
THE BELLS OF
SAN JUAN

.. Jackson Gregory ..

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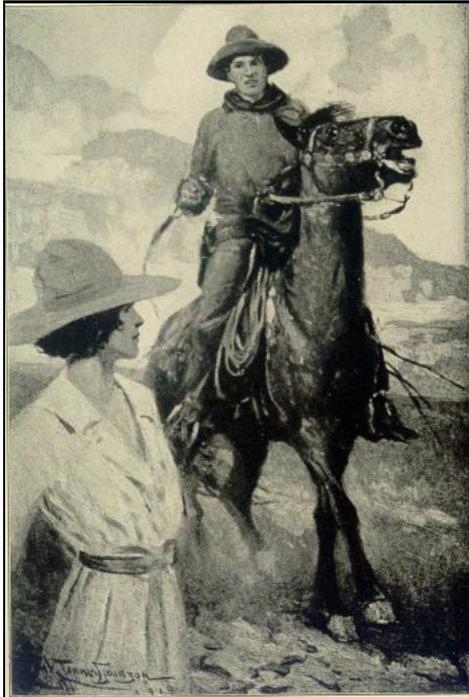
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Having come closer he reined in his horse, stared at her a moment in surprised wonderment . . .

Frontispiece: Having come closer he reined in his horse, stared at her a moment in surprised wonderment . . .

THE BELLS OF SAN JUAN

BY

JACKSON GREGORY

AUTHOR OF

***JUDITH OF BLUE LAKE RANCH, THE JOYOUS TROUBLE MAKER,
MAN TO MAN, ETC.***

ILLUSTRATED BY
FRANK TENNEY JOHNSON

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TO
RODERICK NORTON GREGORY

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Having come closer he reined in his horse, stared at her a moment in surprised wonderment . . . Frontispiece

Then came the second meeting with Jim Galloway

"Come, and I'll share my secret with you"

On through the bright moonlight came the sheriff's posse

The Bells of San Juan

A Novel

FOREWORD

THE BELLS

He who has not heard the bells of San Juan has a journey yet to make. He who has not set foot upon the dusty road which is the one street of San Juan, at times the most silent and deserted of thoroughfares, at other times a mad and turbulent lane between sun-dried adobe walls, may yet learn something of man and his hopes, desires, fears and ruder passions from a pin-point upon the great southwestern map.

The street runs due north and south, pointing like a compass to the flat gray desert in the one direction, and in the other to the broken hills swept up into the San Juan mountains. At the northern end, that is toward the more inviting mountains, is the old Mission. To right and left of the whitewashed corridors in a straggling garden of pear-trees and olives and yellow roses are two rude arches made of seasoned cedar. From the top cross-beam of each hang three bells.

They have their history, these bells of San Juan, and the biggest with its deep, mellow voice, the smallest with its golden chimes, seem to be chanting it when they ring. Each swinging tongue has its tale to tell, a tale of old Spain, of Spanish galleons and Spanish gentlemen adventurers, of gentle-voiced priests and sombre-eyed Indians, of conquest, revolt, intrigue, and sudden death. When a baby is born in San Juan, a rarer occurrence than a strong man's death, the littlest of the bells upon the western arch laughs while it calls to all to hearken; when a man is killed, the angry-toned bell pendant from the eastern arch shouts out the word to go billowing across the stretches of sage and greasewood and gama-grass; if one of the later-day frame buildings bursts into flame, Ignacio Chavez warns the town with a strident clamor, tugging frantically; be it wedding or discovery of gold or returns from the county elections, the bell-ringer cunningly makes the bells talk.

Out on the desert a man might stop and listen, forming his surmise as the sounds surged to meet him through the heat and silence. He might smile, if he knew San Juan, as he caught the jubilant message tapped swiftly out of the bronze bell which had come, men said, with Coronado; he might sigh at the lugubrious, slow-swelling voice of the big bell which had come hitherward long ago with the retinue of Marco de Niza, wondering what old friend or enemy, perchance, had at last closed his ears to all of Ignacio Chavez's music. Or, at a sudden fury of clanging, the man far out on the desert might hurry on, goading his burro impatiently, to know what great event had occurred in the old adobe town of San Juan.

It is three hundred and fifty years and more since the six bells of San Juan came into the new world to toll across that land of quiet mystery which is the southwest. It is a hundred years since an all-but-forgotten priest, Francisco Calderón, found them in various devastated mission churches, assembled them, and set them chiming in the old garden. There, among the pear-trees and olives and yellow roses, they still cast their shadows in sun and moonlight, in silence, and in echoing chimes.

CHAPTER I

THE BELLS RING

Ignacio Chavez, Mexican that he styled himself, Indian that the community deemed him, or "breed" of badly mixed blood that he probably was, made his loitering way along the street toward the Mission. A thin, yellowish-brown *cigarita* dangling from his lips, his wide, dilapidated conical hat tilted to the left side of his head in a listless sort of concession to the westering sun, he was, as was customary with him, utterly at peace. Ten minutes ago he had had twenty cents; two minutes after the acquisition of his elusive wealth he had exchanged the two dimes for whiskey at the Casa Blanca; the remaining eight minutes of the ten he required to make his way, as he naively put it, "between hell and heaven."

For from a corner of the peaceful old Mission garden at one end of the long street one might catch a glimpse of the Casa Blanca at the other end sprawling in the sun; between the two sturdy walled buildings had the town strung itself as it grew. As old a relic as the church itself was La Casa Blanca, and since San Juan could remember, in all matters antipodal to the religious calm of the padres' monument. Deep-shaded doorways let into the three-feet-thick earthen walls, waxed floors, green tables, and bar and cool looking-glasses . . . a place which invited, lured, held, and frequently enough finally damned.

San Juan, in the languid philosophy of Ignacio Chavez, was what you will. It epitomized the universe. You had everything here which the soul of man might covet. Never having dwelt elsewhere since his mother bore him here upon the rim of the desert and with the San Juan mountains so near that, Ignacio Chavez proudly knew, a man standing upon the Mesa Alta might hear the ringing of his bells, he experienced a pitying contempt for all those other spots in the world which were so plainly less favored. What do you wish, señor? Fine warm days? You have them here. Nice cool nights for sound slumber? Right here in San Juan, *amigo mío*. A desert across which the eye may run without stopping until it be tired, a wonderful desert whereon at dawn and dusk God weaves all of the alluring soft mists of mystery? Shaded cañons at noonday with water and birds and flowers? Behold the mountains. Everything desirable, in short. That there might be men who desired the splash of waves, the sheen of wet beaches, the boom of surf, did not suggest itself to one who had never seen the ocean. So, then, San Juan was "what you will." A man may fix his eye upon the little Mission cross which is always pointing to heaven and God; or he may pass through the shaded doors of the Casa Blanca, which, men say, give pathway into hell the shortest way.

Ignacio, having meditatively enjoyed his whiskey and listened smilingly to the tinkle of a mandolin in the *patio* under a grape-vine arbor, had rolled his cigarette and turned his back square upon the devil . . . of whom he had no longer anything to ask. As he went out he stopped in the doorway long enough to rub his back against a corner of the wall and to strike a match. Then, almost inaudibly humming the mandolin air, he slouched out into the burning street.

For twenty years he had striven with the weeds in the Mission garden, and no man during that time dared say which had had the best of it, Ignacio Chavez or the interloping alfileria and purslane. In the matters of a vast leisureliness and tumbling along the easiest way they resembled each other, these two avowed enemies. For twenty years he had looked upon the bells as his own, had filled his eye with them day after day, had thought the first thing in the morning to see that they were there, regarding them as solicitously in the rare rainy weather as his old mother regarded her few mongrel chicks. Twenty full years, and yet Ignacio Chavez was not more than thirty years old, or thirty-five, perhaps. He did not know, no one cared.

He was on his way to attack with his bare brown hands some of the weeds which were spilling over into the walk which led through the garden and to the priest's house. As a matter of fact he had awakened with this purpose in mind, had gone his lazy way all day fully purposing to give it his attention, and had at last arrived upon the scene. The front gate had finally broken, the upper hinge worn out; Ignacio carefully set the ramshackly wooden affair back against the fence, thinking how one of these days he would repair it. Then he went between the bigger pear-tree and the *lluvia de oro* which his own hands had planted here, and stood with legs well apart considering the three bells upon the easterly arch.

"*Que hay, amigos?*" he greeted them. "Do you know what I am going to do for you some fine day? I will build a

little roof over you that runs down both ways to shut out the water when it rains. It will make you hoarse, too much wet."

That was one of the few dreams of Ignacio's life; one day he was going to make a little roof over each arch. But to-day he merely regarded affectionately the Captain . . . that was the biggest of the bells . . . the Dancer, second in size, and Lolita, the smallest upon this arch. Then he sighed and turned toward the other arch across the garden to see how it was with the Little One, La Golondrina, and Ignacio Chavez. For it was only fair that at least one of the six should bear his name.

