls. Falkner, his nerves jumpy from sleepless nights and the continuous strain of keeping his senses alert, flashed a quick, suspicious look around the room.

Ruth turned and unloosened the wraps. The convict, taken by sheer astonishment, moved forward a step or two.

“Well, I’ll be dog-goned! You got a kid in there,” he said slowly.

At sight of his mother the face of the youngster cleared. Through all the fight with the storm, snug and warm in his nest, he had slept peacefully. But now he had wakened, and objected to being half smothered.

“Don’t you remember?” Ruth asked the man. “I told you I had a baby. Do you think he is like me or Rowan?”

She walked straight to him, and held the baby up for his inspection.

Falkner murmured something that sounded like an oath. But it happened that Rowan, junior, took to men. He smiled and stretched out his arms. Before the outlaw could speak, before he could voice the sullen rejection of friendliness that was in his mind, Ruth had pushed the boy into his arms.

The soft little hands of the baby explored the rough face of the man. Rowan, junior, beamed with delight.

“You da-da,” he announced confidently.

Ruth managed a little laugh. “He’s claiming you already, Mr. Falkner, even though he doesn’t know that meeting you has probably saved our lives.”

For years Falkner had fought his snarling way against those who held the upper hand. Hatred and bitterness had filled his soul. But the contact with this soft, helpless bit of gurgling humanity sent a queer thrill through him. It was as if pink velvet of exquisite texture, breathing delicious life, were rubbing itself against his cheek. But it was not alone the physical sensation that reached him. Somehow the little beggar, so absolutely sure of his welcome, twined those dimpled fingers around the heartstrings of the callous man. Not since his mother’s death had any human being come to him with such implicit trust. The Adam’s apple in the convict’s throat shot up and registered emotion.

“The blamed little cuss! See him grab a-holt of my ear.”

Ruth left the baby in his arms, took off her coat, and walked to the stove. She held out her hands and began to warm them.

“We were in the car,” she explained. “I took the high-line back because I was afraid of the upper bridge. The machine stalled in a drift.”

“You don’t ask me how-come I’m here,” he growled.

“I know,” she said simply. “Art Philips dropped in to Yerbys’ and stayed for dinner. He told us you escaped four days ago.”

“Did he tell you I killed a guard?”

“No. He said you wounded one.”

“First I knew he wasn’t dead. Wish I’d been more thorough. If ever a man needed killing, he did.”

“They abused you a good deal, didn’t they?” she ventured.

He ripped out a sudden furious oath. “If ever I get a chance at two or three of them _____”

“Better not think of that now. The question is how you are going to get away.”

“What’s that to you?” he demanded, his suspicions all alert.

“I thought if you’d come down to the Circle Diamond you could get a horse. That would give you a much better chance.”

“And how do I know you wouldn’t ’phone to Matson?” he sneered.

She looked at him. “Don’t you know me better than that, Mr. Falkner?” she said gently.

He mumbled what might be taken either for an apology or for an oath.

“That’s all right. I dare say I wouldn’t be very trustful myself if I had been through what you have.” Ruth tossed him a smiling nod and dismissed the subject. “But we’re not down at the ranch yet. How long is this storm likely to last, Mr. Falkner?”

“It will blow itself out before morning. Too early in the season for it to last. I reckon it’s only a one-day blizzard.”

“You don’t think there will be any trouble about getting down to-morrow, do you?” she asked anxiously. “I’m not worried about myself, but I’ve got to get food for Baby.”

“Depends on the snow,” he said sulkily. “If it keeps on, you can’t break trail and carry the kid.”

“Perhaps you could go with me; then you could cut out a horse and ride away after dark.”

“I don’t have to go down there. I can pick up a horse at Yerbys’.” He added grudgingly in explanation: “Me for the hills. I don’t want to get down into the valleys, where too many people are.”

At midnight the storm outside was still howling and the sleety snow was beating against the window. The wind, coming straight from the divide above, buffeted the snow clouds in front of it. Drifts sifted and shifted as the snow whirled with the changing gusts.

