

A SHOWER OF SILVER

JOHN FREDERICK

(FREDERICK FAUST)

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FAUST

(as John Frederick)

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SILVER

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A Shower of Silver

I

“A WHISPER AND A WOMAN”

The last three months had been a dull time for Bob Lake. He had in the beginning coiled his rope, bidden a profane farewell to his favorite broncho, oiled up his best .45 Colt, planted a gray Stetson on his head, packed a grip, and started to see New York. And he saw it—at a considerable expense. Eventually he parted with everything except the gun and the Stetson, which were holy things to Bob, and, with his last five-dollar bill in his pocket, he sat in at a game of poker with a fat roll and an urgent desire to leave for the land of open skies and little rain. Two hours later he was bound West.

Impulse ruled Bob Lake. Give a man some hundred and ninety pounds of iron-hard muscle, a willingness to fight plus a desire to smile, no master except necessity, and no necessity except the wish for action, and the result is a character as stable as a hair trigger. He had one of those big-featured, but ugly, faces that have all manner of good nature about the mouth, and all manner of danger behind the eyes. He had both enemies and friends in legion, but they all united in the opinion that sooner or later Bob Lake was due to fall foul of the law.

At present Bob Lake was melancholy. This morning he had chuckled with joy to see the mountains of the land of his desire rolling blue against the western sky. It was now noon, and, although the train was rocking along among those same mountains, the joy had departed from the face of Bob Lake. The reason sat in the seat ahead of him.

A newly married couple had boarded the train at ten o'clock that morning at a town in the foothills. The party that accompanied them to the station had swirled about them, laughing, shouting, throwing rice, and out of the confusion had come the girl on the arm of her husband. He was a man as big and Western as Bob Lake, but the pallor of his face bespoke an indoor life. A very handsome fellow, although there were qualities of sternness in him. Bob would not soon forget the grim smile with

which he shook the rice from the brim of his hat and looked back on the shouting crowd.

Then Bob Lake saw the girl. His first impulse was to pray that the seat of the pair would be in his car. His second impulse was to pray that the seat might be elsewhere. For he had a profound conviction that, if he had a chance to look into the eyes of this girl at short range, there would be trouble brewing in no time.

After they had climbed the steps he held his breath, and then straight down the aisle they came. A battery of smiles and chuckles on either side of them marked their progress, and the shouting of the crowd volleyed from outside. The girl was very conscious of it. She came timidly, and her little side glances seemed to beg them to look in another direction, and every step she made down that aisle was straight into the heart of Bob Lake.

Perhaps they would go on through to another car. No, they paused near him, and the crowd with flowers and candy and gay-colored parcels poured around Bob's seat. He saw a gray-haired woman with tears streaming down her cheeks; he saw a gray-haired man with twitching lips that attempted to smile. When the warning—"All aboard!"—had sounded, and the crowd had swept out again, Bob Lake found that the pair were in the seat directly ahead of him.

When he made this discovery, he felt that it was fate. He was as certain of it as if he had seen a shadowy figure in retrospect bidding him rise from that poker table in New York and rush on board the train.

Ordinarily Bob Lake was the very soul of honor; he would rather have blinded his eyes than let them look twice at the wife of another man. But in this case he felt a shrewd difference. Something was taking him up and carrying him on against his own volition as a tide sweeps a man out to the open sea. The irony of it made him wince. Women had never been anything to him. A few had laughed their way into his life for an evening at a dance, but they had all yawned their way out again, and Bob Lake remained essentially heart free. At last it was the wife of another man.

It's fate, he kept repeating to himself. If the thing had not been preordained, why that sudden mad rush from New York? Of course, Bob did not at the moment recall that everything he had ever done had been on spur of the instant. Why, he went on to ask himself, did her glance take hold on him like a hand, if there were not some weird power to blame?

He was glad of one thing—that she was not facing him. He could only see her hair. When he turned to shut out this sight by staring out of the window, the sound of her voice pursued him, tugged at him, made him turn to look at her again and listen with held breath to make out the words. He felt like an eavesdropper, but,

nevertheless, he could not help damning the roar of the train. Something, he kept assuring himself, was going to happen. And when a hundred and ninety pounds of manhood feels that way, something usually does happen.

He made out snatches of the conversation. The marriage ceremony had taken place an hour before they boarded the train. The man's name was Rankin, and the girl's name was Anne. *The most wonderful name in the world*, Bob instantly decided. They were going into the mountains to Al Rankin's country, which the girl did not know, and to his home there that she had never seen.

But what could happen? A train wreck, perhaps. There was a good deal of the boy in Bob Lake. An instant picture was launched in his mind of himself striding through smoke among smashed timbers, carrying the body of the girl. He brushed the dream away and concentrated on reality. For at any moment the train might stop among the mountains—the girl and the man might leave his life forever. The thought turned Lake cold.

Once he got up and walked down the length of the train in order to return a little later and approach the girl so as to see her face. But when he came back, he saw nothing. He was afraid to look. He, Bob Lake, afraid to look a girl in the face. But, although he saw nothing, there was an impression. It was as if a light had shone on him in the night. When he slipped back into his place, his pulses were hammering. And then it happened.

It was the end of a division, and, when the train stopped, a chunky man with a great spread of hat, with baggy-kneed trousers, and riding boots came to the head of the car and squinted down its length. At the same time a newspaper was raised before the face of Al Rankin and shaken out. The result was that Bob Lake did not see what immediately appeared until a pudgy, brown hand appeared over the edge of the paper, pulled it unceremoniously down, and the chunky little man stood looking down at Rankin. He leaned and murmured something.

In fact, his voice was most carefully guarded, but Bob Lake had been training his ear to catch whispers through the roar of the moving train. Now he made out one word: "Arrest."

And he heard what Al Rankin answered: "What charge?"

The whisper which replied to this missed his ear, but Al Rankin immediately rose. His wife was on her feet at the same moment.

"Infernal nuisance," Rankin told her calmly enough. "Meet Bill White . . . an old friend of mine. Bill has a message that takes me off the train here."

"I'm ready, Al," Anne stated.

"Ready for what?"

“To go with you, of course.”

“Nonsense! Break up the trip for this? Certainly not. You stay aboard. When you get to the station, old Charley will be waiting. You can tell him by his beard . . . just like a goat’s. He’ll take you out to the house and make you comfortable. I’ll be up tomorrow.”

He turned and nodded to Bill White, who was watching the girl steadily. He had bowed in a jerky fashion to acknowledge the introduction, and now he was looking at the young wife with a sort of hard sympathy.

“Al, there’s nothing wrong?”

Just a moment of pause. Something gathered in the face of Al Rankin. “Haven’t I told you there’s nothing wrong?” he said sullenly. “You stay aboard and don’t worry. They don’t make enough trouble in these parts to bother me.”

He had changed his tone toward the end of this speech and qualified the scowl with the beginning of a smile. But the blow had fallen. Bob Lake saw the girl wince and whiten a little about the mouth, but she made no further protest. Al Rankin turned with a careless wave of farewell and strolled down the aisle, followed by the little gray-headed man. It seemed to Bob Lake that the girl started impulsively to follow. Perhaps it was the memory of the gruff rebuke that stopped her short and made her sink slowly into her seat again.

From the window he saw Al Rankin sauntering away with his companion. Whatever their business might be, they seemed in no hurry to accomplish it. Then he saw the girl was not looking after them through the window. She sat close to the side of the car with her head turned straight before her.

Al, Bob Lake thought, you sure made a bum play with the rough talk . . . a rotten bad play.

He felt the preliminary lurch of the starting train, and it pressed him back against the seat—just as Al Rankin, he recalled, had lurched back when the chunky little man had whispered into his ear the charge on which he was being arrested. Bob Lake became solemnly thoughtful. There was only one charge which could have disturbed the fine calm of Al Rankin, he felt, and to himself Bob whispered the word: *Murder!* When the thought entered his mind, he glanced guiltily around the car, half expecting to see pitying eyes directed at the young wife. But, instead, everyone was settling back to sleep through that stretch of dreary mountains.

Murder! He was as certain of it now as though he had heard the whisper. And this was the thing for which he had waited to happen. A sudden self-loathing took possession of Bob Lake. He hated himself for the gleam of joy that he had felt as the first surmise came to him. What of the girl? Would she not go through life even as she

sat now, looking straight ahead of her, fearing to meet the eyes of men and women in her shame? All the beauty of her smile would be straightened from her lips, he knew, and the thought made him grind his teeth.

The wheels were beginning to groan as the train slowly started.

And then Bob Lake acted. It was one of those sudden, mad, unreasoning impulses. Two sweeps of his arm planted his hat on his head and gathered up his suitcase. He fairly ran down the aisle and at the door turned for a last look.

She was, indeed, pale, unsmiling, as if she knew the doom that hovered over her. Her glance cleared a little, and, under the fierce probing of Bob Lake's stare, her eyes widened, became aware of him with quiet wonder. The train was gathering headway, and still he lingered to throw all the meaning that was in his heart into his eyes. Everything that he felt was in his glance. Too much, perhaps, and too legible. For now she flushed, and she leaned forward, gazing at him in a sort of horror. It was almost as if she were going to cry out and call him back.

Then he tore himself away, pushed open the door, and poised on the lowest step. The ground was already shooting past with terrifying speed. Yet he gauged his distance, leaned back, and dropped free of the train. The blow crumpled his legs. He went down in a confused mass of whirling arms and legs and suitcase, yet he laughingly scrambled to his feet in time to see a white face pressed against the window as the car shot past. He waved his hand to that face. *How much would she understand?* That thought held him gaping, until the length of the train had rushed past, and the rear end was whipping off into the distance with a mist of dust drawing after it. Then he turned back to take up the adventure. Al Rankin must be saved from the law.

II

“RANKIN’S RECORD”

He had no time to balance reasons nicely or appreciate the folly that had started him on this blind trail. Al Rankin and the stranger had stepped into an automobile where two other men already sat. He saw that Al was put into the back seat between the other men. Then the car shot down the south road.

There were two questions to be asked. One was where that south road led, and

a youngster near the platform told him that it went directly to Everett, twenty miles away. The second question was where he could get an automobile for his own use. It was almost as easily answered, and five minutes after he dropped from the train he was in a machine, speeding down the south road for Everett.

The owner of the car drove him, and he looked a cross between a mechanic and a farmer. Old buckboard customs now made him press the feed with his right foot while his left dangled over the side of the car, and he kept his right shoulder habitually turned to his passenger. Bob Lake had made the necessary explanations about a short business trip, and the first five miles shot past—wild driving over wild roads—without another word exchanged.

They climbed a steep grade and pitched forward at fifty miles on a downward stretch. “You know Bill White?” asked Bob Lake in a different voice.

“Sure, I know the sheriff.”

That was all Bob wished to know. He settled back against the seat until they rushed with open exhaust into the town of Everett. It was rather a village than a town. There was the inevitable single street, deep with dust, and the only up-to-date thing that Bob Lake saw was the automobile in which he sat. His driver came in as the cowpunchers in the good old days used to “come to town.” He came wide open in a dense cloud of dust and came to a stop with jammed brakes, skidding the last few yards into place before the hotel.

“Here you are,” he announced, and one corner of his eye glinted in expectation of applause.

Bob Lake paid him while the dust cloud they had torn up slowly overtook them and enveloped them in white. Then he went into the hotel. When he had secured a room on the second floor and thrown his suitcase on the bed, he slumped into the rickety chair and buried his face in his hands to think. He had great need of thought. Indeed, the last hour had been so dream-like that he would not have been surprised at all if, when he looked up, he had seen the head of Al Rankin leaning against the back of the seat before him and the mountains rushing past the windows of the train. The dust with which he was covered brought him to a realization of the facts. He dragged in a breath through his set teeth and cursed. Once more he had played the impulsive fool.

Perhaps the sheriff had not made an arrest. Perhaps he had only taken Rankin from the train because he needed him badly on a manhunt. Rankin had impressed him as a fighting type. Of course, it was strange that a man’s honeymoon should be interrupted for such a purpose, but, Bob Lake knew, stranger things than this had happened in the mountain-desert country.

He made brief preparations to hunt for information. The shoes came off his feet. The riding boots that he had been unable to leave behind when he started in New York, and which he had never been able to trust to the chance delivery of a trunk—those priceless shop-made boots—were drawn upon his feet. He took a step in them, and the clinking of the spurs was music to his ears. He stepped to the mirror and grinned at the face he saw—the red necktie, the high stiff collar, the coat. Ten seconds tore away that mask. The collar and tie were gone, tossed to a corner of the room, and a voluminous silk bandanna knotted in place around his neck skillfully. Out of the suitcase came the old cartridge belt, and the gun, that had been worn so long in concealment, came into the open and was dropped with a thud into the holster. Last he tossed off his coat and unbuttoned his vest. He was ready again to take his place in the world as a man. But first he walked up and down the room to ease his feet into the familiar boots with their paper-thin soles. Then he tried his gun half a dozen times for the sheer joy of feeling it come out in his fingertips as freely as the wind and the hug of the butt against the palm of his hand.

Then he started out to find information. It came to him at once and not through a coincidence. The whole town was buzzing with it, and most of the buzzing concentrated on the verandah of the hotel. With a little patience he could have gathered the whole tale piecemeal from exclamations and bits of irrelevant news. But he preferred to get his facts in a lump. He found a man young enough to tell the truth and old enough to yearn for an audience. Bob Lake cornered him, and appealed as a stranger for the story.

The fellow was delighted. First a leisurely examination assured him that Bob “belonged” and was “right.” Then he launched into the narrative.

“Them boys think they know a lot,” he said. “But what they’re short on is the facts. I know, because I’m the only one that seen the sheriff since he brought Rankin to town.”