Changing his direction thus, moving directly toward the dropping sun, he shifted his hat well over his eyes and so was constrained to note how the weeds were asserting themselves with renewed insolence. He muttered a soft "*maldito!*" at them which might have been mistaken for a caress and determined upon a merciless campaign of extermination just as soon as he could have fitted a new handle to his hoe. Then he paused in front of the Mission steps and lifted his hat, made an elegant bow, and smiled in his own inimitable, remarkably fascinating way. For, under the ragged brim, his eyes had caught a glimpse of a pretty pair of patent-leather slippers, a prettier pair of black-stockinged ankles, and the hem of a white starched skirt.

Nowhere are there eyes like the eyes of old Mexico. Deep and soft and soulful, though the man himself may have a soul like a bit of charred leather; velvety and tender, though they may belong to an out-and-out cutthroat; expressive, eloquent even, though they are the eyes of a peon with no mind to speak of; night-black, and like the night filled with mystery. Ignacio Chavez lifted such eyes to the eyes of the girl who had been watching him and spontaneously gave her the last iota of his ready admiration.

"It is a fine day, señorita," he told her, displaying two glistening rows of superb teeth friendliwise. "And the garden . . . *Ah, que hay más bonito en todo el mundo?* You like it, no?"

It was slow music when Ignacio Chavez spoke, all liquid sounds and tender cadences. When he had cursed the weeds it was like love-making. A *d* in his mouth became a softened *th*; from the lips of such as the bell-ringer of San Juan the snapping Gringo oath comes metamorphosed into a gentle "Gah-tham!" The girl, to whom the speech of Chavez was something as new and strange as the face of the earth about her, regarded him with grave, curious eyes.

She was seated against the Mission wall upon the little bench which no one but Ignacio guessed was to be painted green one of these fine days, a bronze-haired, gray-eyed girl in white skirt and waist, and with a wide panama hat caught between her clasped hands and her knee. For a moment she was perhaps wondering how to take him; then with a suddenness that had been all unheralded in her former gravity, she smiled. With lips and eyes together as though she accepted his friendship. Ignacio's own smile broadened and he nodded his delight.

"It is truly beautiful here," she admitted, and had Ignacio possessed a tittle of that sympathetic comprehension which his eyes lied about he would have detected a little note of eagerness in her voice, would have guessed that she was lonely and craved human companionship. "I have been sitting here an hour or two. You are not going to send me away, are you?"

Ignacio looked properly horrified.

"If I saw an angel here in the garden, señorita," he exclaimed, "would I say *zape* to it? No, no, señorita; here you shall stay a thousand years if you wish. I swear it."

He was all sincerity; Ignacio Chavez would no sooner think of being rude to a beautiful young woman than of crying "Scat!" to an angel. But as to staying here a thousand years . . . she glanced through the tangle of the garden to the tiny graveyard and shook her head.

"You have just come to San Juan?" he asked. "To-day?"

"Yes," she told him. "On the stage at noon."

"You have friends here?"

Again she shook her head.

"Ah," said Ignacio. He straightened for a brief instant and she could see how the chest under his shirt inflated. "A tourist. You have heard of this garden, maybe? And the bells? So you travelled across the desert to see?"

The third time she shook her head.

"I have come to live here," she returned quietly.

"But not all alone, señorita!"

"Yes." She smiled at him again. "All alone."

"Mother of God!" he said within himself. And presently to her: "I did not see the stage come to-day; in San Juan one takes his siesta at that hour. And it is not often that the stage brings new people from the railroad."

In some subtle way he had made of his explanation an apology. While his slow brown fingers rolled a cigarette he stared away through the garden and across the desert with an expression half melancholy, half merely meditative, which made the girl wonder what his thoughts were. When she came to know him better she would know too that at times like this he was not thinking at all.

"I believe this is the most profoundly peaceful place in the world," she said quietly, half listlessly setting into words the impression which had clung about her throughout the long, still day. "It is like a strange dream-town, one sees no one moving about, hears nothing. It is just a little sad, isn't it?"

He had followed her until the end, comprehending. But sad? How that? It was just as it should be; to ears which had never been filled with the noises or rushing trains and cars and all of the traffic of a city, what sadness could there be in the very natural calm of the rim of the desert? Having no satisfactory reply to make, Ignacio merely muttered, "Si, señorita," somewhat helplessly and let it go with that.

"Tell me," she continued, sitting up a little and seeming to throw off the oppressively heavy spell of her environment, "who are the important people hereabouts?"

La gente? Oh, Ignacio knew them well, all of them! There was Señor Engle, to begin with. The banker of whom no doubt she had heard? He owned a big *residencia* just yonder; you could catch the gleam of its white walls through a clump of cottonwoods, withdrawn aloofly from San Juan's street. Many men worked for him; he had big cattle and sheep ranches throughout the county; he paid well and loaned out much money. Also he had a beautiful wife and a truly marvellously beautiful daughter. And horses such as one could not look upon elsewhere. Then there was Señor Nortone, as Ignacio pronounced him; a sincere friend of Ignacio Chavez and a man fearless and true and extravagantly to be admired, who, it appeared, was the sheriff. Not a family man; he was too young yet. But soon; oh, one could see! It would be Ignacio who would ring the bells for the wedding when Roderico Nortone married himself with the daughter of the banker.

"He is what you call a gunman, isn't he?" asked the girl, interested. "I heard two of the men on the stage talking of him. They called him Roddy Norton; he is the one, isn't he?"

Seguro; sure, he was the one. A gunman? Ignacio shrugged. He was sheriff, and what must a sheriff be if not a gunman?

"On the stage," continued the girl, "was a man they called Doc; and another named Galloway. They are San Juan men, are they not?"

Ignacio lifted his brows a shade disdainfully. They were both San Juan citizens, but obviously not to his liking. Jim Galloway was a big man, yes; but of *la gente*, never! The señorita should look the other way when he passed. He owned the Casa Blanca; that was enough to ticket him, and Ignacio passed quickly to *el señor doctor*. Oh, he was smart and did much good to the sick; but the poor Mexican who called him for a bedridden wife must first sell something and show the money.

Beyond these it appeared that the enviable class of San Juan consisted of the padre José, who was at present and much of the time away visiting the poor and sick throughout the countryside; Julius Struve, who owned and operated

the local hotel, one of the lesser luminaries, though a portly gentleman with an amiable wife; the Porters, who had a farm off to the northwest and whose connection to San Juan lay in the fact that an old maid daughter taught the school here; various other individuals and family groups to be disposed of with a word and a careless wave of a cigarette. Already for the fair stranger Ignacio had skimmed the cream of the cream.

The girl sighed, as though her question had been no idle one and his reply had disappointed her. For a moment her brows gathered slightly into a frown that was like a faint shadow; then she smiled again brightly, a quick smile which seemed more at home in her eyes than the frown had been.

Ignacio glanced from her to the weeds, then, squinting his eyes, at the sun. There was ample time, it would be cooler presently. So, describing a respectful arc about her, he approached the Mission wall, slipped into the shade, and eased himself in characteristic indolence against the white-washed adobe. She appeared willing to talk with him; well, then, what pleasanter way to spend an afternoon? She sought to learn this and that of a land new to her; who to explain more knowingly than Ignacio Chavez? After a little he would pluck some of the newly opened yellow rosebuds for her, making her a little speech about herself and budding flowers. He would even, perhaps, show her his bells, let her hear just the suspicion of a note from each. . . .

A sharp sound came to her abruptly out of the utter stillness but meant nothing to her. She saw a flock of pigeons rise above the roofs of the more distant houses, circle, swerve, and disappear beyond the cottonwoods. She noted that Ignacio was no longer leaning lazily against the wall; he had stiffened, his mouth was a little open, breathless, his attitude that of one listening expectantly, his eyes squinting as they had been just now when he fronted the sun. Then came the second sound, a repetition of the first, sharp, in some way sinister. Then another and another and another, until she lost count; a man's voice crying out strangely, muffled. Indistinct, seeming to come from afar.

It was an incongruous, almost a humorous, thing to see the sun-warmed passivity of Ignacio Chavez metamorphosed in a flash into activity. He muttered something, leaped away from the Mission wall, dashed through the tangle of the garden, and raced like a madman to the eastern arch. With both hands he grasped the dangling bell-ropes, with all of his might he set them clanging and shouting and clamoring until the reverberation smote her ears and set the blood tingling strangely through her. She had seen the look upon his face. . . .

Suddenly she knew that those little sharp sounds had been the rattle of pistol-shots. She sprang to her feet, her eyes widening. Now all was quiet save for the boom and roar of the bells. The pigeons were circling high in the clear sky, were coming back. . . . She went quickly the way Ignacio had gone, calling out to him:

"What is it?"

He seemed all unmoved now as he made his bells cry out for him; it was for him to be calm while they trembled with the event which surely they must understand.