The young mother, crouched behind the stove with her baby asleep across her knees, drowsed at times and wakened again with a start to see half-shuttered eyes shining across at her from the other side of the fire. In the darkness of the night she was afraid. Those gleaming points of light, always focused on her, were too suggestive of a beast of prey. With that blizzard raging outside she was a thousand miles from help, beyond the chance of human aid in case of need.

Again her instinct served Ruth well. She rose stiffly and carried the baby across to the man.

“Would you mind holding him for a while? I’ve been still so long my muscles are stiff and numb.”

Grudgingly Falkner took the baby, but as the warm body of the sleeping child nestled close to him he felt once more that queer tug at his heart. A couple of inches of the fat, pink little legs were exposed where the dress had fallen back. The man’s rough forefinger touched the soft flesh gently. To the appeal of this amazing miracle—a helpless babe asleep in his arms—everything that was good and fine in him responded. He had lived a harsh and bitter life, he had cherished hatred and dwelt with his own evil imagination; but as he looked down and felt the clutch of those small fingers on his wrist the devil that had been in his eyes slowly vanished.

Ruth tramped the floor till the pin pricks and the numbness were gone from her limbs. Then she returned to her place against the wall back of the stove. Her eyes closed drowsily, opened again. She told herself that she must not fall asleep—dare not. Falkner was sitting motionless with Rowan in his arms, his whole attention on the child. The

woman's head nodded. She struggled to shake off the sleep that was stealing over her.

When she wakened it was broad day. A slant of sunshine made a ribbon of gold across the floor. Rowan was crying a little fretfully, and the convict was dancing him up and down as a diversion from his hunger.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE CLOUDS BREAK

“CAN’T you do something for this kid?” the man asked gruffly.
Ruth took the baby. “He’s hungry,” she said.
“Then we’d better be hitting the trail.”

Falkner walked to the door and flung it open. He looked out upon a world of white-blanketed hills. The sun was throwing from them a million sparkles of light.

“Gimme that kid,” the outlaw said roughly. “We gotta get him down to breakfast. Here! You take my gun.”

Ruth wrapped up the baby warmly and handed him to Falkner. The man broke trail to the point where the draw struck the road. He looked to the right, then to the left. Safety lay for him in the mountains; for her and Rowan, junior, at the Circle Diamond, which was three miles nearer than Yerby’s ranch. The way up the cañon would be harder to travel than the way down. There was a chance that they could not make it through the snow, even a probability.

“Which way?” asked Ruth.

He turned to the left toward the Circle Diamond. The heart of the girl leaped. The convict had put the good of the child before his own.

The day had turned warm, so that before they had travelled half an hour the snow was beginning to get soft and slushy. The going was heavy. Ruth was not wearing her heavy, high-laced boots, but the shoes she was accustomed to use indoors. Soon her stockings were wringing wet and the bottoms of her skirts were soaked. It was mostly a downhill grade, but within the hour she was fagged. It cost an effort to drag her foot up for each step. She did not want to be a quitter, but at last she had to speak:

“I can’t go any farther. Leave me here and send the boys to get me. Mrs. Stovall will look after the baby.”

The outlaw stopped. There was grudging admiration in the glance he gave her.

“You can make it. We’re through the worst part. Soon we’ll be in the foothills, and there the snow is real light.” After a moment he added: “We ain’t runnin’ for a train. Take your time.”

He brushed the snow from a rock and told her with a wave of his hand to sit down. After a few minutes’ rest she rose and told him she was ready to try again.

Falkner’s prediction of a lighter snowfall down in the foothills proved correct. They rounded a rocky point, which brought them within sight of the Circle Diamond. The smoke from the house rose straight up in the brilliant sunshine. It looked very near and close, but the deceptive air of the Rockies could no longer fool Ruth. They still had two miles to go. The descent to the valley was very rapid from here, and she could see that a scant two inches would measure the depth of the snow into which they were moving.