“Is Rankin an outlaw?”

“Worse.”

“Eh?”

“I mean he’s the kind that does things and never gets picked up for ’em. Most boys that goes wrong are plumb fools, or else the booze gets ’em, or they get mad about a little thing and do a big thing that’s worse. Al Rankin ain’t none of them. He’s crooked because it pays him. Oh, everybody has known it for a long time. A lot of things happened around these parts. There was that gang that stole Chet Bernard’s cows three years back. There was the killing of young Murphy, and there was the shooting of Lanning and Halsey. Self-defense, you see?” He winked at Bob

Lake without mirth. "I leave it to you, stranger. When a gent practices two hours a day with the cards and never loses when he's playing for big stakes, would you call him a gambler or a card sharp?"

"Hmm," murmured Bob Lake.

"And when a gent goes out and practices with his gun, shooting from all kinds of positions, fanning 'er and wasting a hundred shots a day, would you say that gent was a straight gunfighter who knew he would have trouble and was getting all set to meet it?"

"Hmm," repeated Bob Lake.

"And when a gent kills another man in self-defense . . . well, that's all right. But, when he shoots two more, that self-defense looks kind of thin, eh? And when you add all the facts up, you begin to figure that you've got a gambler and a robber and a man-killer. But with a smart one like Al Rankin, it ain't easy to nail anything on him. They even say he's got a home in another part of the mountains, and that he's pretty well thought of up there. He goes other places and raises his trouble and gets his income.

"Well, Bill White has had his eye on Al for a long time, but he couldn't get nothing to use on him. There was always a lot of bad talk, but bad talk ain't any good with twelve men in a jury box that want facts to hang a man with. So Bill kept waiting for facts, and pretty soon the facts come.

"You see, there was a killing about a year back that nobody thought much of. Sam Coy was a bad one . . . bad all the way through. When he was found dead at the door of his shack, nobody did much except shrug their shoulders. Good riddance, everybody said.

"Well, sir, I'll come back to the Coy killing pretty soon. In the meantime, Al Rankin was pretty sweet on Hugh Smiley's daughter, Sylvia. He kept taking her around to all the parties, and folks begun to say maybe Al would marry and settle down. Worse ones than him has turned out straight. And Sylvia is a pretty fine girl by all accounts. But after a while Al Rankin drops her. That's his way.

"This time he had her expecting to marry him sure, and it about broke her heart, they say. Well, the next thing you know, there comes talk that Al Rankin is down to Polkville trying to marry another girl, and Hugh Smiley gets all heated up about it. Polkville is over behind the mountains, you know.

"Then Hugh Smiley comes into town and says to the sheriff . . . Bill White told me this himself not more'n half an hour ago . . . Hugh says to Bill . . . 'I got something that'll hang Al Rankin.'

"Give it to me,' says Bill.

“Not while Al is ranging around loose,’ says Hugh. ‘I ain’t ready to die.’

“How come, then?’ says Bill.

“Put him behind bars, and then I’ll give you the testimony that’ll hang him.’

“Are you sure?’ says the sheriff.

“Sure as I live,’ says Hugh Smiley.

“But you got to get it to me, quick,’ says the sheriff. ‘If I lock up Al, I got to have the testimony in my hands within the day. I can’t hold him on a trumped-up charge longer’n that. Besides, I’d have him gunning for me after he got turned loose.’

“Partner,’ says Hugh, ‘they ain’t any doubt about it. I got something that’ll hang him. Just show me that I’m safe first, and I’ll bring it. But not till you got Al behind bars.’

“What’ll it convict him of?’

“The murder of Coy.’

“Well, it didn’t take Bill White long to start up some action. *Pronto* he wires to Polkville and hears that Al is all married and on his way to his home. The sheriff cuts across the country and grabs Al off’n the train with a trumped-up warrant that don’t amount to nothing. Then he sent out word by a machine that was driving past Hugh Smiley’s place to get Hugh to come in with the evidence. Hugh’ll be coming in on the west road ’most any time now on his old, one-eared roan. I sold him that hoss, and Hugh still rides him . . . ten years, I guess.”

There was more talk of it, but Bob Lake closed his ears to the tiresome chatter. He needed some thought.

III

“PHILANTHROPIC INTERFERENCE”

There was no doubt in his mind that Al Rankin was guilty of all the crimes that the old man had charged against him, and even more. But a cold syllogism looked Bob Lake in the face. He had vowed himself to secure the happiness of Anne Rankin. Anne Rankin loved Al Rankin. To secure her happiness he must make the criminal safe. A more foresighted man might have pondered long before he reached the same conclusion; certainly he must have weighed much evidence pro and con. But Bob

Lake was not foresighted, nor was he fitted to ponder nice questions. He had a hundred and ninety pounds of muscle suitable for action, and by action he was accustomed to cut the Gordian knot.

Moreover, spurring him on into the service of Al Rankin was the fact that he had coveted the wife of another man the moment he laid eyes on her. To the spotless honor of Bob Lake that was an indelible stain. Indeed, the honor of Bob Lake was almost a proverbial thing on his own ranges. And now he was determined to wipe away the blot, if he could, by assiduously serving the man whom he had in thought shamefully wronged. A very nice distinction, some would have said—to Bob Lake it was as clear as day.

The important thing was, if possible, to keep the evidence of Hugh Smiley from reaching the hands of the sheriff. To that end Bob secured a horse as soon as possible, saddled, and rode at full speed for the west road out of Everett. When he was clear of the town, he sent home the spurs and proceeded at a wild gallop.

It was a matter of four or five miles before he saw a small dust cloud ahead of him, and, as soon as he had made sure from the slowness of its approach that it was a horseman and not a wind drift of dust, he checked his own pace to a lope. The dust cloud eventually cleared, and he was aware of a middle-aged fellow on a roan, one of whose ears was close-cropped. Bob Lake made straight for him and reined in beside the other.

“You’re Hugh Smiley?”

“Maybe,” said the other without enthusiasm, and he studied Bob with intense interest not untinged with alarm.

“If you are, speak up. I’m from Sheriff Bill White. New man of his. Name’s Bob Lake.”

“What are you doing out here?” asked the rider of the roan uneasily.

“The word’s out,” said Bob Lake cheerfully, “that you’re bringing in the evidence that’ll hang that skunk, Al Rankin. The sheriff doesn’t want to take any chances.”

“Any chances of what?”

“Chances that some friend of Al Rankin’s might cut in on you and keep you from landing the evidence in Bill White’s safe.”

“Who ever heard of Al having any friends around these parts?”

“You never can tell. The sheriff ain’t taking any chances.”

“Maybe not.”

Hugh Smiley remained entirely uncommunicative. He was a rat-faced fellow with one of those noses that dip out to a point, forehead and chin receding at exactly the same angle, and yellowish teeth of prodigious length, and his little eyes roved over

and over the big body of Bob Lake.

“Anyway,” said Bob, “they ain’t any harm in me riding in beside you, and if anything should happen . . . why, then I’ll come in handy.”

“But nothing’ll happen,” protested Smiley in growing uneasiness, and he shifted his glance to search the hills through which they were riding. “Nothing’ll happen. Everybody knows that Al never played no partners. He was always a lone hand.”

“Sure. The point is, Bill ain’t taking any chances of any kind. Ain’t hard to see why. If he hangs Rankin, it’ll be a feather in his cap. He can have his job for life . . . pretty near.”

“Yep, pretty near.”

“I ain’t an old hand around these parts, but I been here long enough to find out that Rankin is a skunk.”

Under this stimulating talk, Hugh Smiley grew more communicative. “Yep, I guess I’m doing a pretty good thing all around for the boys.”

“And a thing that takes a lot of nerve,” Bob Lake said frankly. “I been raised in a pretty hard country, and I’ve had my knocks, but I’d hate to come up ag’in’ a gunfighter like Al Rankin, even if he was behind bars.”

“Would you?” Smiley shuddered at the prospect. “What’s him to me?” he declared bravely. “Ain’t he flesh and blood just like me?” He was trying to bring back his courage, but his color changed.

“Just flesh and blood,” admitted Bob Lake, “but a pretty dangerous sort. I tell you there’s going to be a pile of the boys around town that’ll want to shake hands with you, when Rankin is strung up, Smiley! I’ve heard talk already. They was some even said they didn’t think it was in you.”

Smiley warmed again half-heartedly. “All that glitters ain’t gold by a long sight,” he declared. “You can lay to that. I ain’t around blustering and bluffing like the younger gents, but I stand for my rights and most generally git ’em.”

“Sure you do,” returned Bob Lake. “I could see you was that kind at a glance.”

Hugh Smiley now expanded like a flower in the sun of this admiration. “And I’m the man that’s going to hang Rankin,” he declared.

“A good thing, too.”

“Is it? I’ll tell a man it is, son!”

“What I can’t figure is how a smooth one like him would ever leave the evidence lying around?”

“Sounds queer, don’t it? I’ll tell you how it was. He got into a little trouble with Coy, I figure. Maybe he didn’t go there to kill him on purpose. But Al has a devil of a temper, and it must have flared up on him while he was talking to Coy. Must have

begun first with a lot of wrestling around. The ground was all stamped up in front of the door. Then they went for their guns. Al maybe dropped his, but he got Coy's away from him and shot him plumb through the heart.

"I was coming by, and I heard the noise. I let out a yell and started on the gallop. Most like Al heard me yell and didn't think of nothing except to get on his hoss and get away. Which he done, but he left his gun behind him. I come up, find Coy dead, and Al's gun on the ground. I put the gun up and let the sheriff know how I found things, but I left out all about the gun.

"Because why? Because Al was paying a lot of attention to Sylvia, my girl, along about then. That was why. But then he turned around and treated her like a dog, and I started to lay for him. Today I got my chance. I'm waitin' and hungerin' for the minute when I shove this gun under Al's nose and say . . . 'You skunk, here's what hangs you!'"

He had grown so excited in his recital that now he suited the action to the word and, whipping out a pearl-handled revolver, he brandished it in the air close to Bob Lake.

"But there's a lot of pearl-handled guns," said Bob. "How'll that tie the murder of Coy on Rankin?"

"There's not a lot with Al's initials on 'em," triumphantly replied the rat-faced man. "Besides, everybody knows this gun. Al's mighty fond of it. A thousand has heard him say that he wouldn't trade it for a ten-thousand-dollar check, because it saved his life too often. And now it'll hang him." He broke into horrible laughter. "What he'll have to explain away is how come he parted with that gun. And I'll be there to swear where I found it, and how I found it."

"Suppose he says that he gave it to you?"

"He never gives anything away. They's them that can tell how Sandy McGregor offered him a cold thousand for that gun and got refused . . . got laughed at. No, sir, they ain't any way for him to wriggle out. Not with twelve men out of this here county trying him."

"Then," said Bob Lake, "it looks pretty clear that the whole case hangs on the gun. Without the gun your testimony wouldn't be worth a plugged nickel."

"Not a nickel, son."

"Sorry, Smiley," murmured Bob Lake, "but I'll have to take the gun."

"Eh?" asked Smiley, frowning.

He found a gun held close beneath his chin, and behind it there was a determined, savage face.

"Hand over the gun, you rat!"

“You!” exclaimed Smiley. “You’re playing with Rankin?”

“Maybe. Come out with the gun. Slow . . . slow . . . take it by the barrel . . . that’s it.”

He received the handsome weapon, set with jewels, flashing in the sunlight.

“They’ll lynch you,” said Smiley. “You fool!”

“You won’t come into town to tell ’em about it till Rankin’s out of jail, Smiley. You’re going to turn around and ride down this here road till I see you out of sight. If I catch you in town, I’m going to trim that ugly face of yours with bullets. Now, get out!”

There was a parting leer of terror and rage, and then Smiley whirled his horse without a word and galloped down the road looking back over his shoulder. Unquestionably, had Bob Lake turned his back for a moment, the little man would have wheeled and tried a pot shot from the distance, but Bob did not turn, and eventually he had the pleasure of seeing Smiley disappear around the turn.

Then he spurred toward Everett, not far away, for they had covered most of the distance during their talk.

How he should dispose of the weapon was the next trouble, for, if it were found on him, and Smiley explained how the weapon had come into his possession, the gun would still hang Al Rankin.

The sound of running water suggested the solution of that problem. A narrow stream cut across the trail, hardly fetlock deep, but to the right it dropped into a deep pool. Into that pool he dropped the pearl-handled revolver after a last admiring examination of the jewels with which it was set. Then he continued the journey.

Al Rankin was freed by his act. By the same act Anne’s husband was returned to her. A gambler and murderer returned to her! For the first time the full force of that combination came upon Bob Lake, and he sighed. Forethought was not his strong point, but in afterthought he was something of a philosopher. However, the act was irretrievable. By it he had determined the destiny of Anne; by it he had automatically excluded himself from her life. There was a hope, perhaps, that Al Rankin might change his ways. But, as he remembered that pale, handsome, calm face, the hope dwindled and grew thin in the heart of Bob Lake.

He reached Everett in a black melancholy, and, when he had returned the horse and gone back to the hotel, he learned that there was not even an escape from the town. If he went back to the railroad, a timetable told him that he could not get another train until the next morning about noon.

He lounged gloomily through the rest of the afternoon, forced himself to eat dinner, and then returned to his room for the night. He was unhappy, more

desperately unhappy than he had ever been in his life. Truly the way of the philanthropist was a wretched way.

He had hung up his cartridge belt at this point in his reflections, when the door was flung open without the warning of any preliminary knock. He glanced over his shoulder and saw the hall blocked with armed men.

IV

“ALL FOR ANNE”

At their head was the chunky little man with the gray hair—Bill White.