"It is a man dead," he told her as his right hand called upon the Captain for a volume of sound from his bronze throat. "You will see. And there will be more work for Roderico Nortone!" He sighed and shook his head, and for a moment spoke softly with his jangling bells. "And some day," he continued quietly, "it will be Roderico's time, *no?* And I will ring the bells for him, and the Captain and the Dancer and Lolita, they will all put tears into men's eyes. But first, Santa Maria! let it be that I ring the others for him when he marries himself with the banker's daughter."

"A man dead?" the girl repeated, unwilling to grasp fully.

"You will see," returned Ignacio.

CHAPTER II

THE SHERIFF OF SAN JUAN

The girl in the old Mission garden stood staring at Ignacio Chavez a long time, seeming compelled by a force greater than her own to watch him tugging and jerking at his bells. Plainly enough she understood that this was an alarm being sounded; a man dead through violence, and the bell-ringer stirring the town with it. But when presently he let two of the ropes slip out of his hands and began a slow, mournful tolling of the Captain alone, she shuddered a little and withdrew.

That it might be merely a case of a man wounded, even badly, did not once suggest itself to her. Ignacio had spoken as one who knew, in full confidence and with finality. She should see! She returned to the little bench which one day was to be a bright green, and sat down. She could see that again the pigeons were circling excitedly; that from the baking street little puffs of dust arose to hang idly in the still air as though they were painted upon the clear canvas of the sky. She heard the voices of men, faint, quick sounds against the tolling of the bell. Then suddenly all was very still once more; Ignacio had allowed the Captain to resume his silent brooding, and came to her.

"I must go to see who it is," he apologized. "Then I will know better how to ring for him. The sheepman from Las Palmas, I bet you. For did I not see when just now I passed the Casa Blanca that he was a little drunk with Señor Galloway's whiskey? And does not every one know he sold many sheep and that means much money these days? Si, señorita; it will be the sheepman from Las Palmas."

He was gone, slouching along again and in no haste now that he had fulfilled his first duty. What haste could there possibly be since, sheepman from Las Palmas or another, he was dead and therefore must wait upon Ignacio Chavez's pleasure? Somehow she gleaned this thought from his manner and therefore did not speak as she watched him depart.

That portion of the street which she could see from her bench was empty, the dust settling, thinning, disappearing. Farther down toward the Casa Blanca she could imagine the little knots of men asking one another what had happened and how; the chief actor in this fragment of human drama she could picture lying inert, uncaring that it was for him that a bell had tolled and would toll again, that men congregated curiously.

In a little while Ignacio would return, shuffling, smoking a dangling cigarette, his hat cocked against the sun; he would give her full particulars and then return to his bell. . . . She had come to San Juan to make a home here, to become a part of it, to make it a portion of her. To arrive upon a day like this was no pleasant omen; it was too dreadfully like taking a room in a house only to hear the life rattling out of a man beyond a partition. She was suddenly averse to hearing Ignacio's details; there came a quick desire to set her back to the town whose silence on the heels of uproar crushed her. Rising hastily, she hurried down the weed-bordered walk, out at the broken gate, and turned toward the mountains. One glance down the street as she crossed it showed her what she had expected: a knot of men at the door of the Casa Blanca, another small group at a window, evidently taking stock of a broken window-pane.

The sun, angry and red, was hanging low over a distant line of hills, the flat lands were already drawing about them a thin, faintly colorful haze. She had put on her hat and, like Ignacio, had set it a little to the side of her head, feeling her cheeks burning when the direct rays found them. The fine, loose soil was sifting into her low slippers before she had gone a score of paces. When she came back she would unpack her trunk and get out a sensible pair of boots. No doubt she was dressed ridiculously, but then the heat had tempted her. . . .

A curious matter presented itself to her. In the little groups upon the street she had not seen a single woman. Were there none in San Juan? Was this some strange, altogether masculine, community into which she had stumbled? Then she remembered how the bell-ringer had mentioned Mrs. Engle, the banker's wife, and his daughter and Mrs. Struve and others. Besides all this she had a letter to Mrs. Engle which she was going to present this evening. . . .

She was thinking of anything in the world but of a tragedy not yet grown cold, so near her that for a little it had

seemed to embrace her. Now it was almost as though it had not occurred. The world was all unchanged about her, the town somnolent. She had shuddered as Ignacio played upon his bell; but the shudder was rather from the bell's resonant eloquence than from any more vital cause. A man she had never seen, whose name even she did not know, had been shot by another man unknown to her; she had heard only the shots, she had seen nothing. True, she had heard also a voice crying out, but she sensed that it had been the voice of an onlooker. She felt ashamed that the episode did not move her more.

As, earlier in the afternoon, she had been drawn from the heat of her room at Struve's hotel by the shade to be found in the Mission garden, so now did a long, wavering line of cottonwoods beckon to her. In files which turned eastward or westward here and there only to come back to the general northerly trend, they indicated where an arroyo writhed down, tortured serpent-wise, from the mountains. Through their foliage she had glimpsed the Engle home. She expected to find running water under their shade, that and an attendant coolness.

But the arroyo proved to be dry and hot, a gash in the dry bosom of the earth, its bottom strewn with smooth pebbles and sand and a very sparse, unattractive vegetation, stunted and harsh. And it was almost as hot here as on San Juan's street; into the shade crept the heat-waves of the dry, scorched air.

Led by the line of cottonwoods she found a little path and followed it, experiencing a vague relief to have the town at her back. She knew that distances deceived the eye in this bleak land, and yet she thought that before dark she could reach the hills, where perhaps there were a few languid flowers and pools, and return just tired enough to eat and go to sleep. She rather thought that she would postpone her call on the Engles until to-morrow.

"It's mañana-land, after all," she told herself with a quick smile.

Half an hour later she found a spot where the trees stood in a denser growth, looking greener, more vigorous . . . less thirsty. She could fancy the great roots, questing far downward through the layers of dry soil, thrusting themselves almost with a human, passionate eagerness into the water they had found. Here she threw herself down, lying upon her back, gazing up through the branches and leaves.

Never until now had she known the meaning of utter stillness. She saw a bird, a poor brown, unkempt little being; it had no song to offer the silence, and in a little flew away listlessly. She had seen a rabbit, a big, gaunt, uncomely wretch, disappearing silently among the clumps of brush.

Her spirit, essentially bright and happy, had striven hard with a new form of weariness all day. Not only was she coming into another land than that which she knew and understood, she was entering another phase of her life. She had chosen voluntarily, without advice or suggestion; she had had her reasons and they had seemed sufficient; they were still sufficient. She had chosen wisely; she held to that, her judgment untroubled. But that stubbornly recurrent sense that with the old landmarks she had abandoned the old life, that both in physical fact and in spiritual and mental actuality she was at the threshold of an unguessed, essentially different life, was disquieting. There is no getting away from an old basic truth that a man's life is so strongly influenced as almost to be moulded by his environment; there was uneasiness in the thought that here one's existence might grow to resemble his habitat, taking on the gray tone and monotony and bleak barrenness of this sun-smitten land.

Yielding a little already to the command laid upon breathing nature hereabouts, she was lying still, her hands lax, her thoughts taking unto themselves something of the character of the listless, songless brown bird's flight. She had come here to-day following in the footsteps of other men and a few women. Her own selection of San Juan was explicable; the thing to wonder at was what had given the hardihood to the first men to stop here and make houses and then homes? Later she would know; the one magic word of the desert lands: water. For San Juan, standing midway between the railroad and the more tempting lands beyond the mountains, had found birth because here was a mud-hole for cradle; down under the sand were fortuitous layers of impervious clay cupping to hold much sweet water.

The slow tolling of a bell came billowing out through the silence. The girl sat up. It was the Captain. Never, it seemed to her, had she heard anything so mournful. Ignacio had informed himself concerning all details and had returned to the garden at the Mission. The man was dead, then. There could be no doubt as one listened to the measured sorrowing of the big bell.

She got to her feet and, walking swiftly, moved on, still farther from San Juan. The act was without premeditation; her whole being was insistent upon it. She wondered if it was the sheepman from Las Palmas; if he had, perhaps, a wife and children. Then she stopped suddenly; a new thought had come to her. Strange, inexplicable even, it had not suggested itself before. She wondered who the other man was, the man who had done the killing. And what had happened to him? Had he fled? Had other men grappled with him, disarmed him, made of him a prisoner to answer for what he had done? What had been his motive, what passion had actuated him Surely not just the greed for gold which the bell-ringer had suggested! What sort of creature was he who, in cold, calculating blood could murder a man for a handful of money?

There was nothing to answer unless she could catch the thought of Ignacio Chavez in the ringing of his bell. She moved on again, hurrying.