The young woman slogged along behind. She was very tired, and her shoulders sagged from exhaustion. But she set her teeth in a game resolve to buck up and get through somehow. One after another she tried the old devices for marking progress. She would

pick a mark fifty yards ahead and vow to reach it, and then would select another goal, and after it was passed choose a third. One—two—three—four—five, she counted her steps to a hundred, began again and checked off a second century, and so kept on until she had added lap after lap.

They came to the Circle Diamond line fence, crawled between the strands, and tramped across the back pasture toward the house.

Ruth must by this time have been half asleep. Her feet moved almost of their own volition, as if by clockwork. She went forward like an automaton wound up by a set will that had become comatose.

A startled shout brought her back to life abruptly. A man with a raised rifle was standing near the bunk house. He was covering Falkner.

Swift as a panther, Falkner rid himself gently of the baby and turned to Ruth. He ripped out a sudden furious oath. She was empty-handed. Somewhere between the spot where she stood and the line fence the rifle had slipped unnoticed from her cramped fingers.

The outlaw was trapped.

“Throw up your hands!” came the curt order.

Instantly the convict swerved and began running to the right. Ruth stood directly in the line of fire. The man with the gun took a dozen quick steps to one side.

“Stop or I’ll fire!” he shouted.

Falkner paid no attention. He was making for a cottonwood arroyo back of the house.

The rifleman took a long aim and fired. The hunted man stumbled, fell, scrambled to his feet again, ran almost to the edge of the gulch, and sank down once more.

The man who had fired ran past Ruth toward the fallen man. She noticed that he was Sheriff Matson. It is doubtful if he saw her at all. Men emerged from the bunk house, the stable, the corral, and the house. Some were armed, the rest apparently were not. One had been shaving. He had finished one cheek, and the lather was still moist on the other.

The half-shaved man was her foreman, Jennings. At sight of the mistress of the ranch he stopped. She had knelt to pick up the crying baby.

“What’s the row?” he asked.

“Sheriff Matson has just shot Mr. Falkner.” She could hardly speak the words from her dry throat.

“Falkner! How did he come here?”

“Baby and I were snowbound in the old Potier cabin. He broke trail down for us and carried Baby.”

“Gad! And ran right into Matson.”

“What is the sheriff doing here?”

“Came in late last night with a posse. Word had been ’phoned him that Falkner had been seen in the hills heading for the Montana line. He aimed to close the passes, I reckon.”

Mrs. Stovall bore down upon them from the back door of the house. Ruth cut her off without allowing the housekeeper a word.

“No time to talk now, Mrs. Stovall. Feed Baby. He’s about starved. I’ll look after this business.”

With Jennings striding beside her, Ruth went across to the group surrounding the wounded man.

“Is he badly hurt?” she demanded.

One of her own punchers looked up and answered gravely: “Looks like, ma’am. In the leg. He’s bleeding a lot.”

The sight of the blood trickling down to the white snow for an instant sickened Ruth. But she repressed at once any weakness. Matson she ousted from command.

“Stop the bleeding with a tourniquet, Jennings; then have him carried to the house—to Rowan’s room. Sheriff, ’phone Doctor Irwin to come at once. Better send one of your men to meet him.”

Ruth herself flew to the house. She forgot that she was exhausted, forgot that she had had neither supper nor breakfast. The call for action carried her out of her own needs. Before the men had arrived with the wounded outlaw she was ready with sponges, cold water, and bandages.

After Falkner had been made as comfortable as possible, Ruth left him in charge of Norma Tait and retired to the pantry in search of food. When she had eaten she left word with Mrs. Stovall that she was going to sleep, but wanted to be called when Doctor Irwin arrived at the ranch.

At the housekeeper’s knock she awoke three hours later, refreshed and fit for anything. Ruth had not lived the past two years in outdoor Wyoming for nothing. She had grown tough of muscle and strong of body, so that she had gained the power of recuperation with very little rest.