“You’re Bob Lake,” he said bluntly, pointing a stubby forefinger at Lake. “You’re Bob Lake, alias what?”

“Alias nothing,” returned Bob with equal bluntness. “What in thunder are you doing in my room?” As he spoke, he removed the cartridge belt from the hook on the wall and shook the gun out of the holster.

“None of that,” returned the sheriff.

But Bob Lake had forgotten reasonable caution. That mad mood was on him which had made his best friends prophesy that sooner or later he would fall afoul of the law. “Step high, partner,” he said to the sheriff warningly, “Step light. It looks to me like I got the drop on you gents, and I’m going to keep it. Hands away from guns, if you please.”

They had entered so full of the courage of numbers—there were half a dozen of them—that they had not taken the precaution of drawing a weapon against him. And now he stood close to the wall, swaying a little from side to side with a murderous light in his eyes.

“Son,” said White, who seemed less daunted than the others, “you’re talking fool talk. I’m the sheriff.”

“You don’t say so. Am I going to take your word for that?”

Bill White exposed the badge of his office and then grinned triumphantly. “Now, Bob Lake,” he said, “will you listen to reason?”

“Maybe, maybe not. I feel sort of irritable, Sheriff, and you got to talk sharp. What you want?”

“To search you and your room. Start in, boys.”

“You stay put, gents, you hear?” said Lake. “Let’s see your search warrant, eh? Trot it out, Sheriff!”

The sheriff growled: “Search warrant be blowed, Lake!”

“Maybe. But you don’t touch a pocket till you show me one.”

“What’ll keep me from it?”

“This!”

“Lake, I’d ought to arrest you on the spot.”

“Arrest me without a charge, Sheriff, and you’ll wish you’d arrested the devil sooner before you’re through. You hear me talk?”

“Fool talk,” said the sheriff. His calm was breaking into anger.

“Listen,” said Lake, growing calmer as he saw the temper rise in the sheriff. “If you lay a hand on me, partner, you’ll be the first that ever did it. My record’s clean. In my part of the country I’ve got friends, and I’ll use ’em to make your trail hot. Now, get out of this room!”

“Just a minute. Hugh!”

Smiley appeared from the rear of the crowd. “Is this the gent?”

“It’s him right enough.” Smiley looked evilly at Bob Lake.

“Lake, you took Al Rankin’s gun off Smiley. Talk up and confess. You’ll come to no harm that way.”

“I never saw your rat-faced friend before.”

“How does he know you, then?”

“I’ve been in town since morning, and my name’s on the register downstairs. That’s easy enough.”

“Why, if this ain’t the grandpa of all liars!” exclaimed Smiley. “D’you mean to say . . . ?”

“Wait,” said the sheriff, raising his hand. “Loud talk don’t lead nowhere. Now, Lake, talk sense. You’re in the hole.”

“I don’t see how.”

“And you can’t fight your way out. Lake, you horned in to help Rankin. We know it.”

“Never met Rankin in my life.”

“Will you stand to that?”

“Sure. What’s your story?”

“That Smiley was bringing in evidence against Rankin in the shape of his gun, picked up at the scene of the Coy murder, and that you took it from him.”

“Smiley lies. Probably he was talking loud with nothing behind it. You ask him to show, and call his bluff. All he can do is shift the blame on what he ain’t got. He

picks a stranger, and I'm the man. Ain't that simple?"

"Suppose we search the room?"

"Go ahead. If it means anything serious, I'm sure ready to oblige you, gents."

His calm and the readiness with which he now submitted to the search staggered the sheriff. Under his directions, while he kept an eye upon the actions of Lake, the others went over every inch of the space. Closet, suitcase, the clothes of Bob Lake, the bed—there was not the space of a pin that was not seen to or probed, and, as the search progressed and black looks began to be cast at Smiley, the excitement of the little man grew intense.

"He's thrown it away, Bill," he declared. "That's what he's done. He knew we'd search, and he threw it away."

"You're a fool, Hugh. That gun, jewels and all, is worth a thousand, if it's worth a cent."

Hugh Smiley groaned in despair. And the search, coming to an end, resulted in a dark-faced semicircle gathering around the rat-faced man.

"Sheriff," said Bob Lake suddenly, "has this little rat got any grudge ag'in' this Rankin you talk about? Any grudge that'd make him try to get Rankin in trouble?"

"Grudge? Sure." The sheriff turned with a new and ugly glance upon Smiley.

"Take this gent and put him in front of Rankin . . . sudden . . . and see what Rankin does," suggested Smiley.

It was not an altogether brilliant idea, but the sheriff, seeing his greatest of prizes about to slip through his fingers, was quite willing to grasp at straws. Bob Lake readily assented, and they journeyed across to the jail. By this time Hugh Smiley had lost all aggressiveness and was lingering in the back of the group. But the others dragged him along. He had never been a popular member of the community. Behind him was an unsavory youth full of a cunning smoother and infinitely meaner than the crimes attributed to Al Rankin. Now he was carried along in the rear of the little crowd, and his courage was subjected to their sarcastic comments.

When they reached the jail, a little, low-lying building, the sheriff marshaled them into an outer room and cautioned them to silence with a raised finger.

"Now, follow me," he whispered to Bob Lake. Leaving the others behind, he threw open an inner door.

"I got a friend of yours, Al," he called as he entered with Bob Lake behind him. Then he stepped aside to watch the expressions of the two men.

Al Rankin sat behind a heavy set of bars on his cot, and the door opened into a narrow passage between the bars and the wall of the building. In this passage stood the sheriff and Bob Lake, and upon the latter the prisoner now bent a calm glance.

“Friend?” he asked. “Ain’t had the pleasure of meeting him yet, Sheriff?”

“You forget,” said the sheriff. “Think it over. You remember now?”

“Bill, you ought to know that I never forget faces. I never saw this gent before. Wait a minute . . . no, I never saw him before.”

The sheriff was dumbfounded. There was no doubting the sincerity of Al Rankin unless he were, indeed, a consummate actor.

“It’s a queer case,” said the sheriff gloomily. “I told you what I expected from that rat, Smiley?”

“Sure.”

“Well, Rankin, it looks like you’re coming clean through all this. Smiley swears that Bob Lake, here, met him on the road into town and swiped the gun from him. We searched Lake and his room and found never a trace of it.”

Al Rankin turned his handsome face toward Bob Lake, and a faint smile touched the corners of his mouth. What it might mean the sheriff could never guess, but Bob Lake knew that the smile meant a perfect understanding. There was something even a trifle alarming in that quick apprehension.

“Al,” went on the sheriff, “you’re free. I’m sorry that I had to bust in on you the way I did, but . . .”

“Business is business,” answered Al Rankin cheerily. “And this ain’t the first time that you’ve showed me attentions. No hard feelings, Sheriff, but you might have picked a better time for jailing me.”

“The wife and all that . . .,” returned the sheriff. “That was pretty hard, Al, and I’m the first to admit it. Are we quits?”

“Quits?” asked Al Rankin in an indescribable voice. “Quits?” He smiled, and the sheriff shuddered. He took no care to conceal his emotion.

“All right,” he said, “we’ll have it out then, sooner or later.”

“Sooner or later,” said Rankin, “we sure will.”

“But there’s one thing more, Al. This fellow Smiley is scared to death. Will you shake hands with him before me, and tell him that you don’t bear any malice?”

“Why,” said Al Rankin, “from what I’ve heard, it looks as if he’d ought to be more afraid of this gent”—he indicated Bob Lake—“than he is of me.”

“Maybe. But will you shake hands with him, Al?”

“If that’ll make you any happier, sure I will.”

“I’m glad of that. I don’t want him on my conscience. I told him it would be safe, you see?”

“Very thoughtful of you, but go ahead.”

“I’ll get the keys.”

He left the room, and Al Rankin made a long, light step to the bars; his debonair calm was gone.

“Who are you?” he asked curtly.

“Easy,” murmured Lake. “Maybe they’re listening.”

“Can’t hear a thing through these walls. Come out with it.”

“My name is Lake. The sheriff told you the rest. I got the gun from Smiley and threw it away.”

“What gun?”

Lake smiled. “Still bluffing?” he queried.

“But why?” asked Al Rankin.

“I was on the train in the seat behind you,” replied Lake.

“Ah, I thought I remembered something about your face.”

“When White came and took you. . . .” He paused, finding it difficult to go on. “As a matter of fact, Rankin, it seemed a shame that a girl like your wife should lose her husband . . . I. . . .”

“You did this for Anne . . . all this?” asked Al Rankin slowly.

“Rankin, you’ll be thinking me a fool, but I’m talking straight to you. I’ll never see the girl again, and I’ll never see you again. She turned my head, Rankin. I envied you. And for a minute I was almost glad that the sheriff had grabbed you. Then I changed my mind. You know the rest. Now . . . good bye and good luck to you. But one thing before I go, Rankin. If I ever hear that you haven’t straightened out after marrying a girl like that, I’ll come from the end of the world, if I have to, and skin you alive!”

“You’d do all that?” asked Rankin with a sneer. Then he straightened his face. “Shake on it, Lake.”

Their hands closed, and Bob Lake felt a grip that he had never dreamed possible in a man.

“This ain’t the last time I see you,” said Rankin. “A gent like you is the kind I want for a friend. You’re coming up to Greytown with me, and you’re going to visit at the house. The wife will want to know you.”

But Bob Lake shook his head, and he laughed bitterly. “Never in a thousand years, partner. I don’t trust myself that much. I’d be a fool.”

They had no opportunity to say more. At this moment Bill White returned.

“THROUGH THE WINDOW”

The sheriff shook his little bunch of keys and unlocked the barred door and stepped aside to allow Al Rankin to come out. He was perfectly frank in his attitude. “You know how I stand, Al,” he said. “Sooner or later I’m going to get the goods on you. Long as you stood alone, it was a hard fight. But now you’ve started to play partners.” He indicated Bob Lake with a jerk of his thumb. “The minute a gent starts doing things like that, he’s done for. I’ve seen too many of ’em come and go.”

But the temper of Al Rankin refused to be disturbed. “You’re all wrong, Bill,” he assured the sheriff. “I’m married, and I’m going to lead a life nobody can point a finger at.”

The sheriff met this speech with a cold smile of deep wisdom. “I know you’ll try to get me sooner or later,” he said. “But I’ll try to be ready. Now come along and shake hands with Hugh Smiley. The little chap is half dead with being scared. And I don’t blame him.”

He led the way out of the cell room and into his office. The rest of the little building was already deserted. The crowd had learned that the last hope of the sheriff had failed, when he could establish no proof of past relationship between Al Rankin and Lake. In the office stood only Hugh Smiley. It was plain that he was in the throes of a panic. He would far rather have been outside, flying for his life, but he felt it was hopeless to flee from Al Rankin. Other men had tried it and failed. The only thing for him to do was to stay and face the music and try to effect a reconciliation.

But it was only by dint of clutching the edge of the table that he was able to remain there, facing the door. As it opened and he saw the handsome face of Rankin, the little man shivered violently. He stood like one waiting for the death sentence from the judge.

“Here you are,” said the sheriff. “Al, maybe you think you’ve got reason to be sore at Smiley. But, as far as I can make out, Hugh has reason to be sore at you. Suppose you shake hands, here, and call everything quits.”

The face of Al Rankin, it seemed to Lake, was a study in controlled emotion. The quivering of his eyelids showed the tremor of fierce anger that was passing through him, yet he maintained the calmest of smiles.

“Most generally,” he said, “I aim to square things up with a gent that double-crosses me. However, I let a promise drop to the sheriff, and I like to live up to my

promises. Besides, you have a grudge against me, Hugh. D'you think it's all cleared up, now?"

"All cleared," said Hugh Smiley. His little rat eyes went restlessly to and fro. "I was wrong, Al. I don't mind tellin' you now that I was wrong and . . . and I want to ask your pardon for it."

"Why," said Rankin, "if you feel that way, we will call it quits. Go back home and sleep easy and forget about me, Hugh. I guess that'll do, Sheriff, eh?"

"I suppose so." The sheriff was not entirely satisfied.

"If anything goes wrong," said Hugh Smiley, pointing a trembling finger at White, "remember that it was you that got me into this."

"I know it," returned the sheriff, and he made a wry face.

"Wait," cut in Bob Lake. "I think they ought to shake hands first, eh, Sheriff?"

"Good idea. That's what they met for in the first place. Go ahead, Al."

A glance from the corner of Rankin's eyes fell upon Lake, a glance gleaming with such venom that the big fellow winced. The handshaking was duly performed. And the sheriff sighed.

"All right, boys," he said, "I've got to run along. Sit around and talk things over. Here's your gun, Al. Here's yours, Lake."

He hung the cartridge belt and the revolver on the wall, while he put Rankin's gun before him on the table. Then he left the room.

"All I got to say," said the rat-faced man, "is that I'm glad you showed some sense, Al."

Al Rankin looked up from his gun that he was balancing lightly in his long fingers. "By the way," he said, "I've got to say something to the sheriff before he leaves."

Tossing his weapon back on the table, he left the room hurriedly. They heard a door close outside, and the keen eyes of Smiley turned for the first time upon Bob Lake.

"Why you done it," he said gloomily, "I dunno. But it was sure a fool play. D'you think Al is grateful? He don't know what gratitude means, stranger, and you'll live long enough to find out. Grateful? Right this minute he's plannin' something ag'in' you. For why? Because he knows that you know where that gun was put, and the minute the gun's found, they's a noose around his neck. Does that sound reasonable?" He leaned across the table and grinned maliciously into the face of Lake.

"Reasonable enough," replied the other carelessly, a great deal more carelessly than he felt about the matter.