Following the arroyo, she had come to the first of the little, smooth hills, the lomas as the men on the stage had named them. Through them the dry watercourse wriggled, carrying its green pennons along its marge. She went up gentle slopes mantled with bleached grass which directly under her eyes was white in the glare of the sun. But the sun was very low now, very fierce and red, an angry god going down in temporary defeat, but defiant to the last, filled with threat for to-morrow; at a little distance he tinged the world with his own fiery hue. The far western uplands cut the great disk squarely in two; down slipped the half wafer until it seemed that just a bright signal-fire was kindled upon the ridge. And as that faded from her eyes the slow sobbing of the swinging bell was like a wail for the death of the day.

She had removed her hat, fancying that already the earth was throwing off its heat, that a little coolness and freshness was coming down to meet her from the mountains. She turned her eyes toward them and it was then, just after the sunset, that she saw a man riding toward her. He was still far off when she first glimpsed him, just cresting one of the higher hills, so that for him the sun had not yet set. For she caught the glint of light flaming back from the silver chasings of his bridle and from the barrel of the gun across the hollow of his left arm. She did not believe that he had seen her in the shadow of the cottonwoods.

If she went on she must meet him presently. She glanced back over her shoulder, noting how far she had come from the town. It was very still again; the bell had ceased its complaint; the hoofs of the approaching horse seemed shod with felt, falling upon felt. She swung about and walked back toward San Juan.

A little later she heard the man's voice, calling. Clearly to her, since there was no one else. Why should he call to her? She gave no sign of having heard, but walked on a trifle faster. She sensed that he was galloping down upon her; still in the loose sand the hoof-beats were muffled. Then when he called a second time she stopped and turned and waited.

A splendid big fellow he was, she noted as he came on, riding a splendid big horse. Man and beast seemed to belong to the desert; had it not been for the glint of the sun she realized now, she probably would not have distinguished their distant forms from the land across which they had moved. The horse was a darkish, dull gray; the man, boots, corduroy breeches, soft shirt, and hat, was garbed in gray or so covered with the dust of travel as to seem so.

"What in the world are you doing way out here?" he called to her. And then having come closer he reined in his horse, stared at her a moment in surprised wonderment, swept off his hat and said, a shade awkwardly: "I beg pardon. I thought you were some one else."

For her wide hat was again drooping about her face, and he had had just the form of her and the white skirt and waist to judge by.

"It is all right," she said lightly. "I imagined that you had made a mistake."

It was something of a victory over herself to have succeeded in speaking thus carelessly. For there had been the impulse, a temptation almost, just to stare back at the man as he had stared at her and in silence. Not only was the type physically magnificent; to her it was, like everything about her, new. And that which had held her at first was his eyes. For it is not the part of youth to be stern-eyed; and while this man could not be more than midway between twenty and thirty, his eyes had already acquired the trick of being hard, steely, suggesting relentlessness, stern and

quick. Tall, lean-bodied, with big calloused hands, as brown as an Indian, hair and eyes were uncompromisingly black. He belonged to the southwestern wastes.

These things she noted, and that his face was drawn and weary, that about his left hand was tied a handkerchief, hinting at a minor cut, that his horse looked as travel-worn as himself.

"One doesn't see strangers often around San Juan," he explained. "As for a girl . . . Well, I never made a mistake like this before. I'll have to look out." The muscles of the tired face softened a little, into his eyes came a quick light that was good to see, for an instant masking their habitual sternness. "If you'll excuse me again, and if you don't know a whole lot about this country . . ." He paused to measure her sweepingly, seemed satisfied, and concluded: "I wouldn't go out all alone like this; especially after sundown. We're a rather tough lot, you know. Good-by."

He lifted his hat again, loosened his horse's reins, and passed by her. Just as she had expected, just as she had desired. And yet, with his dusty back turned upon her, she experienced a sudden return of her loneliness. Would she ever look into the eyes of a friend again? Could she ever actually accomplish what she had set out to accomplish; make San Juan a home?

Her eyes followed him, frankly admiring now; so she might have looked at any other of nature's triumphant creations. Then, before he had gone a score of yards, she saw how a little tightening of his horse's reins had brought the big brute down from a swinging gallop to a dead standstill. The bell was tolling again.

Again he was calling to her, again, swinging about, he had ridden to her side. Now his voice like his eyes, was ominously stern.

"Who is it?" he demanded.

"I don't know," she told him, marvelling at the look on his face. His emotion was purely one of anger, mounting anger that a man was dead? "The man who rings the bells told me that he thought it must be a sheepman from Las Palmas. He went to see. . . . I didn't wait. . . ."

Nor did this man wait now. Again he had wheeled; now he was racing along the arroyo, urging a tired horse that he might lose no unnecessary handful of moments. And as he went she heard him curse savagely under his breath and knew that he had forgotten her in the thoughts which had been released by the dull booming of a bell.

CHAPTER III

A MAN'S BOOTS

In the bar at the Casa Blanca, a long, wide room, low-ceilinged and with cool, sprinkled floor, a score of men had congregated. For the most part they were silent, content to look at the signs left by the recent shooting and to have what scraps of explanation were vouchsafed them. And these were meagre enough. The man who had done the shooting was sullen and self-contained. The dead man . . . it was the sheepman from Las Palmas . . . lay in an adjoining card-room, stark under the blanket which the large hands of Jim Galloway had drawn over him.

When the clatter of hoofs rang out in the street a couple of men went to the door. Coming back, "It is the sheriff," they said.

Roderick Norton, entering swiftly, his spurs dragging and jangling, swept the faces in the room with eyes which had in them none of that human glint of good-will which the girl at the arroyo had glimpsed in them. Again they were steely, angry, bespeaking both threat and suspicion.

"Who is it this time?" he demanded sharply.

"Bisbee, from Las Palmas," they told him.

"Who did it?" came the quick question. And then, before an answer could come, his voice ringing with the anger in it: "Antone or Kid Rickard? Which one?"

He had shifted his rifle so that it was caught up under his left arm. His right hand, frank and unhidden, rested upon the butt of the heavy-caliber revolver sagging from his belt. Standing just within the room, he had stepped to one side of the doorway so that the wall was at his back.

"It was the Kid," some one answered, and was continuing, "He says it was self-defense . . ." when Norton cut in bluntly:

"Was Galloway here when it happened?"

"Yes."

"Where's Galloway now?"

It was noteworthy that he asked for Jim Galloway rather than for Kid Rickard.

"In there," they told him, indicating a second card-room adjoining that in which the Las Palmas sheepman lay. Rod Norton, again glancing sharply across the faces confronting him, went to the closed door and set his hand to the knob. But Jim Galloway, having desired privacy just now, had locked the door. Norton struck it sharply, commanding:

"Open up, Galloway. It's Norton."

There came the low mutter of a voice hasty and with the quality of stern exhortation, the snap of the lock, and the door was jerked open. Norton's eyes, probing into every square foot of the chamber, took stock of Jim Galloway, and beyond him of Kid Rickard, slouching forward in a chair and rolling a cigarette.

"Hello, Norton," said Galloway tonelessly. "Glad you showed up. There's been trouble."

A heavy man above the waist-line, thick-shouldered, with large head and bull throat, his muscular torso tapered down to clean-lined hips, his legs of no greater girth than those of the lean-bodied man confronting him, his feet small in glove-fitting boots. His eyes, prominent and full and a clear brown, were a shade too innocent. Chin, jaw, and mouth, the latter full-lipped, were those of strength, smashing power, and a natural cruelty. He was the one man

to be found in San Juan who was dressed as the rather fastidiously inclined business men dress in the cities.

"Another man down, Galloway," said Norton with an ominous sternness. "And in your place. . . How long do you think that you can keep out from under?"

His meaning was plain enough; the men behind him in the barroom listened in attitudes which, varying in other matters, were alike in their tenseness. Galloway, however, staring stonily with eyes not unlike polished agate, so cold and steady were they, gave no sign of taking offense.

"You and I never were friends, Rod Norton," he said, unmoved. "Still that's no reason you should jump me for trouble. Answering your question, I expect to keep out from under just as long as two things remain as they are: first, as long as I play the game square and in the open, next, as long as an overgrown boy holds down the job of sheriff in San Juan."

In Norton's eyes was blazing hatred, in Galloway's mere steady, unwinking boldness.

"You saw the killing?" the sheriff asked curtly.

"Yes," said Galloway.

"The Kid there did it?"

For the first time the man slouching forward in the chair lifted his head. Had a stranger looked in at that moment, curious to see him who had just committed homicide . . . or murder . . . he must have experienced a positive shock. Sullen-eyed, sullen-lipped, the man-killer could not yet have seen the last of his teens. A thin wisp of straw-colored hair across a low, atavistic forehead, unhealthy, yellowish skin, with pale, lack-lustre, faded blue eyes, he looked evil and vicious and cruel. One looking from him to Jim Galloway would have suspected that one could be as inhuman as the other, but with the difference that that which was but means to an end with Galloway would be end in itself to Kid Rickard. Something of the primal savage shone in the pale fires of his eyes.