Having examined the patient, Doctor Irwin retired with Ruth and Sheriff Matson to the front porch.

“What do you think?” asked the young woman anxiously.

“H’m! Think—just missed a funeral,” he snorted. “Bullet struck half inch from artery.”

“But he’ll get well?”

“I reckon. Know better later.”

“When can I move him?” asked Matson.

“Don’t know. Not for a week or two, anyhow. You in a hurry to get him back to that hell where he came from, Sheriff?” bristled the old doctor.

“I’m not responsible for the pen, Doc,” answered Matson evenly. “And by all accounts I reckon Hal Falkner makes his own hell there. But I’m responsible for turning him over to the warden. If I could get him down to Wagon Wheel——”

“Well, you can’t!” snapped Irwin. “He’ll stay right here till I think it safe to move him. It’s my say-so, Aleck.”

“Sure. And while he’s at the Circle Diamond I’ll leave a couple of men to help nurse him. He might hurt himself trying to move before he’s really fit to travel,” the sheriff announced with a grim little smile.

Ruth was head nurse herself. For years she had held a bitter resentment against

Falkner, but it could not stand against the thing that had happened. Put to the acid test, the man had sacrificed his chances of escape to save her and the baby. Alone, he could have reached the Yerby ranch and gone through one of the passes before Matson had closed it. With her and the baby as encumbrances he had not dared try the deeper snow of the upper hills. Because of his choice he lay in Rowan's room, wounded, condemned to a return to Rawlins.

Never in his rough and turbulent life had the man been treated with such gentle consideration. The clean linen and dainty food were external effects of an atmosphere wholly alien to his experience. Here were kindness and friendly smiles and an unimaginable tenderness. All three of the women were good to him in their own way, but it was for Ruth that his hungry eyes watched the door. She brought the baby with her one day, after the fever had left him, and set the youngster on the bed, where the invalid could watch him play.

Falkner did not talk much. He lay quiet for hours, scarce moving, unless little Rowan was in the room. Ruth, coming in silently one afternoon, caught the brooding despair in his eyes.

He turned to her gently. "What makes you so good to me? You know you hate me."

Her frank, friendly smile denied the charge. "No, I don't hate you at all. I did, but I don't now."

"I'm keeping Rowan away from you. It was my fault he went there in the first place."

"Yes, but you saved Baby's life—and mine, too. If you had looked out only for yourself, you wouldn't be lying here wounded, and perhaps you would have got away." She flashed deep, tender eyes on him. "I'll tell you a secret, Mr. Falkner. You're not half so bad as you think you are. Can't I see how you love Baby and how fond he is of you? You're just like the rest of us, but you haven't had a fair chance. So we're going to be good to you while we can, and after you come back from prison we're going to be friends."

The ice that had gathered at his heart for years was melting fast. He turned his face to the wall and lay still there till dusk. Perhaps it was then that he fought out the final battle of his fight with himself.

When Mrs. Stovall came in with his supper he told her hoarsely that he wanted to see Matson at once on important business.

The sheriff drove his car in the moonlight out from Wagon Wheel. Ruth took him in to see Falkner.

"Send for Jennings and Mrs. Stovall. She's a notary, ain't she?" said the convalescent.

Ruth's heart beat fast. "Yes. She was one when she was postmistress. Her term hasn't run out yet."

"All right. Get her. I want to make a sworn statement before witnesses."

Matson took down the statement as Falkner dictated:

I want to tell some facts about the Bald Knob sheep raid that did not come out at the trial of Rowan McCoy. When the party was made up to ride on that raid I wasn't included. They left me out because I had a grudge at Tait. But I horned in. I followed the boys for miles, and insisted on going along. McCoy

objected. He said the party was going to drive off the sheep and not to do any killing. I promised to take orders from him. He laid out a plan by which we could surprise the camp without bloodshed, and made it plain there was to be no shooting. Afterward he went over it all very carefully again, and we agreed not to shoot.