"And how does he know that you won't use what you know to squeeze money

out of him? He's got lots of coin, Al has. He got a lot from his father. He's got a house that's a regular palace, Al has, and the only reason he's been around raisin' trouble is because he likes action. That's all. He'll be kind of wishing you was out of the way, maybe, and the minute he does that, you'll sure cuss the day when you held me up for that hanging evidence. Wait, son, till. . . ."

The evil joy went out of that face. The eyes went past Bob Lake toward the window and fastened there with a sort of horrible fascination. Before Lake could turn, the bark of a gun crowded the room with echoes, and Hugh Smiley slumped forward on the table. At the same time there was a heavy impact on the floor.

Bob Lake reached first for his gun on the wall. The holster was empty! There on the floor lay the heavy object that had been thrown through the window. It was a revolver, and, as Bob Lake caught it up, he knew at once that it was his.

"Rankin," said a voice behind him.

He whirled to find Smiley propping himself with sagging arms back from the table. His eyes were already glazing. From the outer part of the building Lake heard footsteps coming. There he stood with the gun in his hand from which a bullet had struck the dying man.

The whole devilish scheme dawned on his mind. Al Rankin had left his own weapon, lying on the table. On his way out of the room he had slipped Lake's gun out of its holster, and then, circling the building on the outside, he had fired through the open window. What could be neater?

It was known that Lake and Smiley were at odds, and there were plenty of grounds for a quarrel between them, whether Lake had actually held up the little man as Smiley had sworn, or whether Smiley had evened the score between them. And the blame of that bullet was thrown upon Bob Lake, removing him from Rankin's path, just as Smiley had prophesied the gambler and gunfighter would wish to do.

He leaned over Smiley.

"Witnesses!" was all the little man could say. He seemed to be saving his strength for a later moment.

Then the door was burst open by the sheriff. "You murdering idiot!" he shouted and wrenched the gun from Lake's hand.

But the latter pointed mutely to the dying man.

By this time High Smiley had slumped back in the chair with his arms dangling in odd positions at his side. He was plainly far gone, and only his eyes showed a sign of life as his chin sagged down against his chest.

The sheriff dropped to his knees beside the little man, still covering Bob Lake with his own gun.

“Not him,” whispered Smiley. “Al Rankin . . . through the window . . . I seen his face.” He sank limp against the shoulder of the sheriff.

Bob Lake raised the dead body and laid it on the table. Others were coming through the building, shouting to one another. Gunshots in Everett generally had aftermaths.

“Is it clear?” asked Lake.

“Not at all,” said the sheriff. “A minute ago I left you here all chummy as so many partners. Now here I am with the gun that killed Smiley, and that gun is yours, and Smiley gives me a dying declaration that Al Rankin is the man, and there’s Rankin’s gun, lying on the table cold.” He wiped his forehead.

“Rankin went out, Sheriff, and took my gun with him. He fired through the window and then threw my gun inside. His plan was to come running back after the hubbub started and show surprise. But. . . .”

“Then where is he now?” asked the bewildered sheriff.

“He heard Smiley yell his name a minute ago and saw that his whole plan had been spoiled because Smiley had seen his face, when he fired through the window. Where is he now? He’s riding out of Everett on the first horse he found saddled, most like.”

The sheriff’s amazement cleared itself in one tremendous curse, then he bolted from the room. But Bob Lake went back to the dead man and looked down into his face. No doubt Hugh Smiley was a bad one and not worth his salt, but he would have served to apprehend a murderer had Lake not interfered. Now the rôles were reversed, and, as surely as the sun shone, Bob Lake was responsible for the tragedy.

He went out from the jail and back to the hotel a free man, but a very thoughtful one.

VI

“MOSTLY ABOUT ANNE”

The result of his reflections was one clear perception: he had made a terrible mess of things from the start. A worthless gambler and murderer without honor or faith or gratitude had been taken out of the proper hands of the law; a man, innocent of crime in this affair at least, now lay dead. And finally the man to whom he had been a

benefactor had come within an ace of saddling the guilt of a murder upon his own shoulders.

It was sufficient, one would say, to make Bob Lake swear himself in as a deputy and join the posse in the pursuit of the renegade, Al Rankin. But there was another residue of Bob Lake's thought, and that residue was the face of Anne Rankin as he had last looked back to her from the head of the car. His memory of her was astonishingly clear. The few attitudes and expressions that he had seen remained before his mind like so many pictures, and in his leisure he could take them out and examine them in detail, one by one. Long before reaching this point, another man would have taken a train back for Manhattan or some other more distant point. But, when all was said and done, Lake only knew that he must see that girl again—at once.

The next morning he was on the train for Greytown, and early in the afternoon he dismounted at the little station in the heart of the mountains. It was bitterly cold in spite of the spring. An unseasonable snow had fallen several days before, and now it was frozen and packed hard by a stiff northerly wind. Over this the clear sunshine fell, blinding to the eye where the snow fields lay level. The nearer mountains were crystal outlines against the sky. The farther peaks were a bluish white, but here and there, where the snow had slid away, there was a raw, bare, black cliff.

The train pulled away and left another man standing on the platform, a middle-aged man whose eyes were extremely old and whose smile was extremely young. He had dropped his suitcase and was bundling himself into an overcoat, when Bob Lake approached.

"D'you know this layout?" asked Lake.

"Not a thing. I'm a stranger here, and I'm looking for Albert Rankin's house."

"Albert Rankin? Oh, Al Rankin, eh? Well, I'm trying to spot the same place."

He found himself regarded with a new and vital interest. "Friend of Rankin's?"

The voice was even, but there was no doubt of the hardness that crept into the tone. Plainly this man was not apt to take kindly to the friends of Al Rankin. He might, perhaps, be an officer of the law sent to watch the newly made outlaw's headquarters.

"Nope. Only talked to him once."

"Where was that, may I ask?"

"In Everett."

The other started. "When?"

"Last night."

"The deuce you say," exclaimed the older man. "You were in Everett last night?"

“I’ll say I was.”

“Then you know about the whole fracas.”

“All there is to be known.”

His companion bundled him off to a corner of the platform for the station agent had come out to watch them.

“I have an unfortunate interest in this matter,” he said. “Let me introduce myself. I am Paul Sumpter. I see that name means nothing to you, but I am the father of Al Rankin’s wife.”

“I’m Bob Lake. Glad to know you.”

“And you, sir. Sheriff White advised me of everything that had happened last night by wire. Of course, it was told in brief. I have come up here to see to my girl, but, above all things, I’d like to find out exactly what happened in Everett last night.”

Bob Lake drew back. He was ordinarily talkative enough, but he was filled with aversion to this man who had allowed his daughter to marry such a fellow as Al Rankin.

“I can tell you what happened in a nutshell . . . murder, Mister Sumpter.”

The other drew his knuckles across his puckered forehead. “Murder,” he repeated softly. “There were extenuating circumstances?”

“Sure, there was a chance for him to shift the blame on another gent. That was why he took a pot shot at Smiley.”

“And who was the other?”

“Me.”

It was Sumpter’s turn to fall back. “You are the man who . . . ?”

“Oh, I’m him, all right,” returned Lake. “I’m the fool who stepped in and got messed up.”

They stood regarding one another curiously. “I see,” said the older man quietly. “You’re up here, hunting for Rankin? Well, sir, I hope to heaven that you find him.”

“Don’t start jumping to conclusions. Right now I got an idea that I’m the best friend Rankin has in the world.”

His companion gaped in amazement. “After he has tried to saddle a murder on you? But possibly the sheriff is wrong, and I’m wrong. There are qualities in Al Rankin that can make a man stick to him through thick and thin, even as you seem to be doing.”

“There are.”

“I’m glad of it,” said Mr. Sumpter. “I’ve been making up my mind that my daughter shall never see the fellow again. But he may be an extraordinary sort of man. The reports against him may be exaggerated. Tell me, Mister Lake, the good

things you have noted in him.”

“I can do that short, Mister Sumpter . . . his wife.”

“His wife?” Then, as he understood, Sumpter frowned. “It’s on account of my girl, Anne, that you’re prepared to stay by Rankin? Is that it? I’ve never heard her mention your name among her friends.”

“She doesn’t know me. But let that go.”

“Mister Lake, let me tell you, once and for all, that the best thing you can do for Anne is to let the law take its course. You have already done too much, I believe. You are the man who removed from Smiley the evidence which would have hung Rankin. Far better if he had swung on the gallows. There would have been an end to him and another beginning for Anne. The best thing you can do is to turn around and go back.”

“Your daughter will be the best judge of that.”

He was favored with a long and searching scrutiny, and then, at the approach of the station agent, he turned to the man and asked for directions. They were easily given. One had only to take the road and keep on around the side of the next hill. It was easy walking because the snow was firm. No one could mistake the Rankin house. There was no other in sight.

Sumpter and Lake started out side by side. They talked little at first, but Sumpter seemed to have taken a determined liking to the younger man, and finally he began on the story of the marriage.

It was by no means a novel tale. The life of his daughter had fallen into two distinct divisions, it seemed. First, she had been a romping girl typical of the West. She did anything that boys could do and sometimes did it a good deal better. The tomboy period ended when she was sent East to a girls’ school. On her return she was a new personality, it seemed. But one undercurrent of her nature remained the same—she continued to love the outdoors and the life of the mountains. The time she had spent away from her homeland had served to idealize it. The East to her had always remained the country of the effête. Constantly harking back to the wild days of her girlhood, she came back expecting in a measure to take up the old times as she had left them, and she had been shocked to find she could not. The thing she admired she could no longer do, and she was physically incapable of the thirty miles a day in the saddle that had once been nothing to her. So she transferred her interests; she began to idolize the Western men. She loved their freedom. She professed a liking even for their dialect. At this crucial moment in stepped Al Rankin.

He was everything that she admired. He could almost literally ride anything that walked on four feet. His courage was known. Although he was a comparative

stranger in their town, tales followed out of the mountains, and it was said that he had killed "his man."

This was enough to startle Sumpter and put him on his guard. He went so far as to forbid the girl having anything to do with the stranger until he had been able to learn more about his past. But the prohibition, as usual in such cases, merely confirmed the girl in her liking. She refused to see other men. She concentrated stubbornly on Albert Rankin and wasted on him all of her inborn aptitude for idealization. When her father attempted to argue, he was met with stubborn silence.

He decided, more indulgently than wisely, to let her have her own way, trusting to her woman's intuition, and fearing to drive her to rashness by a prolonged opposition. For stubbornness was a Sumpter characteristic, and, under all of her gentleness of exterior manner, Anne Sumpter at heart could be firm as a rock. And the father, recognizing the family trait, gave way.

No sooner was the ban lifted than Al Rankin was constantly in the house. Their engagement followed, and at once he pressed for an early marriage. The girl consented. She declared it was the way of the West. Her father and even her mother protested only half-heartedly. They had been won over by the pleasant manner and easy social address of handsome Albert Rankin. Financially they easily learned that he was sound enough. The marriage followed.

Even before the ceremony Mr. Sumpter received the first serious warnings in the shape of several anonymous letters, and one was signed by Hugh Smiley. They made various unsavory charges against young Rankin, but Sumpter gave them slight attention. In the first place because he despised anonymous blackmail, and in the second place because in the case of Smiley he felt a bitter personal spite.

"But, when I took her to the train," concluded Sumpter, "I had a premonition that she was embarking toward a disaster. It came over me all at once, when we stepped into the coach. But then it was too late to do anything.

"It was not long. Last night the telegram came from Sheriff White of Everett, informing me in outline of everything that had happened. He also told me that Rankin is now outside the law. So that nothing can prevent me from taking my girl back to her home and teaching her to forget this horrible affair. It might be that I shall need help. In that case, may I call on you?"

"When you get her consent, call on me," said Lake.

"You don't think she'll come?"

"I've stopped thinking," said Bob Lake bitterly. "The things I figure on all come out wrong."

“FOR BETTER OR WORSE”

Rounding the hill, they paused by mutual consent and stared at one another. Stretching to the right before them, the hillside flattened into a spacious plateau heavily forested, and above the trees in three tall gables rose the roof of the house. To Bob Lake it seemed to have the dimensions of a palace, and his heart fell.

To him a house in the mountains meant a three-room shack. How would he be able to face the mistress of this mansion and talk to her of the things that he began to feel vaguely forming in his mind?

“I remember hearing something about it,” Sumpter was saying. “But can you imagine the owner of a property like this becoming a common gunfighter and gamester?”

Bob Lake returned no answer. They struggled over the slippery snow up the hillside, and on the level of the plateau every step among the trees revealed the more and more imposing proportions of the house. Built of the heaviest timbers, it was settled to the natural slope of the ground like a piece of landscape. At night and unlighted it must have seemed merely the peaked crest of the mountain.

“But why a house like that . . . up here?” asked Bob Lake.

“Rankin’s father had a great deal of money. He was an Easterner, but he built this hunting lodge and raised Albert in the wilds. Wanted to get him back to nature, as I understand it, and he succeeded.”

They came out onto a semicircular opening in the woods before the lodge, and presently they rang the doorbell. A Chinese boy admitted them and took their names. When he had gone, Bob Lake pointed to the big logs that were smoldering in the fireplace of the hall. “No real use,” he said, “but just for folks to look at when they come saunterin’ in.”

Then they admired the paneling in the great style of redwood. The stonework about the fireplace alone, Bob Lake decided, would have cost his entire fortune to reproduce. Wherever his eye fell, it reported back to his mind a detail which made him more gloomy.

There was light, rapid fall of feet, and then down the generous curve of the great staircase came Anne. She was huddling a wrap of blue, shimmering stuff around her shoulders as she ran; Bob Lake did not miss even this detail. The light from a

window that opened on the stairway showed her brightly for a moment, and then she descended into the shadow of the hall and was in the arms of her father.