"Yes," retorted the Kid, his surly voice little better than a snarl. "I got him and be damned to him!"

"Bad luck cursing a dead man, Rickard," said Norton coldly. "What did you kill him for?"

Kid Rickard's tongue ran back and forth between his colorless lips before he replied.

"He tried to get me first," he said defiantly.

"Who saw the shooting?"

"Jim Galloway. And Antone."

Rod Norton grunted his disgust with the situation.

"Give me your gun," he commanded tersely.

The Kid frowned. Galloway cleared his throat. Rickard's eyes went to him swiftly. Then he got to his feet, jerked a thirty-eight-caliber revolver from the hip pocket of his overalls and held it out, surrendering it reluctantly. Norton "broke" it, ejecting the cartridges into his palm. Not an empty shell among them; the Kid had slipped in a fresh shell for every exploded one.

"How many times did you shoot?"

"I don't know. Two or three, I guess. . . . Damn it, do you imagine a man counts 'em?"

"What were you and Galloway doing alone in here with the door locked?"

Galloway cut in sharply:

"I didn't want any more trouble; I was afraid somebody . . ."

"Shut up, will you?" cried the sheriff fiercely. "I'll give you all the chance you want to talk pretty soon. Answer me, Rickard."

"I told him to lock me up somewhere until you or Tom Cutter come," said the Kid slowly. "I was afraid somebody might jump me for what I done. I didn't want no more trouble."

Norton turned briefly to the crowded room behind him.

"Anybody know where Cutter is?" he asked.

It appeared that every one knew. Tom Cutter, Rod Norton's deputy, had gone in the early morning to Mesa Verde, and would probably return in the cool of the evening. Frowning, Norton made the best of the situation, and to gain his purpose called four men out of the crowd.

"I want you boys to do me a favor," he said.

"Antone, come here."

The short, squat half-breed standing behind the bar lifted his heavy black brows, demanding:

"Y porqué? What am I to do?"

"As you are told," Norton snapped at him. "Benny, you and Dick walk down the street with Antone; you other boys walk down the other way with Rickard. If they haven't had all the chance to talk together already that they want, don't give them any more opportunity. Step up, Rickard."

The Kid sulked, but under the look the sheriff turned on him came forward and went out, his whole attitude remaining one of defiance. Antone, his swart face as expressionless as a piece of mahogany, hesitated, glanced at Galloway, shrugged, and did as Rickard had done, going out between his two guards. The men remaining in the barroom were watching their sheriff expectantly. He swung about upon Galloway.

"Now," he said quickly, "who fired the first shot. Galloway?"

Galloway smiled, went to his bar, poured himself a glass of whiskey, and standing there, the glass twisting slowly in his fingers, stared back innocently at his interrogator.

"Trying the case already, Judge Norton?" he inquired equably.

"Will you answer?" Norton said coolly.

"Sure." Galloway kept his look steady upon the sheriff's, and into the innocence of his eyes there came a veiled insolence. "Bisbee shot first."

"Where was he standing?"

Galloway pointed.

"Right there." The spot indicated was about three or four feet from where Norton stood, near the second card-room door.

"Where was the Kid?"

"Over there." Again Galloway pointed. "Clean across the room, where the chair is tumbled over against the table."

"How many times did Bisbee shoot?"

Galloway seemed to be trying to remember. He drank his whiskey slowly, reached over the bar for a cigar, and answered:

"Twice or three times."

"How many times did Rickard shoot?"

"I'm not sure. I'd say about the same; two or three times."

"Where was Antone standing?"

"Behind the bar; down at the far end, nearest the door."

"Where were you?"

"Leaning against the bar, talking to Antone."

"What were you talking about?"

This question came quicker, sharper than the others, as though calculated to startle Galloway into a quick answer. But the proprietor of the Casa Blanca was lighting his cigar and took his time. When he looked up, his eyes told Norton that he had understood any danger which might lie under a question so simple in the seeming. His eyes were smiling contemptuously, but there was a faint flush in his cheeks.

"I don't remember," he replied at last. "Some trifle. The shooting, coming suddenly that way . . ."

"What started the ruction?"

"Bisbee had been drinking a little. He seemed to be in the devil's own temper. He had asked the Kid to have a drink with him, and Rickard refused. He had his drink alone and then invited the Kid again. Rickard told him to go to hell. Bisbee started to walk across the room as though he was going to the card-room. Then he grabbed his gun and whirled and started shooting."

"Missing every time, of course?"

Galloway nodded.

"You'll remember I said he was carrying enough of a load to make his aim bad."

Norton asked half a dozen further questions and then said abruptly:

"That's all. As you go out will you tell the boys to send Antone in?"

Again a hint of color crept slowly, dully, into Galloway's cheeks.

"You're going pretty far, Rod Norton," he said tonelessly.

"You're damned right I am!" cried Norton ringingly. "And I am going a lot further, Jim Galloway, before I get through, and you can bet all of your blue chips on it. I want Antone in here and I want you outside! Do I get what I want or not?"

Galloway stood motionless, his cigar clamped tight in his big square teeth. Then he shrugged and went to the door.

"If I am standing a good deal off of you," he muttered, hanging on his heel just before he passed out, "it's because I am as strong as any man in the county to see the law brought into San Juan. And"--for the first time yielding outwardly to a display of the emotion riding him, he spat out venomously and tauntingly--"and we'd have had the law here long ago had we had a couple of men in the boots of the Nortons, father and son!"

Rod Norton's face went a flaming red with anger, his hand grew white upon the butt of the gun at his side.

"Some day, Jim Galloway," he said steadily, "I'll get you just as sure as you got Billy Norton!"

Galloway laughed and went out.

To Antone, Norton put the identical questions he had asked of Galloway, receiving virtually the same replies. Seeking the one opportunity suggesting itself into tricking the bartender, he asked at the end:

"Just before the shooting, when you and Galloway were talking and he told you that Bisbee was looking for trouble, why weren't you ready to grab him when he went for his gun?"

Antone was giving his replies as guardedly as Galloway had done. He took his time now.

"Because," he began finally, "I do not belief when Señor Galloway speak that . . ."

His eyes had been roving from Norton's, going here and there about the room. Suddenly a startled look came into them and he snapped his mouth shut.

"Go on," prompted the sheriff.

"I don't remember," grunted Antone. "I forget what Señor Galloway say, what I say. Bisbee say: 'Have a drink.' The Kid say: 'Go to hell.' Bisbee shoot, one, two, three, like that. I forget what we talk about."

Norton turned slowly and looked whither Antone had been looking when he cut his own words off so sharply. The man upon whom his eyes rested longest was a creased-faced Mexican, Vidal Nuñez, who now stood, head down, making a cigarette.

"That's all, Antone," Norton said. "Send the Kid in."

The Kid came, still sullen but swaggering a little, his hat cocked jauntily to one side, the yellow wisp of hair in his faded eyes. And he in turn questioned, gave such answers as the two had given before him.

Now for the first time the sheriff, stepping across the room, looked for such evidence as flying lead might have left for him. In the wall just behind the spot where Bisbee had stood were two bullet holes. Going to the far end of the room where the chair leaned against the table, he found that a pane of glass in the window opening upon the street had been broken. There were no bullet marks upon wall or woodwork.

"Bisbee shot two or three times, did he?" he cried, wheeling on the Kid. "And missed every time? And all the bullets went through the one hole in the window, I suppose?"

The Kid shrugged insolently.

"I didn't watch 'em," he returned briefly.

Galloway and Antone were allowed to come again into the room, and of Galloway, quite as though no hot word had passed between them, Norton asked quietly:

"Bisbee had a lot of money on him. What happened to it?"

"In there." Galloway nodded toward the card-room whose door had remained closed. "In his pocket."

A few of the morbid followed as the sheriff went into the little room. Already most of the men had seen and had no further curiosity. Norton drew the blanket away, noted the wounds, three of them, two at the base of the throat and one just above the left eye. Then, going through the sheepman's pockets, he brought out a handful of coins. A few gold, most of them silver dollars and half-dollars, in all a little over fifty dollars.

The dead man lay across two tables drawn together, his booted feet sticking out stolidly beyond the bed still too short to accommodate his length of body. Norton's eyes rested on the man's boots longer than upon the cold face.

Then, stepping back to the door so that all in the barroom might catch the significance of his words, he said sharply:

"How many men of you know where Bisbee always carried his money when he was on his way to bank?"

"In his boots!" answered two voices together.

"Come this way, boys. Take a look at his boots, will you?"

And as they crowded about the table, sensing some new development, Galloway pushing well to the fore, Norton's vibrant voice rang out:

"It was a clean job getting him, and a clean job telling the story of how it happened. But there wasn't overmuch time and in the rush. . . . Tell me, Jim Galloway, how does it happen that the right boot is on the left foot?"