I lost my head when we was crawling up on the camp and shot at the wagon. That was the first shot fired. Tait came out and began shooting at us. Two or three of us were shooting. I don't know who killed him. Gilroy ran out of the wagon to escape. McCoy hollered to stop shooting, and ran forward. I must have been crazy. I shot and killed Gilroy.

Then McCoy ran to protect the herders. He wrestled with me for the gun to keep me from shooting. None of the other boys had anything to do with the killing of Gilroy except me.

It was so dark that nobody knew whether McCoy or I shot Gilroy. McCoy protected me, and said we were all to blame, since we had come together. He never did tell who did the shooting. I looked at his gun a little later, and saw that he had not fired a shot from first to last.

I am making this statement of my own free will, and under no compulsion whatever. I am of sound mind and body, except for a bullet wound in my leg that is getting better. My only reason for making it is that I want to see justice done. The others have suffered too much already for what I did.

Falkner signed the statement. It was witnessed by Jennings and the two deputies. Mrs. Stovall added the notarial seal of her office to it.

Ruth put her head down on the little table where the medicines were and cried like a child. At last—at last Rowan would be free to come home to her. Her long, long waiting was at an end. She could begin to count the days now till her lover would be with her again.

CHAPTER XXXIII

GOOD NEWS

RUTH telephoned a message down to Wagon Wheel to be wired to Governor McDowell that night. It was impossible for her to sleep, and after she had packed she lay awake for hours planning the fight for Rowan's freedom. She found herself framing a passionate plea to the governor and the board of pardons for justice to her husband. She visualized the scene until it became so real that she had to rise from bed, get into a loose gown, and take notes of what she must tell them. Not till nearly two o'clock did she fall into a broken sleep.

The sheriff drove her and the baby to town next morning. From here she sent Louise a telegram to tell her they were on the way to Cheyenne. Matson, with strong letters in his pocket from Haight and the district judge recommending clemency, took the noon train also to add the weight of his influence.

When the train rolled into the station at Cheyenne, Louise was waiting for them in her car. She and Ruth, after the manner of their sex, shed a few happy tears together in each other's arms, while Matson, rawboned and awkward, stood near holding Rowan, junior.

"The board of pardons is to meet this afternoon in Phil's office, and you and Mr. Matson are to have a hearing before it," her friend told Ruth. "It's going to be all right this time, I do believe. I can see Phil means to be reasonable. He'd better. I told him I was going over to the ranch to live with you if he didn't pardon Rowan."

"What does he say?"

"He says that if Falkner's statement is as strong as your wire claimed the board will have to free all four. Phil wants to push the whole thing through as quick as he can for you."

"That's fine," commented Matson. "Will it be a parole or a pardon?"

"Depends on the confession, Phil says," Louise declared. "He has wired the warden at Rawlins to call in any of the four men if they are out on road work. I expect that by this time Rowan and his friends must guess there is something in the air."

This was not the first time that Ruth and her attorney had appeared before the board of pardons. From the very day of his conviction she had missed no possible chance that might help her husband. The members of the board had been very kind to her. She had read admiration in their glances. But the majority of them had voted against her request. To-day somehow it was different. As soon as she entered the inner office of the governor with Sheriff Matson and Rowan, she knew that victory was in sight. The cordial handshake of the chairman, a fatherly old gentleman with Horace Greeley whiskers, was more reassuring than promises. She felt that his grip was congratulating her on the success he anticipated.

Little Rowan prevented the meeting from being a formal one. He wriggled free from his mother and ran forward with arms outstretched to his friend the governor. He insisted clamorously on having his "tick-tock" to play with, and he experimented with the pockets of his Excellency to find which one of them had supplied the candy with which he had been furnished earlier in the day.