A dozen half laughing and half excited questions tumbled out all at once, and then, as her father stepped back gravely, she saw Bob Lake. If he had any fear that she might have forgotten him, that fear was banished instantly. There was a flash and paling of color as she looked at him and, it seemed to Lake, no little alarm in her manner.

“You know Mister Lake?” her father was saying.

She bowed to him, recovering her self-possession. “I’ve seen Mister Lake before. But, Dad, what brought you here? Have you missed me already? And have you seen the house? And isn’t it wonderful? And the servants . . . and everything you could imagine.”

“I have missed you,” said Sumpter. “But that isn’t exactly what’s brought me here. If Mister Lake will excuse us for a moment, I wish to talk with you alone.”

They made their brief excuses to Bob Lake, and then she drew her father into the library, lined with more books than Sumpter had ever seen in one room before.

“It’s serious?” she murmured to him.

“Very serious. The first thing for you to do is to pack up your things and come back home with me. I can explain things on the way in detail.”

He could have been more diplomatic, but he was not in a tender mood. He felt that she had so thoroughly messed matters in her marriage that there was not a little of “I told you so” in his attitude. And the result was that he hurt her cruelly with his very first speech.

“It’s Al!” she exclaimed. “Something has happened to Al. I knew it, when I saw you come!”

“Something has happened to Al,” repeated her father grimly. “Besides, what’s more to the point, Al has done a good deal to others.”

“But what?”

“Anne, I want you to take your father’s word. I don’t want to go into details just now. The main thing is that you’ve married a hound, and you’ve got to get away from this house as fast as you can. Will you trust me for that?”

He might as well have trusted a mother to send her child to the gallows. “Are you trying to drive me mad?” she asked. “What’s happened to Al? Is . . . is he hurt?”

“Never better in his life.”

“Then . . . ?”

“Which is more than can be said for at least one of his acquaintances.”

“There’s been a fight?”

“Not a fight.”

“Tell me everything . . . everything. I knew there was something serious about it from the manner of that man who took him off the train.”

“Do you know why he was taken off the train?”

“No.”

“It was an arrest.”

“Ah! On what charge?”

“Murder!” He drove the word at her brutally. He was determined that, before he ended this interview, he would have her so thoroughly subdued to his will that she would never question it again. But, instead of crumbling before his attack, she rallied to meet it.

There was an unexpected basis of strength in her nature that always came to the top in an emergency. All his life her father had been astonished when he was confronted by it.

“It’s not true,” she said quite calmly.

“Do you think I’d lie to you, Anne?”

“Someone else has lied to you . . . or else they trapped Al with a false charge. At this very moment I know as surely as I know that I’m standing here, that Al is a free man!” She said it proudly.

“You’re right. He’s free.”

It staggered Anne in spite of her surety of the moment before. “Then . . . ?”

“Do you know who to thank for his freedom? The romantic fool downstairs . . . Lake. Who is he?”

“Lake? Thank him? What do you mean by that?” She came close to him with eagerness that he could not understand in her face. “What did Mister Lake do? What did he do?”

“Saved the neck of Al Rankin, that’s all.”

“I knew it . . . almost.”

“You knew what?”

“Nothing. Tell me what Mister Lake did.”

“The sheriff arrested Al Rankin without evidence. He was waiting for evidence that a man didn’t dare to bring in, for fear of having his throat cut. That’s the sort of a man your husband is. This Lake . . . the idiot . . . intercepted Smiley on his way and took the evidence from him. That evidence was the revolver with which Rankin had killed a man named Coy . . . deliberate murder, Anne!”

“I don’t. . . .”

“Don’t say you don’t believe it. Don’t act like a stubborn child, my dear.”

“But why did Mister Lake do it? Did he know Al?”

“Never saw him before that day. He was riding behind you on the train. Can you figure out why he did it?”

Her flush was a marvelous thing to see. “I don’t know,” she said softly. “No, I can’t understand. I’ve never spoken to him before today.”

“Everybody seems to have gone mad,” said her father. “But I have told you enough to convince you that you’ve got to go back with me?”

“Do you think I shall leave Al for a charge that even the law can’t hold against him?”

“But there’s a new charge, Anne.”

“And this time?” she queried.

“Murder again.”

“Ah!” She winced from that blow and then made herself meet his eyes.

“You’ve made a fool of yourself, and that’s the short of it, my dear. You’ve let a crazy, romantic idea run away with you. Now, come back home and face the music and forget this devil of a Rankin. I never liked him. I warned you against him from the first.”

“They’ll never convict Al! They can’t.”

“Not with eyewitnesses?”

“Who?”

“The man who was killed lived long enough to name his murderer. That man was Smiley.”

“He lied out of malice.”

“Did he? There was another man. It was a man who had just saved Rankin from the gallows at the risk of his own neck. It was a man who had done these things out of the bigness of his heart. To repay him for what he had done Al Rankin tried to shift the blame for the murder on his shoulders. That’s the sort of a cur Rankin is. And the name of the living witness against Rankin is the man downstairs . . . Bob Lake! Will you call *him* a liar?”

She was struck mute. Feeling her way, she found a chair and sank slowly into it. Still she watched her father with haunted eyes.

“And now, Anne,” he went on, growing suddenly gentle, the thing for you to do is to come back to people who love you and people you can trust. I’ll keep you from this murdering devil, this ungrateful, hard, scheming sneak.”

“Oh, Dad,” she whispered, “how can I go back? How can I go back and face them and live down their whispers and their smiles?”

“Why, curse ’em,” said her father. “I’ll knock off the head of the first man that raises his voice against you or insults you with a grin. And as for the gossip of the women . . . why, honey, you can silence the whole pack of ’em with a single smile.”

A very wan smile rewarded him for his flattery. Still she shook her head. “What right have I to desert him? ‘For better or worse.’ I’ve no right to leave him . . . and he’ll still be proven innocent.”

“You can’t meet my eye, when you say that.”

“Dad, I can’t go. I can’t!”

“Anne, why not?”

“Shame . . . pride . . . everything keeps me here.”

“It’s ruin, Anne.”

“I’ve brought it on my own head . . . besides . . . I won’t admit that he’s wrong. I’m going to stay.”

“Then, by heaven, I’m going to stay here with a gun. If your husband comes inside the door, he’s a dead man.”

VIII

“‘A STRANGE COMBINATION’”

She left him raging up and down the room and pausing with a stamp of the foot from time to time, when he recalled her stubbornness. He felt very much like one who has brought a chance of escape to a prisoner and finds the obstinate fool unwilling to accept freedom.

But Anne slipped out and came on Bob Lake, sitting in the hall where she had left him. He sat with his chin propped upon one great brown fist while he studied empty space. On his puckered forehead there was the wistfulness of a man who submits to inevitable defeat. She paused on the stairs to study him. He was by no means a handsome fellow, she decided, and yet she liked his very ugliness. There was a certain dauntless honesty about that face that others had felt before her. She saw, too, as any woman with the feel of the West in her blood will do, the breadth of his shoulders, his fighting jaw, and the size of hands capable of holding and retaining what they seized—or else crushing it under the fingers. Anne Sumpter liked these things, and, having finished her catalogue of details, she went on to surprise him.

A man who is surprised, she knew, is always half disarmed and left open to the eye of a woman. Smiling faintly, she reached the hall before he sensed her coming.

“My father has told me about you,” she said, taking pity on his confusion, but she had not by any means intended to. “He has told me,” she went on, “that you have done a good deal for Mister Rankin.”

Then she waited, she hardly knew for what. He was not quite so clumsy as she had expected. She discovered that he had a way of looking at one so that it was difficult to bear his eye. His seriousness was contagious.

“Lady,” he said gravely, “I dunno what your father has said. But if you want facts, I’ll give ’em to you.”

“By all means,” said the girl, and paused for the recital. There would be much boasting in it, she had no doubt.

“The facts are these,” said Bob Lake, reflecting on them as though to make sure that he was correct. “It come in my way to do a little favor for Al Rankin, and I done it.”

Was that the way he phrased a service that had kept her husband from the gallows?

“Then it came in Al Rankin’s way to do a kind of a bad-looking trick to me, and it appears like he done it, too. So that’s how it stands between Al Rankin and me.”

And was this the way he described what her father had called an attempt to put the blame of a murder on his shoulders? She was staggered by this studious understatement. And there was a ring of truth about it that went home. For the first time a great doubt about Al Rankin entered her mind and lodged there.

“Then,” she said, “as Al’s wife I can only hope that the time will soon come when he can explain that away.”

“I hope so, too,” said the big man frankly, “but I misdoubt it. The point is, we’ve come to a pass where gun talk is a pile more likely than man talk.”

Again that very simplicity of expression shocked her into belief. She began to feel suddenly that this was the reality for which she had been consciously seeking and never finding.

But she said coldly: “And why have you come to tell me these things . . . and you’ve come a long distance, Mister Lake?”

“Because,” he answered calmly, “it came into my mind that you might have heard enough things from your father to think that you got hooked up with a yaller hound.”

“Do you think Al Rankin is that?”

He paused, lost in thought. “No,” he said, “I ain’t sure of it. Not quite.”

“And why do you wish to find out what I think?”

“Because,” he said, “if you was to think that way, it’d come in handy for me to go out and blow off the head of this same Al Rankin.”

She could merely stare at him. “Mister Lake, I don’t suppose I should listen to you, but, you have helped Mister Rankin . . . and you do seem to feel that you have been wronged. But . . . do you realize that you are talking to Al Rankin’s wife?”

“Lady,” he said, “it’s something that I can’t forget.”

“Do you actually expect me to ask you to go out with a gun to find my husband?”

“I ask you to talk frank to me, like I’m doing to you,” he said.

“And suppose that I don’t give you this mad commission?”

“Then it’s up to me to go out and get to Al Rankin and see that he’s safe and sound and clean out of the hands of the law which is tryin’ tolerable hard to reach him, I figure.”

“Of all the strange men I have ever known or heard of,” she said slowly, “you’re the strangest, Mister Lake.”

“Me? Strange? Not a bit. I can tell you everything about myself in half a minute . . . everything worth knowing, that is.”

“Then I earnestly wish that you would.”

“Plain cowpuncher, lady. Does that answer?”

“Cowpuncher? But there are all manner of cowpunchers, aren’t there?”

“No, they’re mostly a pretty lazy set, take ’em by and large. They punch cows because they’d rather ride than walk. Not very clean in the skin, seeing the kind of a life they lead, and not a terrible lot cleaner under the skin, seeing the life they lead. Off and on they sort of smell of their work, you might say. They happen onto the range sort of casual, most of ’em, and they happen off the range sort of casual, most of ’em. They drink considerable, and they cuss considerable. Some of ’em dies in their boots and is glad of it, and some of ’em dies in their boots and is sorry for it. Religion they ain’t bothered a pile with. Past they ain’t got. Family don’t bother ’em none.” He paused to pick up the fragments of facts that might have strayed from his attention during this strange recital, and then he looked up to her faintly smiling face. “And there you are, lady, with a pretty fair picture, taking it by and large, of Bob Lake. Will it do?”

She knew by the very bitterness of his smile that he was not understating this time, but really striving to give her a literal portrait of himself, as he was, so that she might not be led astray hereafter in her estimation of him. With all her heart she admired that fearless honesty.

“I think,” she said gently, “that you’ve named all the things about yourself that

don't count a bit, and you've deliberately left out of account everything that really matters."

He bowed profoundly. "Lady, I never figured on having the last word with you, even about myself."

She could not help smiling. And then she stopped and wondered at herself. It was the most serious day of her life, and here she was forgetting the seriousness and centering only on this odd man—this stranger. What was coming to her husband all this time? "If I asked you," she said at length, "you would go out to help Mister Rankin?"

"I suppose," he said gloomily, "that I would."

"And will you tell me why?"

"Because I done wrong by Al Rankin," he answered after another moment.

"Wrong to him? How?"

"Speakin' man to man, that's a thing I can't talk about."

"But speaking man to woman, Mister Lake?"

"All the more reason."

At that it became absolutely necessary for her to know. Of course, she guessed quite distinctly, and she knew that she was walking on dangerous ground. But what woman could have done otherwise?

"It's a mystery," she said. "And . . . I'd like to know. How in the world could you possibly have wronged Al Rankin?"

"By envyin' him, Missus Rankin. When the sheriff took him off the train, I was sitting behind you, and I wished that he'd never come back . . . I started in hoping that he was done for. Well, that sort of thing is poison. So I jumped off the train to make up."

"Do you know that there are no other men like you, Mister Lake?"

"Millions of 'em, lady, but they don't let themselves go. Well, they ain't any real reason why I should horn in here. You're going back home with your father?"

"I'm not. I'm staying here."

He blinked and then looked earnestly at her. "Stay here and wait for Al?"

"Exactly."

"What you've heard about him, don't turn you ag'in' him none?"

"Not a bit."

Bob Lake sighed. "You're sure fond of him," he replied. "Well, that lets me out."

He picked up his hat, and she knew perfectly well that the moment he passed through the door he would be out of her life and gone forever. It was a hard thing to look forward to. Between the lines of his blunt speech she had been reading busily

for herself, and what she read was a romance so astonishing that it carried her back to her days of fairy stories. Out of those pages all this seemed to have happened—a fairy tale turned into the ways and days of the 20th Century. A strange combination of Faithful John, Mysterious Prince, and Wandering Knight—there he went out of her life.

“Wait!” called the girl faintly.

He paused.

“A little while ago you made an offer. You said you would try to help my husband, if I asked you to.”

“I did.”

“You meant that?”