CHAPTER IV

AT THE BANKER'S HOME

Rod Norton made no arrest. Leaving the card-room abruptly he signalled to Julius Struve, the hotel keeper, to follow him. In the morning Struve, in his official capacity as coroner, would demand a verdict. Having long been in strong sympathy with the sheriff he was to be looked now for a frank prediction of the inquest's result. And, very thoughtful about it all, he gravely agreed with Norton; the coroner's jury, taking the evidence offered by Jim Galloway, Kid Rickard, and Antone, would bring in a verdict of justifiable homicide.

"Later on we'll get 'em, Roddy . . . mebbe," he said finally. "But not now. If you pulled the Kid it would just be running up the county expense all for nothing."

The sheriff left him in silence and leading his horse went the few steps to the hotel. Ignacio Chavez appearing opportunely Norton gave his animal into the breed's custody; Ignacio, accustomed to doing odd jobs for el Señor Roderico Nortone, and to the occasional half dollars resulting from such transactions, led the big gray away while the sheriff entered the hotel. It had been a day of hard riding and scanty meals, and he was hungry.

Bright and new and conspicuous, a gold-lettered sign at Struve's doorway caught his eye and caused him to remember the wounded left hand which had been paining him considerably through the long hot day. The sign bore the name of Dr. V. D. Page with the words Physician and Surgeon; in blue pencilled letters upon the practitioner's card, affixed to the brass chain suspending the sign, were the further words: "Room 5, Struve's Hotel."

The sheriff went to Room 5. It was at the front of the building, upon the ground floor. The door opened almost immediately when he rapped. Confronting him was the girl he had encountered at the arroyo. He lifted his hat, looked beyond her, and said simply:

"I was looking for Dr. Page. Is he in now?"

"Yes," she told him gravely. "Come in, please."

He stepped across the threshold, his eyes trained to quick observation of details taking in at a glance all there was to be seen. The room showed all signs of a fresh unpacking, the one table and two chairs piled high with odds and ends. For the most part the miscellany consisted of big, fat books, bundles of towels and fresh white napkins, rubber-stoppered bottles of varicolored contents, and black leather cases, no doubt containing a surgeon's instruments. Through an open door giving entrance to the adjoining room he noted further signs of unpacking with a marked difference in the character of the litter; the girl stepped quickly to this door, shutting out the vision of a helter-skelter of feminine apparel.

"It is your hand?" she asked, as in most thoroughly matter of fact fashion she put out her own for it. "Let me see it."

But for a moment he bestowed upon her merely a slow look of question.

"You don't mean that you are Dr. Page?" he asked. Then, believing that he understood: "You're the nurse?"

"Is a physician's life in San Juan likely to be so filled with his duties that he must bring a nurse with him?" she countered. "Yes, I am Dr. Page."

He noted that she was as defiant about the matter as the Kid had been about the killing of Bisbee of Las Palmas; plainly she had foreseen that the type of man-animal inhabiting this out-of-the-way corner of the world would be likely to wonder at her hardihood and, perhaps, to jeer.

"I came to-day," she explained in the same matter-of-fact way. "Consequently you will pardon the looks of things. But I am one of the kind that believes in hanging out a shingle first, getting details arranged next. Now may I see the hand?"

"It's hardly anything." He lifted it now for her inspection. "Just a slight cut, you know. But it's showing signs of infection. A little antiseptic . . ."

She took his fingers into hers and bent over the wound. He noted two things, now: what strong hands she had, shapely, with sensitive fingers ignorant of rings; how richly alive and warmly colored her hair was, full of little waves and curls.

She had nothing to say while she treated him. Over an alcohol lamp she heated some water; in a bowl, brought from the adjoining room, she cleansed the hand thoroughly. Then the application of the final antiseptic, a bit of absorbent cotton, a winding of surgeon's tape about a bit of gauze, and the thing was done. Only at the end did she say:

"It's a peculiar cut . . . not a knife cut, is it?"

"No," he answered humorously. "Did it on a piece of lead. . . . How much is it, Doctor?"

"Two dollars," she told him, busied with the drying of her own hands. "Better let me look at it again in the morning if it pains you."

He laid two silver dollars in her palm, hesitated a moment and then went out.

"She's got the nerve," was his thoughtful estimate as he went to his corner table in the dining-room. "But I don't believe she is going to last long in San Juan. . . . Funny she should come to a place like this, anyhow. . . . Wonder what the V stands for?"

At any rate the hand had been skilfully treated and bandaged; he nodded at it approvingly. Then, with his meal set before him, he divided his thoughts pretty evenly between the girl and the recent shooting at the Casa Blanca. The sense was strong upon him as it had been many a time that before very long either Rod Norton or Jim Galloway would lie as the sheepman from Las Palmas was lying, while the other might watch his sunrises and sunsets with a strange, new emotion of security.

The sheriff, who had not eaten for twelve hours, was beginning his meal when the newest stranger in San Juan came into the dining-room. She had arranged her lustrous copper-brown hair becomingly, and looked fresh and cool and pretty. Norton approved of her with his keen eyes while he watched her go to her place at a table across the room. As she sat down, giving no sign of having noted him, her back toward him, he continued to observe and to admire her slender, perfect figure and the strong, sensitive hands busied with her napkin.

A slovenly, half-grown Indian girl, Anita, the cook's daughter, came in from the kitchen, directed the slumbrous eyes of her race upon the sheriff who fitted well in a woman's eye, and went to serve the single other late diner. Norton caught a fleeting view of V. D. Page's throat and cheek as she turned slightly in speaking with Anita. As the serving-maid withdrew Norton rose to his feet and crossed the room to the far table.

"May I bring my things over and eat with you?" he asked when he stood looking down on her and she had lifted her eyes curiously to his. "If you've come to stay you can't go on forever not knowing anybody here, you know. Since you've got to know us sooner or later why not begin to get acquainted? Here and now and with me? I'm Roderick Norton."

One must have had far less discernment than she not to have felt instinctively that the great bulk of human conventions would shrivel and vanish before they could come this far across the desert lands. Besides, the man standing over her looked straight and honestly into her eyes and for a little she glimpsed again the youth of him veiled by the sternness his life had set into his soul and upon his face.

"It is kind of you to have pity upon me in my isolation," she answered lightly and without hesitation. "And, to tell the truth, I never was so terribly lonesome in all my life."

He made two trips back and forth to bring his plate and coffee cup and auxiliary sauce dishes and plated silver, while she wondered idly that he did not instruct the Indian girl to perform the service for him. Even then she half formulated the thought that it was much more natural for this man to do for himself what he wanted than for him to

sit down to be waited upon. A small matter, no doubt; but then mountains are made up of small particles and character of just such small characteristics as this.

During the half hour which they spent together over their meal they got to know each other rather better than chance acquaintances are likely to do in so brief a time. For from the moment of Norton's coming to her table the bars were down between them. She was plainly eager to supplement Ignacio Chavez's information of "*la gente*" of San Juan and its surrounding country, evincing a curiosity which he readily understood to be based upon the necessities of her profession. In return for all that he told her she sketchily spoke of her own plans, very vague plans, to be sure, she admitted with one of her quick, gay smiles. She had come prepared to accept what she found, she was playing no game of hide-and-seek with her destiny, but had wandered thus far from the former limits of her existence to meet life half way, hoping to do good for others, a little imperiously determined to achieve her own measure of success and happiness.

From the beginning each was ready, perhaps more than ready, to like the other. Her eyes, whether they smiled or grew suddenly grave, pleased him; always were they fearless. He sensed that beneath the external soft beauty of a very lovely young woman there was a spirit of hardihood in every sense worthy of the success which she had planned bare-handed to make for herself, and in the man's estimation no quality stood higher than a superb independence. On her part, there was first a definite surprise, then a glow of satisfaction that in this virile arm of the law there was nothing of the blusterer. She set him down as a quiet gentleman first, as a sheriff next. She enjoyed his low, good-humored laugh and laughed back with him, even while she experienced again the unaccustomed thrill at the sheer physical bigness of him, the essentially masculine strength of a hardy son of the southwestern outdoors. Not once had he referred to the affair at the Casa Blanca or to his part in it; not a question did she ask him concerning it. He told himself that so utterly human, so perfectly feminine a being as she must be burning with curiosity; she marvelled that he could think, speak of anything else. When together they rose from the table they were alike prepared, should circumstance so direct, to be friends.

She was going now to call upon the Engles. She had told him that she had a letter to Mrs. Engle from a common friend in Richmond.

"I don't want to appear to be riding too hard on your trail," he smiled at her. "But I was planning dropping in on the Engles myself this evening. They're friends of mine, you know."

She laughed, and as they left the hotel, propounded a riddle for him to answer: Should Mr. Norton introduce her to Mrs. Engle so that she might present her letter, or, after the letter was presented, should Mrs. Engle introduce her to Mr. Norton?