Ruth forgot all about the arguments she had meant to present. Instead she told, between tears and smiles, the story of the blizzard and its consequences. The adroit questions of the governor drew the tale of the adventure from her in a simple, dramatic way. No doubt its effect was greater coming from this slender, girlish mother with the dark, wistful eyes and the touch of shyness in her manner. Rowan's lawyer, an expert with juries, knew when to avoid an anticlimax by getting her out of the room.

Just before leaving his office for the night Governor McDowell called Louise on the telephone. That young woman beamed at what he said, and beckoned Ruth.

"Phil wants to talk with you."

Ruth took the receiver, her hand trembling. "Hello!" she said. "Yes, it's Ruth."

"I have good news for you, my dear," the voice at the other end of the wire said. "Rowan and his three friends are to be paroled at once. I am going to make it a full pardon for Rowan and perhaps for the others, too."

For years Ruth had been waiting for this news. Now that it had come she did not weep or cry out or do anything the least dramatic. She just said: "Oh, I'm so glad! Thank you."

"I've been instructed by the board to tell you how much it appreciates the game fight you made and to add that it gives this parole with more pleasure than any it has ever granted."

"When can I see Rowan? And when will he be out?"

"He'll be out just as soon as the papers can be prepared, my dear. I'm coming right home to tell you all about it."

Two more telegrams were flashed westward from Ruth that night. One was to McCoy, the second to Tim Flanders. The message to Flanders laid upon him the duty of notifying the families of the paroled men. Early next morning Ruth sent still another telegram. It was addressed to Jennings, and gave him instructions that made him get busy at once looking after horses, saddles, pack saddles, a tent, and other camping outfit.

Later in the day Rowan, junior, and his mother entrained for Rawlins. The adventure before her tremendously intrigued the interest of the young wife. It was immensely more significant than her marriage had been. All the threads of her life for years had been converging toward it.

CHAPTER XXXIV

A HONEYMOON IN THE HILLS

SAM YERBY strolled up and down the station platform. His wife clung to him on one side and on the other trotted Boy, hand in hand with his new-found father. Outwardly Rogers and Cole took their good fortune philosophically, but the Texan could not hide his delight at Missie, Boy, and freedom. The habits of his former life began to reassert themselves. His cheek bulged with a chew of tobacco. As the old cowman grinned jauntily at Ruth, who had come down to see the party off, he chirruped out a stanza of a range song:

“Goin’ back to town to draw my money,
Goin’ back home for to see my honey.

“Only I don’t have to go home to see her. She done come to see the old man. I tell you it’s great, Miss Ruth. This air now; Lordee, I jus’ gulp it down! But I’ll bet it ain’t a circumstance to that on the Fryingpan. I’m sure honin’ to hit the old trails again.”

Ruth smiled through her tears. “Good days ahead, Mr. Yerby, for all of us. We know just how you feel, don’t we, Missie?”

“When do you-all expect Mac to get in?”

“Some time this afternoon. Here comes your train. We’ll see you soon.”

After the train had gone Ruth walked back to the hotel where she was staying. Governor McDowell had given a complete pardon to all four of the cattlemen, but Rowan had not yet reached town from the distant road camp where he was working. The clerk handed the young woman a letter. It was from Jennings and was postmarked at a small town seventy miles farther up the line.

Ruth reclaimed the baby from the nursemaid with whom she had left him and went up to her room. A man came swinging with crisp step along the dark corridor. She would have known that stride anywhere. A wave of emotion crashed through her. In another moment she was in his arms.

“Oh, Rowan—at last!” she cried.

Presently they moved into the room and he held her from him while he searched her face. Since last he had seen her she had endured the sting of rain, the bluster of wind, and the beat of sun. They had played havoc with her wild-rose complexion and the satin of her skin. She was no longer the hothouse exotic he had married, a slip of a girl experimenting with life, but a woman strong as tested steel. Here was a mate worthy of any man, one with a vigorous, brave spirit clad in a body of exquisite grace, young and lissom and vital.

An incomparable mate for some man! But was he the man that could hold her? His old doubts asserted themselves in spite of the white dream of her his heart had held through the years of their separation. She had been loyal—never a woman more so. But he wanted more than loyalty.