“Lady, are you going to take me up?”

“Ah, now you want to withdraw?”

He came back to her. “Listen,” he said, “you think it over careful. Think it over a whole pile. But, if you need me, say the word. It ain’t an easy thing to do, Missus Rankin. But, if you start me, I’ll stick with it to the finish.”

“But don’t you see that there are no friends who will help him now? He’s alone. Nothing but enemies around him. Mister Lake. . . .”

“You don’t have to plead,” said Bob Lake. “Tell me straight what you want me to do.”

“Find him,” said the girl, “and keep him safe.”

IX

“AL SLEEPS IN HIS BOOTS”

Out of Everett, Al Rankin rode hard, cursing in spite of his newly gained liberty. He had been on the point of running back into the room after shooting Smiley. That was his plan as Lake had afterward seen. He would come back, appearing surprised at what he found, and the gun on the floor would convict Bob Lake. He hated Hugh Smiley for various reasons; he hated Bob Lake as a man of evil generally hates those who have found him out. The very fact that his life had depended on the romantic generosity of a stranger was abhorrent to him. The time might come, perhaps, when Bob Lake would boast of how he kept no less a person than Al Rankin from the

halter.

For all these causes Rankin wished both Smiley and Bob Lake out of the way. And he had cunningly contrived it so that one blow might destroy both without bringing even a breath of suspicion upon his own head. Only one thing foiled him, and that was his own inaccuracy with the revolver. Had he thought twice he would have aimed for the head—it was far surer. But the bullet through the body had not taken the life instantly—it had left enough breath in the lungs of Hugh Smiley for him to cry out the name of his murderer, and Rankin, running back into the building, had heard that cry and recognized the voice. At one stroke all of his plans were ruined.

He hurried out of the jail again, and, rounding the corner at the hitching rack, he chose with a single glance the best of the three horses that were tethered there—a rangy bay with legs enough for speed and a wide expanse of breast that promised staying qualities. He had no time for a longer examination and threw himself hastily into the saddle. A moment later he was galloping swiftly out of Everett.

From the moment he swung onto the back of that horse, he became a thing more to be shunned than the guilt of a dozen murders—he became a horse thief. There is an old maxim west of the Rockies: “It takes a man to kill a man; it takes a skunk to steal a horse.” Al Rankin knew the maxim well enough. He knew various other things connected with horse thieves and their ways. And yet here he was on the back of a stolen horse.

Crime had been for Al Rankin a temptation like liquor to other men. If he had been born poor, he probably would have found sufficient excitement in the mere work of earning a living, which is rarely dull in a cattle country. But Al Rankin had never known the sting of breaking blisters on the inside of his hands. He had never known the pleasure of earned money, whether in the making or the spending. His only joy in life had come out of matching his wits against the wits of others and his speed of hand and straightness of eye against theirs. The trouble with Al was that he was different from his fellows. He despised his victims, and, when a man does that, he is past hoping for.

What tortured him with shame now was not that he had attempted to destroy his benefactor, Bob Lake, but that the obscure crime of killing Coy so long ago should have led to such complicated consequences. Of all the acts of his life that was probably the least blameless, for Coy needed killing if ever a man did. But out of that death the train of consequences sprang. It was that killing which had determined him on leaving the mountains for a time. That departure sent him into the life of Anne Sumpter. And Anne Sumpter led directly to the break with Smiley’s daughter which in turn had worked back to put him in peril from Smiley himself. And to get even

with Smiley he had now definitely enlisted against himself the enmity of the first man he had ever met whom he had definitely respected—that man was Bob Lake.

He was in fact, though he would not admit it, not a little afraid of Lake. Not that he would have feared a test of physical strength or a gun play man to man, but there were qualities in Lake that he did not understand, and whatever men do not understand they fear and hate. With all his soul Rankin hated Bob Lake.

He drew up the bay on a hilltop and looked back at Everett, a sprawling, shapeless shadow. By this time they knew that he was a horse thief. By this time the posse had started after him. He shook his fist into the night at them and spat in his contempt. In a way, there was a sort of fierce pleasure in knowing that from this time forth the hand of every man would be against him, his hand against every man.

Murderer and horse thief! There was a fine ending for Al Rankin, son of Judge Rankin. But he would fool them. For how long? Coldly there stepped into his mind the memory of other men, cool, confident, clever, experienced, who had from time to time passed outside the law. One by one they always fell. One by one their brief careers of wild living had ended with a wild or a wretched death. Some confederate enraged or bribed to betray them—but he, Al Rankin, would have no confederates. Other thoughts came to him.

“Curse resolutions,” he said softly to himself. “I’ll play the game the way it comes to me, and the boys that get me will pay a full price.” And then he went on.

Another thought came to him and made him spur on the horse. For the first time in many hours he had recalled his wife. Again he cursed into the night—cursed Bill White and dead Hugh Smiley and his daughter and the interloper. Bob Lake. This was their work, he decided. He hardly knew Anne Sumpter—that name came to him more readily than the new one. He had sought her out because, when he went into her home town, she had been the attraction. He had wanted her because it seemed that everyone else wanted her. To his self-centered point of view she would have been desirable for this reason alone. And, indeed, he had not stopped to learn more about her. He had instantly concentrated upon learning how to win her. He had stepped into her home. He had studied her environment. He had quickly learned that she loved the West for its rough freedom, and he had exaggerated all these qualities in himself for her sake. It had from the first been a great game. He enjoyed it because he felt that he was deceiving her with consummate skill. Not once had he allowed his real self to come to the surface until that moment when he was saying good bye to her on the train to follow Bill White. Then for a moment the ugly inner self cropped up to the surface, and the sudden whitening of her face had been the result of his speech.

But bah, he concluded at this point in his reflections. I'll fool her again. I'll fool her all her life. She ain't got the brains to see through me. I'll have her thinking I'm a martyr before she's two days older.

It was very necessary that he should educate her to this belief in him now that he was a wanderer. She must be his base of supplies. She must be ready to send him succor of money and supplies from time to time. She must be the rock on which he was to build his safety and happiness. And again he cursed. It was surely an irony of fate that compelled him to accept a woman as a partner—he who had never had partners of any description.

Now, in the very beginning of his duel with the law, he found himself without any of the essentials. He had not a sign of a weapon except his pocket knife. He had very little money. It was necessary at once to strike to his base of supplies and get both money and weapons. As a matter of fact, it was the direction which he would choose. His cleverness was known. Ordinarily Bill White would have guarded the home of a man he wanted in the hope that the criminal would head toward it for refuge. But dealing with Al Rankin, the canny sheriff would probably never try such simple methods. He would attempt something complicated—some smart deduction—and Al Rankin would baffle him by doing the simple thing.

He decided to strike from the south toward the home town, making a wide detour and traveling in a loose semicircle so as to keep within a region of easy trails. In this manner he came down into that region where the deep and narrow gorge, which began near Greytown, spread out into a wider valley with tillable ground in patches here and there. It was near to his home in a matter of miles, but he had never been in that exact region before. The lowlands of the farmers were not exciting enough to attract Al Rankin. He was glad of this fact now, because it gave him a chance to harbor safely without much fear of being recognized. The first thing he did, when he reached that valley, was to head straight for a crossroads hotel and put up his horse for the night.

It was very bold, but he counted on two things. First that the news of his crimes and a description of him might not have been spread as yet. Second that he would never be expected and looked for so close to his home. It would be generally surmised that he would strike out for distant regions.

All went as smoothly as he could have wished. There were not, apparently, more than four or five men staying in the hotel that night, and he saw not a single face that was even remotely familiar. He put up his horse in security, ate his dinner with the five men before him, and then went up to his room.

But the scheme had not been as simple as it seemed. The moment he was alone

in his room he began to worry, for he realized that he had stepped out of his natural character. Ordinarily he would not have favored these yokels with a single word more than orders for food. But this night he knew that he had been exceedingly affable, making himself laugh at their jests, even venturing a few stale jokes, and putting himself out to be agreeable. Was it not possible that he had been so unnatural that they would suspect something? Might they not be putting their heads together downstairs this very moment?

He heard a loud burst of laughter downstairs, and his skin prickled. What if that laughter was at his expense? His pulse quickened. With soft steps he stole about his room and took stock of his surroundings. There was fortunately one easy exit that he could use in case of need. There was a shed beside the hotel, and the roof of it joined the side of the main building a couple of feet below his window. It would be easy in a pinch to slip out the window and down this roof, and then drop lightly to the ground.

Having noted this, he breathed more easily, and, returning to the door, he examined the lock. It was a stout affair, and there was besides a strong bolt on the inside. This he shot home and felt fairly assured against a surprise attack. But he dared not take off his boots, when he lay down on the bed. For the first time the meaning of the phrase "dying in one's boots" came home to him with all its force.

In the meantime, how should he sleep? Finding himself fast approaching a stage of hysterical excitement, he shrugged his shoulders, turned on his side, calmly assured himself that he was frightening his mind with silly fancies, and closed his eyes, determined to find sleep until the dawn. Then one day's march would bring him home. The closing of his eyes automatically induced drowsiness, and he was on the verge of falling fast asleep, when he heard a soft tapping at the door.

It brought him off the bed and onto his feet in the middle of the floor with one soundless bound. What could it mean? He slipped to the door.

"Who's there?"

"A friend. Let me in, Al."

"What news?"

"Danger, Al . . . and hurry."

“RANKIN’S ESCAPE”

Were they attempting to lure him out with this stale pretext? He decided to take the gambler’s chance which he loved above all things. The moment he had drawn the bolt he leaped back and landed noiselessly far to the side where an enemy would never look for him on first entering. On one point he was certain. If there were the glint of a gun in the hand of the man who entered, he would fling the open, heavy pocket knife that he now held in his hand. That was a dainty little art which he had picked up in odd moments from an Italian friend.

But, when the door was pushed open, a big man strode in and at once closed the door behind him again and secured the lock and the bolt. There was no glimmer of a gun in the darkness.

“Where are you, Al?”

“Who are you?” asked Al Rankin.

“A friend.”

“What name?”

“One you won’t want to hear. But first, to show you I’m here in good faith, take this gun.”

Something in the quality of the whisper that he heard brought a wild surmise to the outlaw, but he dismissed it at once as an absurdity. Then in the darkness he made out the butt of a weapon extended toward him. He clutched it eagerly; it was dearer to him than the touch of the hand of any friend had ever been. It meant safety. It meant, at least, a glorious fighting chance against odds. At once his heart stopped thundering. He felt that he was himself again.

“I’m going to light the lamp,” said the stranger, feeling his way toward the bedside table and taking off the chimney with a soft chink of glass. “When you see my face, think twice before you jump.”

A sulphur match spurted blue flame between his fingers, the wick of the lamp was lighted, and, as the chimney was replaced, the room brightened. Al Rankin found himself looking into the eyes of Bob Lake. Only the warning that had been given him before—and, in addition, the fact that Lake stood with his arms folded, his hands far from his holster—kept the outlaw from a gun play.

“You,” he exclaimed softly. “You . . . Lake!”

“I’m here,” said Lake dryly.

“You’ve come for an accounting, eh?” asked Rankin fiercely. “You can have it,

Lake, on foot or in the saddle. With fists or guns or knives. I'm ready for you."

"You're a kind of man-eater, ain't you?" Lake sneeringly retorted. "But I ain't here for trouble. Besides, you got enough on your hands."

"Trouble?"

Lake pointed significantly at the floor.

"Those blockheads downstairs?" Rankin in spite of his mocking tone changed color.

"Those blockheads know who you are," said Lake.

"The mischief!" He set his teeth over the next part of his exclamation. "I had the idea of it," he muttered. "I should have jumped, when the hunch first hit me."

"You should have," assented Lake calmly. "There's a reward out."

"A reward!" Rankin felt his skin prickle.

"Who offered it?" he said huskily.

"The gent whose horse you stole. Sid Gordon."

"How much?"

"Three thousand."

Al Rankin cursed as the perspiration streamed out on his forehead. He knew what three thousand dollars as a reward meant. In that hard-working community, where a man would labor all month for wretched "found" and fifty dollars a month, how many hard riders and sure shots would turn out on a trail that ended with three thousand dollars—sixty months' savings—a fortune to most of the men he knew. The country would be alive with those who pursued him. His hand closed hard on the handle of the revolver.

"They heard of the reward? But how did they locate me? They don't know my face down this way."

"There's a description of you and of your horse. Bill White wired it all over the country and the amount of the reward. Maybe they figured the way I did . . . that you'd come back home this way."

"They knew I'd come home?"

"The first guess was that you would, the second that you'd be too clever to make that move . . . but there was a third guess that you'd count on them figuring you for the foxy move. I made that third guess, and they's a pile of men around here that's smarter than I am."

"They told you downstairs that I'm here?"

"It's all they're talking about. They wanted me to join in with 'em. I told 'em I didn't give a hang about rewards. What I wanted was sleep. So I came up to my room. Then I sneaked out to yours."

“How many are there? Have they sent out for help?”

“No, they don’t want to split the reward up too much. They figure they’re strong enough. There’s the landlord and five others. Two of ’em are pretty handy in a fight, two ain’t much, and one is yaller. I could tell it by the twitching of his hands.”

“Six to one, ain’t that enough?”

“Sure. But six to two ain’t so bad.”

“Six to two?”

Rankin crossed the room with a long light step. He had never walked like that before. He had never talked like this before. But now loud sounds had become abhorrent to him. They prevented him from listening to what was going on outside the room. They kept him from marking and interpreting every creak, every rustle of the wind in the old building.