It did not suggest itself to her until they had passed from the street, through the cottonwoods and into the splendid living-room of the Engle home, that her escort was not dressed as she had imagined all civilized mankind dressed for a call. Walking through the primitive town his boots and soft shirt and travel-soiled hat had been in too perfect keeping with the environment for her to be more than pleasurably conscious of them.

At the Engles', however, his garb struck her for a moment of the first shock of contrast, as almost grotesquely out of place.

At the broad front door Norton had rapped. The desultory striking of a piano's keys ceased abruptly, a girl's voice crying eagerly: "It's Roddy!" hinted at the identity of the listless player, a door flung open flooded the broad entrance hall with light. And then the outer door framed banker Engle's daughter, a mere girl in her middle teens, fair-haired, fair-skinned, fluffy-skirted, her eyes bright with expectation, her two hands held out offering themselves in doubled greetings. But, having seen the unexpected guest at the sheriff's side, the bright-haired girl paused for a brief moment of uncertainty upon the threshold, her hands falling to her sides.

"Hello, Florrie," Norton was saying quietly. "I have brought a caller for your mother. Miss Engle, Miss Page."

"How do you do, Miss Page?" Florrie replied, regaining her poise and giving one of her hands to each of the callers, the abandon of her first appearance gone in a flash to be replaced by a vague hint of stiffness. "Mama will be so glad to see you. Do come in."

She turned and led the way down the wide, deep hall and into the living-room, a chamber which boldly defied one to remember that he was still upon the rim of the desert. In one swift glance the newcomer to San Juan was offered a picture in which the tall, carelessly clad form of the sheriff became incongruous; she wondered that he remained at his ease as he so obviously did. Yonder was a grand piano, a silver chased vase upon a wall bracket over it holding three long-stemmed, red roses; a heavy, massive-topped table strewn comfortably and invitingly with books and magazines; an exquisite rug and one painting upon the far wall, an original seascape suggestive of Waugh at his best; excellent leather-upholstered chairs luxuriously inviting, and at once homelike and rich. Just rising from one of these chairs drawn up to the table reading-lamp, a book still in his hand, was Mr. Engle, while Mrs. Engle, as fair as her daughter, just beginning to grow stout in lavender, came forward smilingly.

"Back again, Roddy?" She gave him a plump hand, patted his lean brown fingers after her motherly fashion, and came to where the girl had stopped just within the door.

"Virginia Page, aren't you? As if any one in the world would have to tell me who *you* were! You are your mother all over, child; did you know it? Oh, kiss me, kiss me, my dear, for your mother's sake, and save your handshakes for strangers."

Virginia, taken utterly by surprise as Mrs. Engle's arms closed warmly about her, grew rosy with pleasure; the dreary loneliness of a long day was gone with a kiss and a hug.

"I didn't know . . ." she began haltingly, only to be cut short by Mrs. Engle crying to her husband:

"It's Virginia Page, John. Wouldn't you have known her anywhere?"

John Engle, courteous, urbane, a pleasant-featured man with grave, kindly eyes and a rather large, firm-lipped mouth nodded to Norton and gave Virginia his hand cordially.

"I must be satisfied with a hand-shake, Miss Page," he said in a deep, pleasant voice, "but I refuse to be a mere stranger. We are immensely glad to have you with us. . . . Mother, can't you see we have most thoroughly mystified her; swooping down on her like this without giving her an inkling of how and why we expected her?"

Roderick Norton and Florrie Engle had drawn a little apart; Virginia, with her back to them during the greeting of Mrs. and Mr. Engle, had no way of knowing whether the withdrawal had been by mutually spontaneous desire or whether the initiative had been the sheriff's or Miss Engle's. Not that it mattered or concerned her in any slightest particular.

In her hand was the note of introduction she had brought from Mrs. Seth Morgan; evidently both its services and those of Roderick Norton might be dispensed with in the matter of her being presented.

"Of course," Mrs. Engle was saying. An arm about the girl's slim waist, she drew her to a big leather couch. "Marian never does things by halves, my dear; you know that, don't you? That's a letter she gave you for me? Well, she wrote me another, so I know all about you. And, if you are willing to accept the relationship with out-of-the-world folks, we're sort of cousins!"

Virginia Page flushed vividly. She had known all along that her mother had been a distant relative of Mrs. Engle, but she had had no desire, no thought of employing that very faint tie as an argument for being accepted by the banker's family. She did not care to come here like the proverbial poor relation.

"You are very kind," she said quietly, her lips smiling while her eyes were grave. "But I don't want you to feel that I have been building on the fact of kinship; I just wanted to be friends if you liked me, not because you felt it your duty. . . ."

Engle, who had come, dragging his chair after him, to join them, laughed amusedly.

"Answering your question, Mrs. Engle," he chuckled, "I'd certainly know her for Virginia Page! When we come to know her better maybe she will allow us to call her Cousin Virginia? In the meantime, to play safe, I suppose that to us she'd better be just Dr. Page?"

"John is as full of nonsense after banking hours," explained Mrs. Engle, still affectionately patting Virginia's hand, "as he is crammed with business from nine until four. Which makes life with him possible; it's like having two husbands, makes for variety and so saves me from flirting with other men. Now, tell us all about yourself."

Virginia, who had been a little stiff-muscled until now, leaned back among the cushions unconscious of a half sigh of content and of her relaxation. During the long day San Juan had sought to frighten, to repel her. Now it was making ample amends: first the companionable society of Rod Norton, then this simple, hearty welcome. She returned the pressure of Mrs. Engle's soft, warm hands in sheer gratitude.

After that they chatted lightly, Engle gradually withdrawing from the conversation and secretly watching the girl keenly, studying her play of expression, seeking, according to his habit, to make his guarded estimate of a new factor in his household. From Virginia's face his eyes went swiftly now and then to his daughter's, animated in her tête-à-tête with the sheriff. Once, when Virginia turned unexpectedly, she caught the hint of a troubled frown in his eyes.

Broad double doors in the west wall of the living-room gave entrance to the patio. The doors were open now to the slowly freshening night air, and from where she sat Virginia Page had a glimpse of a charming court, an orange-tree heavy with fruit and blossom, red and yellow roses, a sleeping fountain whose still water reflected star-shine and the lamp in its niche under a grape-vine arbor. When Norton and Florence Engle strolled out into the inviting patio Engle, breaking his silence, leaned forward and dominated the conversation.

Virginia had been doing the major part of the talking, answering questions about Mrs. Engle's girlhood home, telling something of herself. Now John Engle, reminding his wife that their guest must be consumed with curiosity about her new environment, sought to interest her in this and that, in and about San Juan.

"There was a killing this afternoon," he admitted quietly. "No doubt you know of it and have been shocked by it, and perhaps on account of it have a little misjudged San Juan. We are not all cutthroats here, by any manner of means; I think I might almost say that the rough element is in the minority. We are in a state of transition, like all other frontier settlements. The railroad, though it doesn't come closer than the little tank station where you took the stage this morning, has touched our lives out here. A railroad brings civilizing influences; but the first thing it does is to induct a surging tide of forces contending against law and order. Pioneers," and he smiled his slow, grave, tolerant smile, "are as often as not tumultuous-blooded and self-sufficient, and prone to kick over the established traces. We've got that class to deal with . . . and that boy, Rod Norton, with his job cut out for him, is getting results. He's the biggest man right now, not only in the country, but in this end of the state."

Continuing he told her something of the sheriff. Young Norton, having returned from college some three years before to live the only life possible to one of his blood, had become manager of his father's ranch in and beyond the San Juan mountains. At the time Billy Norton was the county sheriff and had his hands full. Rumor said that he had promised himself to "get" a certain man; Engle admitted that that man was Jim Galloway of the Casa Blanca. But either Galloway or a tool of Galloway's or some other man had "gotten" Billy Norton, shooting him down in his own cabin and from the back, putting a shotgun charge of buckshot into his brain.

It had occurred shortly after Roderick Norton's return, shortly before the expiration of Billy Norton's term of office. Rod Norton, putting another man in his place on the ranch, had buried his father and then had asked of the county his election to the place made empty by his father's death. Though he was young, men believed in him. The election returns gave him his place by a crushing majority.

"And he has done good work," concluded Engle thoughtfully. "Because of what he has done, because he does not make an arrest until he has his evidence and then drives hard to a certain conviction, he has come to be called Dead-sure Norton and to be respected everywhere, and feared more than a little. Until now it has become virtually a two-man fight. Rod Norton against Jim Galloway. . . ."

"John," interposed Mrs. Engle, "aren't you giving Virginia rather a sombre side of things?"

"Maybe I am," he agreed. "But this killing of the Las Palmas man in broad daylight has come pretty close to filling my mind. Who's going to be next?" His eyes went swiftly toward the patio, taking stock of the two figures there. Then he shrugged, went to the table for a cigar and returned smiling to inform Virginia of life on the desert

and in the valleys beyond the mountains, of scattering attempts at reclamation and irrigation, of how one made towns of sun-dried mud, of where the adobe soil itself was found, drifted over with sand in the shade of the cottonwoods.