Perhaps it was from him she got it. At any rate, an unexpected touch of shyness lowered her lashes. She caught up the baby and handed him to the father.

“Here is your son,” she said, the colour glowing in her cheeks.

Rowan looked at the little being that was flesh of his flesh and blood of his blood, and his heart went out to the child in complete surrender. Something primeval, old as the race, set him in an inner tumult. The flame of life had passed through him to this dimpled babe. The child was his—and Ruth’s. If he lived to be a hundred, he would never again know quite the ecstasy of that moment.

To escape the tension of her feeling Ruth hurried into explanations. “I’ve made all our arrangements for the next three days. You’re not to ask me anything about them. You’re going to be personally conducted by me and Baby, and you’ll have to do whatever we tell you to do. Do you understand, sir?”

He smiled and nodded. This particular Ruth—the one that gave gay, imperious orders—was an old friend of his. His heart welcomed her.

Apparently her plans included an automobile journey. Within an hour they were driving through a desert of sand and sagebrush toward the mountains. They glimpsed in the distance a couple of antelope shining in the sunlight. Once a sage hen whirred from almost beneath the wheels of the car. Great bare buttes rose in front of them and marched slowly to the rear.

Rowan asked no questions. He wondered where she was taking him, but he was content to await developments so long as he could sit beside Ruth with the youngster on his lap.

As for Ruth her blood began to beat faster with excitement. She was trying an experiment. If it proved a failure she knew she would be very greatly disappointed. Just now it seemed to her that she had set the whole happiness of her life at stake. For if Rowan did not look at it as she did, if his joy in it did not equal her hopes, they would fail by just so much of that unity of mind for which she prayed.

They had left Rawlins before noon. It was well into the middle of the afternoon before the driver of the car stopped at a little two-store village deep in the hills.

“We get out here,” Ruth told her husband.

She settled with the owner of the car, and the man started back to Rawlins. Opposite the store where they had stopped was a corral. Ruth led the way to it. Three horses were eating hay from a rack.

Rowan looked at them, then at Ruth. He had recognized two of the animals, and the third one showed on the flank the Circle Diamond brand.

“Am I to ask questions yet?” McCoy wanted to know.

“If you like,” she smiled.

“Are we to ride home on the pinto and old Duke?”

“Yes.”

“And the sorrel?”

“For a pack horse.”

“You have supplies and a tent?”

“Jennings brought them.”

He took a deep breath of delight. For three days and nights they would be alone, buried together in the eternal hills. Such a home-coming as this had been beyond his

dreams.

“Are you—glad?” she asked, and her voice was tremulous.

“Glad!” He spoke a little roughly to hide his deep feeling. “If I could only let you know how I feel! If I could!”

Her heart jumped with a sudden gladness. Rowan did not want to meet his friends yet. He wanted to be alone with her and the baby. This was to be, then, their true honeymoon, the seal of their love for each other.

Rowan saddled the horses and packed the third animal, throwing the diamond hitch expertly. His wife watched him work. It was a joy to see how the vigour of his spirit found expression in the economy of his movements, in the certainty of his fingers, in the easy power of the shoulders muscled so beautifully where the bronzed neck sloped into them.

Presently they were moving into the bigger hills. They saw no more sage chickens or antelope, but as they wound deeper into the mountains his keen eye detected signs of life that escaped her observation. He made her get down once to look at the trail of an elk.

“We’ve been following his trail from that pine back there,” McCoy told her. “He’s a big fellow, and he was on his way down to water. But he got scared right here, I expect. Maybe he heard us coming, or maybe he smelled a bear. Anyhow, he plunged right into the aspens without waiting to say good-bye.”

“How do you know all that? I believe you’re spoofing, as one of our riders, an Englishman, sometimes tells me when I joke him.”