“Now, Lake,” he demanded in that new, soft voice, “who in blazes are you, and what’s behind all this? Who are you? Where do you come from? How do you figure in on me and what I do? What made you save me at Everett? What’s brought you down here, pretending to play in on my side? Can you tell me? Do you think I don’t know that you’re trying to trick me so’s you can turn me over to those skunks downstairs? Out with it!”

“I’ll out with it,” answered Bob Lake. “It’s the girl, Al. Not you, you dirty, sneakin’ coyote. Not you, you treacherous, man-killing, life-stealin’ hound! But it’s the girl. Keep your hand away from your gun. You’re a fast man with a gun, Al. Maybe faster’n I am. But I’d kill you. There ain’t any shadow of a doubt in my head. I’d kill you, if it come to a pinch. And why I don’t kill you is because the girl loves you. I ain’t going to have her face hauntin’ me. If keepin’ you safe is going to make her happy, safe you shall be, if I can make you.”

“Fairy stuff,” said Rankin, but he stepped back. There had been a conviction in that steady, low-pitched voice that was still thrilling him. “Now what’s your plan?”

“A dead simple one. First we switch bandannas. Yours is blue and white . . . fool colors. Mine is red. Then gimme your sombrero for this Stetson. We’re about the same size. They won’t look close, and they won’t see much by this light.”

He tore off the big bandanna as he spoke and tossed it to Rankin, and then he took Rankin’s and knotted it about his throat.

“You go right downstairs, Al, hummin’ to yourself, and don’t speak to nobody. Head for the stables. They’ll think that you’re going for somethin’ you forgot in your saddlebags . . . somethin’ *I* forgot, I mean. When you get in the stables, saddle my horse. It’s the big gray, and it’s a sound horse, if there ever was one. Then saddle your own horse . . . Gordon’s bay. Take that horse out behind the barn and leave

him there. Will he stand with the reins thrown over his head?"

"Sure he will."

"Then leave him there like that. After you've done that come out the front of the barn with my horse, climb on him, and lope off up the road, up the valley. You can break through, and before morning you'll be at your home. Keep off the main trail. They'll be watching there for you, but they won't watch at your house. Now, get out!"

"Lake," began Rankin, "after what I've done to you, this. . . ."

"Don't talk," cut in Bob Lake. "When I hear you talk, Rankin, it sort of riles me. I ain't doin' this for you. I'd be glad to see you planted full of holes or swingin' from a tree. That's where your happy home had ought to be. Get out. I'm sick of your face."

"All them kind things," murmured Al Rankin, "I'll remember. Someday I'll pay in full. S'long."

Without another word he adjusted the Stetson on his head and slipped softly out of the room. His first steps were soundless, but then Lake heard his heel striking heavily and caught the burden of a tune the outlaw was humming. It was very good acting, but would someone downstairs see his face and halt him? Bob Lake waited breathlessly. Any moment there might be the report of a revolver. But the moments passed. There was the clatter of a back door swinging shut, and then, peering out the window, he saw a shadowy figure move toward the barn through the starlight. It was outlined distinctly against the whitewashed wall of the barn and then was swallowed in the blackness of the open doorway. The first step had been successfully taken.

Next he studied the shrubbery opposite the window. He had heard them say that this was the point at which Rankin, if alarmed, might attempt to break out, and two of them—the landlord and another—were posted yonder among the trees, keeping a vigilant watch on that window.

Yet through that window he must attempt to escape. For it was two-thirds of his plan to make them think that he was Rankin and to draw their pursuit after him. That would give the outlaw a clear break up the valley and toward his house. It would give him a chance to see his wife for the second time since their marriage, equip himself with plenty of funds, supply her with the location to which she should send him further relief, and, in short, give Al Rankin a flying start in his career of outlawry. Later, no doubt, the Rankin estate could buy off Gordon and the heirs of Hugh Smiley, and the prosecution would be dropped. Then Rankin could return and, accepting a short term in prison, could make a fresh start in life.

All of this was perfectly plain, but the difficult thing was to make that escape from the window. To attempt to pass down through the house would be madness. At this point in his thoughts he saw Rankin bring the gray out of the barn and climb into the saddle. Someone spoke to him from the hotel, and he returned a loud and cheery answer. There was no doubt that the fellow had plenty of nerve. But what if he had again betrayed his benefactor? In that case, even supposing Lake ran the gamut and reached the back of the barn in safety, it would only mean that he would be run down later on by odds of six to one. The thought made him cringe closer to the wall.

In the meantime, the tattoo of the departing horse sounded fainter and fainter in the distance and finally died out altogether. Then very softly Lake pushed up the window to its full height. Fortunately, there was no protesting squeak. He passed his legs through the window and sat on the sill, making ready for his start. They would not see him against the black square of the window; not until he began running would they note him.

He waited. The longer he delayed the farther away Rankin was riding, and the closer he drew to his goal. The longer he delayed the more this keen cold of the mountain air would be numbing the arms and fingers of the watchers who sat as sentinels yonder in the dark. That same cold was eating into him, and finally, for fear it should numb his own muscles, he determined to make the break for safety. It was no longer a game. If he were found in the clothes of Rankin, even though he were discovered not to be the wanted man, his shrift on earth would be short. What was the punishment for assisting an outlaw? If he were caught, it would be by a bullet that would ask and answer all its own questions.

He slipped completely out of the window and rose and lowered himself until his leg muscles were unlimbered. Then, crouching low so as to make a less important mark against the gray of the house, he started running, aiming his flight at the lower and farthest corner of the roof of the shed. The first step betrayed him. He had not counted on that and had hoped to cover most of the distance to the edge of the roof before he was noted by the watchers, but with the first fall of his foot the dry shingles crashed and crackled beneath him with a sound almost as loud as the report of a gun.

His alarm was answered by a yell from the shrubbery. Two bits of fire flashed like great fireflies, and at the same instant two deep reports came barking through the night. There was an ugly, whining whisper beside him. He knew that sound, and by its nearness he knew that expert marksmen were shooting.

He raced on with the smashing of the shingles beneath him, the yells of the sentinels beyond, and now a rapid fire of shots. Rifle shots, he supposed, by the

depth of the tone. Yet he reached the corner of the roof before something swept across his forehead like the cut of a red-hot knife, moving at an incredible speed. There was no pain, but a stunning shock that cast him off his balance, and he floundered forward into thin air.

Only by luck he landed on sprawling hands and knees instead of on his feet. And that fall gave him a new lease on life. The marksmen had seen the fall, and now, ceasing fire, they ran toward him with yells of triumph.

He was up on his feet and racing away again like the wind. He saw them drop to their knees, heard their cursing, and once more the sing of bullets whipped around him. But this time the surprise had unsteadied them, and they shot wildly.

A moment later he had turned the corner of the barn, and one breathing space of security was left to him. But the horse? Had Al Rankin done as he was bidden, or had the selfish devil gone off without a single thought of the man he left behind him? That heart-breaking question was answered an instant later. Whipping around the farther corner of the barn, he saw the form of a tall horse, glimmering under the stars, and on his back he recognized the bunched outlines of a saddle.

He reached that saddle with a single leap, and, sweeping up the hanging reins, a second later he was rejoicing in the first spring of the horse as the spurs touched his flanks. That very first leap spoke volumes to Lake as to the animal's running power. A fence shot up before them out of the night. Before he had well noted it, the horse rose and took it splendidly, the lurch of the jump hurling Lake far back in the saddle.

Yells and bullets came from the direction of the barn, but they were random shots. He shouted his defiance back at them and fired his revolver foolishly in the air. For they must know his direction. They must know that he was fleeing not up the valley toward the Rankin house, but across it toward the higher mountains. For that would give Al still further respite and make him certainly safe.

New sounds began behind him. He swung low in the saddle and listened away from the hoofbeats of his own horse. It was a steady drumming. The pursuit had already begun.

XI

“WRONG—ALL WRONG!”

Twenty-four hours perceptibly changed the outlook of Paul Sumpter. He had an eye of not inconsiderable shrewdness for men, but with him men and money were inextricably entangled. He had been a banker on a small scale all his life, and property to him had an almost human appeal. The broad face of a meadow with a furrow turning black behind the plowshare was to him like beauty in a woman. A dense stand of yellow wheat with the wind rattling through it was a perfect symphony.

His opinion of Al Rankin began to change insensibly before he had been in the house a full hour. In the first place, it seemed a shame that the owner of such a property should be so evil. And that thought fathered the next, which was that the young fellow might not be entirely evil, and this in turn gave rise to the idea that there might be explanations. He had begun by insisting that Anne return with him to his home. He ended by blushing, when he remembered the folly of his advice.

Let it not be thought that the heart of Paul Sumpter was no larger than his money bags. He was a generous man. But he had thought in terms of dollars for so long that, like many a rich man, an oil painting could be actually beautiful to him because fifty thousand dollars had been paid for it and the pedigree of a Thoroughbred became an entrancing study because its appeal to the bank account was so intimate and real.

He would have been the first to denounce such an attitude, but unconsciously he had come to feel that poverty was a sin. Naturally wealth became a virtue. He was very humble about himself, because his own affairs in money were very moderate.

In a word Paul Sumpter, having denounced Al Rankin and all that appertained to him, looked out the window and beheld the noble pine trees marching up the mountains—timber to build a whole city—and the violence of his rage abated. He turned from the window, and his heel, that was intended to crash against the floor, was muffled in its fall by a rug of exquisite depth. Sinking thoughtfully into a chair, its softness embraced him and wooed him to stay, while his fingers strayed idly over the delicacy of the velvet upholstery. When he sat at the table that night opposite his daughter—how far she was removed by the noble length of that table—it seemed to him that her beauty acquired a new luster from the beauty of the silver and the shimmer of the glass. From the luxurious depths of a chair, a little later, he expanded his hands toward the blaze of a great fire and accepted with sleepy pleasure a long and black and thick cigar that his daughter brought him in a fragrant humidior. He noted the white turn of her wrist as she lighted that cigar for him.

“By heaven, Anne, dear,” he said, “you were cut out for the wife of a rich man. And what’s more,” he added, drawing strongly on the cigar, and then pausing to let

the smoke waft toward the ceiling, “what’s more, you’ve found him. You waited, and you found him.”

Wrinkles of amused understanding came at the corners of her eyes. She knew him and understood his frailties. Sometimes it seems that a woman loves a man actually on account of his faults. Saints are usually loved by posterity alone. Paul Sumpter was by no means a saint, and Anne, knowing it, gained her power over him by never letting him see that she understood. Nothing is so ruinous to domestic peace as that. When a family man feels that his native mystery has vanished, he cringes behind his newspaper.

“I suppose I have,” she said, and went back to her chair so that she could indulge herself in a smile while her back was turned. Her face was perfectly grave, when he saw it again.

“Just now,” went on Paul Sumpter, “things look a little blue. But we’ll have them out of that. Oh, yes, we’ll straighten affairs. There are ways.”

She remembered his mingled indignation, despair, and rage earlier in the day. And again the wrinkles of mirth came around her eyes. Her father did not see; he was watching the cigar smoke mount in fat, blue-brown wreaths.

“What ways, Dad?”

“Ways of money with men. Al has followed a foolish . . . er . . . impulse . . . and has broken the law. What’s the law? Men! What do men listen to? Money! Who has the money? Al has it. There you are.”

He smiled beneficently on her and waited for admiration. And he received it. It was always her habit to slip in the little verbal pat on the back whenever she could.

“It sounds wonderful, Dad, but is it possible?”

“Of course, it’s possible. What’s against him? The Smiley family . . . that’s all. Aren’t they poor as rats? Five thousand would make them swear their souls away and bring them weeping with joy to Al Rankin. Then there’s Gordon, you say? Tush! I go to him and give him some straight talk . . . ‘Boy made a few mistakes, but he’s good at heart. Wants a new start. Just married. Ready to settle down. I’ll answer for him. Besides, here’s the value of your horse plus the reward you offered.’ I guess that would hold Mister Gordon, whoever he is. Suppose the case comes to trial? No evidence . . . no weeping relatives of Smiley to appear. A yokel of a district attorney against a real man of the law such as I could get. Why, girl, don’t you see how it will come out?”

“But there’s one other . . . the only living eyewitness . . . Bob Lake.”

“He didn’t see the shot fired,” said her father. “If he wants to talk, can’t he be bought off as well as the others? Tut, he knows which side his bread is buttered on.

What other reason has he for working for Al now?"

"Oh," sighed the girl. "You think he's like the rest?"

"Why not?"

"I wonder."

"But there's no use worrying about him. He's already with us."

"You don't think I'll have to leave here and go home, Dad?"

He flushed a little. "I was excited when I said that. Hadn't a chance to look over the ground of the case. Needlessly excited, my dear, that's all. Now, don't worry. If Al can only be kept out of danger until we have this thing straightened out. . . ."

"He will be kept out of danger."

"You're so sure?"

"Bob Lake will see to it."

"Yes! Remarkable fellow! I'll see to it that he's rewarded."

"How?"

"With money, my dear. How else?"

"Do you really think that money would do for him?" Anne asked her father.

"How else, then? Do you think he's working for us for nothing?"

"I don't know," replied the girl. "I don't know."

For it had started a train of thoughts that had run through her brain too often of late. What would be the result for Bob Lake? At the idea of a money reward she shivered. Of course, she would have to prevent such an offer to him. Before she had finished that thought, there was a swish of a door swung swiftly open, and she looked up into the face of her husband.

There followed without a word spoken an instant of hurried movements. Her father ran tiptoe to one door and closed and locked it; she did the same for another; and Al Rankin tended to the one through which he had entered.

She came back slowly, a little timidly, waiting for him with a smile and with gentle eyes. He had not a glance for her.

"First," he said, "money! I need the coin."

"Certainly, my boy. How much?"