“He’s left signposts all along the way. There’s one track. See? And there’s another. They’re big tracks and they are far apart. The spread of his forefeet shows that he’s a bull. Now notice where he broke the brush here and how trampled down the young aspens are. His horn ripped the bark clear off this tree. See how far from the ground it is. That shows his height.”

“Yes, but how do you know he was frightened?”

“He dived into the brush mighty reckless. Why didn’t he wait and turn off there by the big rock where the going would be easy? I reckon he thought he hadn’t time.”

They camped far up beside a mountain lake. He pitched tent in a beautiful grove of wide-spaced pines through which a brook sang its way down to the lake. While he unpacked and made preparations for supper Ruth took the rod to try her luck. When she returned half an hour later the tent was pegged down, young pine boughs cut and spread for a bed, and the fire going for their meal. Rowan had the water on to boil for coffee, and slices of bacon in the frying pan ready to set upon the rocks that hedged in his coals.

“I got the big fellow on a royal coachman. He took it with a rush,” she explained.

McCoy cleaned the fish in the brook and cooked them in the pan when the bacon grease was ready. They ate with the healthy appetite of outdoor animals in the hills.

Ruth told him the gossip of the ranch and of the neighbourhood. She retailed to him what she knew of the politics of the county. It pleased her that his interest in these far-away topics was as yet perfunctory. His world just now consisted of three persons, and of the three she was the most important.

“You’re going to lose Jennings,” she told him.

“Isn’t he satisfied?”

Little imps of mischief danced in her eyes. “Not quite, but I think he’s going to be. He has notions of marrying a handsome widow with a sheep ranch.”

Rowan looked at her quickly. “You don’t mean Norma Tait?”

“Don’t I? Why not?” She added a corollary. “Norma is growing younger every day. She has learned to laugh again.”

“I’m glad. Life plays some queer tricks, doesn’t it? But maybe in the end things even up.”

From where she was cuddling the romping boy Ruth looked up and made confession. “At first I thought I wouldn’t bring him with us. I wanted these first days to be ours—just yours and mine. But that was selfish. He has as much right to you as I have. Now I’m glad he is here. You won’t think him in the way, will you?”

It did not seem to him necessary to answer that in words. He took little Rowan into his arms and held him there till the child fell asleep.

When the baby was safely tucked up in the tent Ruth and Rowan walked to the brow of the hill and watched the murk mist settle down into the mountain cañons and drive the purple glow into the lake. They saw the stars come out one by one until the heavens were full of them.

“The day is dead,” he said at last in a low voice which held the throb of pain.

She knew that in his thoughts he was breasting again the troubled waters that had swept them so far apart. Her warm, strong little hand slipped into his. Cheerfully she took up his words:

“Yes, the day is dead—the long day so full of sorrow for us both. But now the night has blotted out our grief. We are at peace—alone—beneath the everlasting stars.”

He could not yet quite escape the net. “I’ve been a poor makeshift of a husband, Ruth. I’ve brought you much worry and sorrow. And I’ve put a stain on you and the boy that never can be wiped out.”

“You’ve brought me all that makes life brave and beautiful.” She turned her buoyant head, and in the white moonlight her smile flashed radiant upon him. “A new day is on the way to us, Rowan. The sun will reach down into the valley there where you and I have been lost in the fog, and all the mist will vanish as if it had never been.”

The man caught his breath sharply. She was so fine! With superb courage and patience she had fought for him. All good things that life had to offer should be hers. Instead, he brought her the poison of the penitentiary record to taint her future.

Something of this he tried to tell her. “I’m a pardoned convict. Your friends will never let you forget that—never.”

“Your friends are my friends. I have no others,” she told him, eyes aglow. Then added, in a murmur: “Oh, my dear, as if what anybody says matters now between you and me.”

Her faith was enough to save them both. He threw away his prudent doubts and snatched her to him. In his kisses the lover spoke.

Presently they walked back to the camp through the gathering darkness. A great peace lay over their world.

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Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Troubled Waters* by William MacLeod Raine]