Paul Sumpter had drawn out his fat wallet. It was snatched from his hand and pocketed by the outlaw. Sumpter stared blankly at his own open hand.

"That'll do for a while," said Al Rankin. "I'll tell you where to send more. Now a gun!"

"You have one in the holster."

"I need two. One might jam on me, and then where'd I be? I need two!"

"Al," asked Sumpter, "you're not going to fight?"

“What do you think? Lie down and let them grab me? Not me! This is a game, and I’m going to play it.” He threw his clenched fist above his head and laughed in silent exultation. “What’s happened?” he continued, firing the question at them like a shot. “What’s been doing around here? And where are the servants? That rat-eyed Charley . . . where’s he?”

All vestiges of a smile had been brushed from the face of Anne Rankin, and all softness was faded from her eyes, and they were now hard and steady. Al passed close to her as he went around the table, and she shrank back, but this he did not note.

“Nothing has happened. They haven’t been near the house, but I know they’re watching the approaches. How in the world did you get through?”

“Night before last. It was a squeeze, but I made it. What’s that?” He whirled, his teeth showing under a lifted upper lip. There was a far-away sound of a door closing. “Try . . . try the hall. Look out!” he commanded.

The command was directed to Anne, but she did not stir. Her father covered the embarrassing part of that moment by going himself to obey the order. He unlocked the door, peered out, and turned back into the room, forgetting to lock the door.

“Someone must have gone out. There’s not a soul or a sound in the hall.”

“All right.”

Anne raised her head. “You’ve met Bob Lake?” She pointed to his bandanna and the Stetson hat that he wore crushed onto the back of his head.

“You’re sharp-eyed, ain’t you?” he asked. “Been looking pretty close at this Lake fellow, and he at you? The idiot! Well, don’t forget that I’m watching you both.”

There was no avoiding or explaining away the pointed ugliness of his voice. It brought a stifled exclamation from Paul Sumpter. But the girl smiled in an odd manner, and she met his eyes with a steadiness which in another than his wedded wife might have seemed contempt. He turned, fumbled in a cabinet, and brought out a second revolver, looked to its mechanism, and then laid it on the table.

“You met Bob Lake,” she went on. “What happened?”

“Him?” He tossed up his head and favored her with a wolfish grin. “The skunk tried to play the crook with me.”

“The fiend,” said Sumpter softly.

“The fiend he is,” asserted Al Rankin calmly. “But I paid him his dues. He ran onto me in a crossroads hotel . . . found me in my room. Then he went down and warned the people that I was there and came back to me.”

Anne had sunk in a chair where she sat very erect, her fingers clutching the arms

until the knuckles whitened.

“The dirty dog,” breathed Paul Sumpter. “Anne, I knew there was something behind that cur’s actions. I’ll have him skinned alive for this and run out of the country, if there’s a law in it.”

“There ain’t any law for gents like him,” said Rankin. “He’s too smooth to get caught.”

“Go on,” said Anne, strangely without emotion. “Tell us what happened after that?”

“After that? Well, when he come back to the room, I gave him a look. The hound smiled too much to please me. I waited a minute. Then I asked him point-black what he was up to. What d’you think he did?”

“What?” asked Paul Sumpter.

“Went for his gun!”

From the corner of his eye he became aware that Anne was smiling a mirthless smile, and the sight disturbed him a trifle.

“Great Cæsar!” said Sumpter. “And what did you do?”

“Didn’t waste a bullet on him. I knocked the skunk head over heels.”

“Good. I’d have given a thousand to see you do it.”

“Then I tied and gagged him and took his hat and bandanna, and with that I managed to get away. The others thought it was his outfit and let me pass . . . there wasn’t much light. And that’s all there is to Mister Bob Lake.”

“I knew it!” said Sumpter, striking his fist into his open palm. “Something in the face of that fellow that I distrusted the first time I saw him.”

“You think pretty good . . . backwards,” replied Al Rankin. “Point is I got clean away from him.”

“Wrong,” said a soft voice behind him. “All wrong, Al.”

He whirled. The door into the hall had been opened silently, and Bob Lake stood in the arch. His revolver was at his hip, pointing at Rankin.

XII

“PLUMB HOLLOW INSIDE”

Instinctively Rankin made one impulsive clutch for his revolver, but an imperative

jerk to the side of Lake's weapon discouraged him.

"Don't do it, Al," said Lake. "I told you before I'd had a hunch that I'd blow your head off one of these days, and now I got an idea that the time has come."

"Sumpter!" implored Rankin.

"Stay where you are, you thick-headed fool," said Bob Lake. "And you, girl, stay where you are. I'm watching all three of you. You're wrong . . . the whole bunch of you."

Anne was on her feet.

"It shows that playing square don't count and don't pay. I'm a fool to bother with you, but first I'm going to get the truth out of this hound, and then I'm going to wash my hands of the whole gang of you." He stretched back to the door, and with his left hand, feeling behind him, he turned the lock. "These walls are tolerable thick," he said, "and I don't think that a rumpus here would get much notice in the house. Rankin, you and me has got to have it out here. Understand?"

Paul Sumpter had backed up step by step against the wall as though an invisible hand shoved him, and, even when his shoulders struck the wall, he still wriggled as though he hoped to work his way through it.

"Now," said Bob Lake, "I want that gun you got there, Al. I want it bad. No, don't hurry. Move slow, Al, move slow. Pull back that hand of yours like you was liftin' a hundred pounds instead of a gun. Then bring the gun out careful . . . mighty careful . . . because, if I got to complain, this gat of mine'll do my talkin' for me. That's right. Now take it by the barrel. There you are. No flips, Al. Nothin' fancy. Just shove that gun of yours onto the table. And now we're nearly ready."

Al Rankin was trembling like a man with ague, and he raved at the others. "Sumpter . . . Anne . . . are you tongue-tied? Give a yell. Get somebody in here."

"There ain't going to be any noise," stated Bob Lake. "There ain't going to be a whisper. You figure on that, Sumpter. You figure on that, ma'am."

She made a little motion toward him, but once more he failed to see, and certainly he failed to understand.

"Now," he continued, "since I've started in preaching, I'm going to finish the sermon. I'm going to tell you what's wrong with you, Al. You're like a kid that needs a thrashing. When a kid don't get the whip once in a while, he goes wrong. He gets wild. He turns bad, but maybe he ain't quite as bad as he thinks. One taste of the whip would straighten him out and bring him to time. Well, Al, that's the trouble with you. You need the whip. And I'm it. I'm the whip!" Then he shoved his gun back into his holster. There was a slow gravity about this that was more impressive than any burst of violent action.

“I’m going to lick you, Al,” went on the cowpuncher slowly. “I think you’re a better man than I am with a gun. But what are guns for? Cowards. Cowards, Al, like yourself. Yaller hounds, like yourself, gents that practice till they’re perfect and then go out and pick a fight. Fight? No, it ain’t a fight, it’s a murder, when a gent like you picks on an ordinary ’puncher. Fists are what we were meant to fight with, and fists it’s going to be today. I know you’re a fast one with your hands, Al, but what I’m going to trust is the muscle that come out of labor. You see you’re a gentleman, Al, by all accounts. I’m a cowpuncher, plain and simple. And I’m goin’ to bulldog you the way I’d bulldog a yearlin’ . . . if I can. Now step up and put up your hands. Unless . . . you’ll tell this lady what was the truth of the last time I met you?”

The alarm had been gradually fading from the face of Al Rankin. As Bob Lake said, Al was fast with his hands. Careful boxing instruction had trained him, and he knew how to use his great strength to the greatest advantage. Now he smiled with savage satisfaction.

“Why, you fool,” he said, “I’ll bust you in two! Tell ’em the truth? I’ve already told ’em the truth.”

On the heels of that speech he leaped in with a left arm that shot out with the precision of a piston and thudded squarely on the jaw of Bob Lake. The weight of the blow carried him before it and drove him back until his shoulders were against the wall, but Al Rankin, instead of following, made for the table where his gun lay. To his astonishment the girl intercepted him like a flash. She snatched up the heavy weapon and leveled it at him, her eyes on fire with anger and excitement.

“A fair fight, Al Rankin. That’s all he asked from you, and he’ll have it.”

The beast came up in the face of Rankin as he glared at her. He would have sprung in to wrest away the gun, but a merciless coldness in her bearing told him she meant what she said.

“You’ve swung over to him, eh? I’ll attend to you later on. You. . . .”

He had to whirl before he had finished the sentence and meet the rush of Bob Lake. For the first blow had stung the cowpuncher rather than dazed him, and he came in now furiously, a terrifying figure. The bandage around his forehead was thickly stained. The jar of the first blow had opened the shallow wound where the rifle bullet had skinned across the flesh of his brow, and now a thin trickle went down his face.

Al Rankin, wheeling, smashed out with both hands, and both hands struck the mark. The weight of the punches held up Lake, but in he came again. A lightning side-step made him charge into thin air, and, before he could change direction, a heavy blow behind the ear knocked him sprawling.

He was badly dazed by the fall, and Al Rankin whining with beastly satisfaction caught up a heavy stool and swung it around his head. That blow would have ended the fight and Bob Lake, but the shrill voice of the girl cut in on Rankin.

“Drop it, or I’ll shoot you, Al. Drop it and fight fair, or I swear I’ll shoot!”

He aimed a curse at her, cast the stool away, and sprang in on Bob Lake, who was rising slowly to his feet. He came in rashly. Sure of his man he paid no attention to his own guard, and the result was that Lake, lunging low with the full power of his big body behind the blow, drove his fist fairly into the ribs of the other. The impact sounded heavily through the room, and Paul Sumpter groaned in sympathy.

Al Rankin was not too much hurt to side-step, but this time Lake did not rush blindly. Instead, he followed his man slowly with a bulldog steadiness, and he dealt out bone-breaking blows with either hand, swinging full-arm punches, four out of five of which were blocked by the skill of Al Rankin, but the fifth blow went home with cruel effect.

He was taking terrible punishment in the meantime. The cutting, darting fists of Rankin battered his face and played a tattoo on his body, but still Lake came in like a tide with a resistless force.

There was dead silence in the room except for the impacts of the blows and the panting of the fighters. Paul Sumpter cowered against the wall in terror, but the girl stood erect, swaying a little, following the battle with a fierce interest as though she gloried in it. And the revolver was never lowered in her hand.

There was a short, half-stifled cry from Al Rankin. He had smashed both fists fairly into the face of Bob Lake, and yet he had failed to stop the rush of the latter. The sneering contempt and confidence with which Rankin began the battle had changed to a wild-eyed fear. His own strength was failing him, but the strength of Lake, built on the ranges, remained. It grew with the taste of battle, apparently. If ever he came to close quarters, the end would be near.

Al Rankin sensed it, and he used every trick he knew to keep away. If it had been the open, he might have succeeded through his lightness of foot, but the walls of the room confined him. Finally, he leaped aside from a swinging blow, and, as he leaped, his shoulder struck the wall. He sprang back, and his shoulders struck against the corner. He was fairly trapped, and now Bob Lake came lunging, head down, arms circling, and caught his enemy under the armpits.

The minute those bear arms circled him the last strength left the body of Rankin. He remembered a fight he had once seen—a fight that he had egged on. It had been like this—bulldog against wolf. And finally, when the bulldog cornered his man, the ending had been horrible to see—a hurricane of short blows that battered the body

and face of the wolf to a shapeless pulp. No quarter, either. Al Rankin gave up.

At the very point where Bob Lake had expected the crucial test, he found a form of putty in his embrace, and then the harsh scream of terror from Rankin's lips—"Help!"

He jerked his hand over the shoulder of the man and crushed his hand against the lips. The wild, horrible eyes stared at him—the plea and the terror of a cornered beast. Bob Lake shook himself free with a snort of disgust. Rankin, that support suddenly removed, was cowering against the wall.

"I knew it," said Lake. "I knew it. Plumb hollow inside . . . a bluff. A yaller quitter. Look at him!"

He stood back so that the others could see the better, and Al Rankin crouched and shuddered. His eyes flashed here and there, seeking escape and finding none—finding disgust even on the face of Paul Sumpter, his gaze reverted to Lake.

"He . . . he'll kill me," said Rankin. "Anne . . . Sumpter . . . take him off."

"If she asks me," said Bob Lake slowly. "Otherwise, I'm just beginning on you, Al. Down on your knees and beg her to call me off."

To the horror of them all, Al Rankin dropped to his knees. "Anne . . . say a word. . . ."

She covered her face. "Bob Lake," she whispered.

And Bob Lake drew back. "It's the end for you, Al," he said with a certain amount of pity in his voice. "It's the complete end for you. You've been showed up, and your color is yaller . . . like a dog's. This is just the beginning of what's coming. The next gent that meets up with you, you'll buckle to. You'll be afraid. You can't help it. You'll be scared that he'll call your bluff the way I've called it. You'll take water going down the line. You ain't going to be hung because you ain't worth the price of a rope. Get up, Rankin, and git out of the house and never come back."

It was long after the divorce; it was long after Anne Sumpter Rankin had become Anne Lake. Bob Lake was a little less lean of face, a little less brown of hand. But happiness had kept the eyes of Anne like the eyes of a girl. They had gone to New York to celebrate the end of a prosperous season. Stepping out of a taxicab one night, they encountered a beggar, unshaven, thin-shouldered, thrusting his lank, white hand before them.

Anne Lake dropped a little shower of silver into it. She would have paused, for something in the beggar interested her, but her husband drew her on.

"But do you know," she said, "that I thought I recognized that face?"

"Maybe you did," said Bob Lake. "Maybe it was something you saw in a bad

dream. Nothing more'n that."

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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.

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[The end of *A Shower of Silver* by Frederick Schiller Faust (as John Frederick)]