But Mrs. Engle's sigh, while her husband spoke of black mud and straw, testified that her thoughts still clung about those events and possibilities which she herself had asked him to avoid; her eyes wandered to the tall, rudely garbed figure dimly seen in the patio. Virginia, recalling Jim Galloway as she had seen him on the stage, heavy-bodied, narrow-hipped, masterful alike in carriage and the look of the prominent eyes, glanced with Mrs. Engle toward Rod Norton. He was laughing at something passing between him and Florence, and for the moment appeared utterly boyish. Were it not for the grim reminder of the forty-five-caliber revolver which the nature of his sworn duties did not allow of his laying aside even upon a night like this, it would have been easy to forget that he was all that which the one word sheriff connotes in a land like that about San Juan.

"Can't get away from it, can we?" Engle having caught the look in the two women's eyes, broke off abruptly in what he was saying, and now sat studying his cigar with frowning eyes. "Man against man, and the whole county knows it, one employing whatever criminal's tools slip into his hands, the other fighting fair and in the open. Man against man and in a death grapple just because they are the men they are, with one backed up by a hang-dog crowd like Kid Rickard and Antone, and the other playing virtually a lone hand. What's the end going to be?"

Virginia thought of Ignacio Chavez. He, had he been here, would have answered:

"In the end there will be the ringing of the bells for a man dead. You will see! Which one? *Quien sabe!* The bells will ring."

CHAPTER V

IN THE DARKNESS OF THE PATIO

Through the silence of the outer night, as though actually Ignacio Chavez were prophesying, came billowing the slow beating of the deep mourning bell. Mrs. Engle sighed; Engle frowned; Virginia sat rigid, at once disturbed and oppressed.

"How can you stand that terrible bell?" she cried softly. "I should think that it would drive you mad! How long does he ring it?"

"Once every hour until midnight," answered Engle, his face once more placid as he withdrew his look from the patio and transferred it to his cigar. And then, with a half smile: "There are many San Juans; there is, in all the wide world, but one San Juan of the Bells. You would not take our distinction from us? Now that you are to become of San Juan you must, like the rest of us, take a pride in San Juan's bells. Which you will do soon or late; perhaps just as soon as you come to know something of their separate and collective histories."

"Tell her, John," suggested Mrs. Engle, again obviously anxious to dispel the more lugubrious and tragic atmospheres of the evening with any chance talk which might offer itself.

"Let her wait until Ignacio can tell her," laughed Engle. "No one else can tell it so well, and certainly no one else has an equal pride or even an equal right in the matter."

But, though he refused to take up the colorful theme of the biographies of the Captain, the Dancer, Lolita, and the rest, John Engle began to speak lightly upon an associated topic, first asking the girl if she knew with what ceremony the old Western bells had been cast; when she shook her head and while the slow throbbing beat of the Captain still insisted through the night's silences, he explained that doubtless all six of Ignacio Chavez's bells had taken form under the calm gaze of high priests of old Spain. For legend had it that all six were from their beginnings destined for the new missions to be scattered broadcast throughout a new land, to ring out word of God to heathen ears. Bells meant for such high service were never cast without grave religious service and sacrifice. Through the darkness of long-dead centuries the girl's stimulated fancies followed the man's words; she visualized the great glowing caldrons in which the fusing metals grew red and an intolerable white; saw men and women draw near, proud blue-blooded grandees on one hand, and the lowly on the other, with one thought; saw the maidens and ladies from the courtyards of the King's palace as they removed golden bracelets and necklaces from white arms and throats, so that the red and yellow gold might go with their prayers into the molten metals, enriching them, while those whose poverty was great, but whose devotion was greater, offered what little silver ornaments they could. Carved silver vases, golden cups, minted coins and cherished ornaments, all were offered generously and devoutly until the blazing caldrons had mingled the Queen's girdle-clasps with a bauble from the beggar girl.

"And in the end," smiled Engle, "there are no bells with the sweet tone of old Mission bells, or with their soft eloquence."

While he was talking Ignacio Chavez had allowed the dangling rope to slip from his hands so that the Captain rested quiet in the starshine. Roderick and Florence were coming in through the wide patio door; Norton was just saying that Florrie had promised to play something for him when the front door knocker announced another visitor. Florence made a little disdainful face as though she guessed who it was; Engle went to the door.

Even Virginia Page in this land of strangers knew who the man was. For she had seen enough of him to-day, on the stage across the weary miles of desert, to remember him and to dislike him. He was the man whom Galloway and the stage-driver had called "Doc," the sole representative of the medical fraternity in San Juan until her coming. She disliked him first vaguely and with purely feminine instinct; secondly because of an air which he never laid aside of a serene consciousness of self-superiority. He had established himself in what he was pleased to consider a community of nobodies, his inferiors intellectually and culturally. He was of that type of man-animal that lends itself to fairly accurate cataloguing at the end of the first five minutes' acquaintance. The most striking of the physical attributes about his person as he entered were his little mustache and neatly trimmed beard and the diamond stick-

pin in his tie. Remove these articles and it would have been difficult to distinguish him from countless thousands of other inefficient and opinionated individuals.

Virginia noted that both Mr. and Mrs. Engle shook hands with him if not very cordially at least with good-humored toleration; that Florence treated him to a stiff little nod; that Roderick Norton from across the room greeted him coolly.

"Dr. Patten," Engle was saying, "this is our cousin, Virginia Page."

Dr. Patten acknowledged the introduction and sat down, turning to ask "how Florrie was today?" Virginia smiled, sensing a rebuke to herself in his manner; to-day on the stage she had made it obvious even to him that if she must speak with a stranger she would vastly prefer the talk of the stage-driver than that of Dr. Caleb Patten. When Florence, replying briefly, turned to the piano Patten addressed Norton.

"What was our good sheriff doing to-day?" he asked banteringly, as though the subject he chose were the most apt one imaginable for jest. "Another man killed in broad daylight and no one to answer for it! Why don't you go get 'em, Roddy?"

Norton stared at him steadily and finally said soberly:

"When a disease has fastened itself upon the body of a community it takes time to work a cure, Dr. Patten."

"But not much time to let the life out of a man like the chap from Las Palmas! Why, the man who did the shooting couldn't have done a nicer job if he'd been a surgeon. One bullet square through the carotid artery . . . That leads from the heart to the head," he explained as though his listeners were children athirst for knowledge which he and none other could impart. "The cerebrum penetrated by a second. . . ."

What other technical elucidation might have followed was lost in a thunderous crashing of the piano keys as Florence Engle strove to drown the man's utterance and succeeded so well that for an instant he sat gaping at her.

"I can't stand that man!" Florence said sharply to Norton, and though the words did not travel across the room, Virginia was surprised that even an individual so completely armored as Caleb Patten could fail to grasp the girl's meaning.

When Florence had pounded her way through a noisy bit of "jazz," Caleb Patten, with one of his host's cigars lighted, was leaning a little forward in his chair, alert to seize the first opportunity of snatching conversation by the throat.

"Kid Rickard admits killing Bisbee," he said to Norton. "What are you going to do about it? The first thing I heard when I got in from a professional call a little while ago was that Rickard was swaggering around town, saying that you wouldn't gather him in because you were afraid to."

The sheriff's face remained unmoved, though the others looked curiously to him and back to Patten, who was easy and complacent and vaguely irritating.

"I imagine you haven't seen Jim Galloway since you got in, have you?" Norton returned quietly.

"No," said Patten. "Why? What has Galloway got to do with it?"

"Ask him. He says Rickard killed Bisbee in self-defense."

"Oh," said Patten. And then, shifting in his chair: "If Galloway says so, I guess you are right in letting the Kid go."

And, a trifle hastily it struck Virginia, he switched talk into another channel, telling of the case on which he had been out to-day, enlarging upon its difficulties, with which, it appeared, he had been eminently fitted to cope. There was an amused twinkle in John Engle's eyes as he listened.

"By the way, Patten," the banker observed when there came a pause, "you've got a rival in town. Had you heard?"

"What do you mean?" asked the physician.

"When I introduced you just now to our Cousin Virginia, I should have told you; she is Dr. Page, M.D."

Again Patten said "Oh," but this time in a tone which through its plain implication put a sudden flash into Virginia's eyes. As he looked toward her there was a half sneer upon the lips which his scanty growth of beard and mustache failed to hide. Had he gone on to say, "A *lady* doctor, eh?" and laughed, the case would not have been altered.

"It seems so funny for a girl to be a doctor," said Florence, for the first time referring in any way to Virginia since she had flown to the door, expecting Norton alone. Even now she did not look toward her kinswoman.

John Engle replied, speaking crisply. But just what he said Virginia did not know. For suddenly her whole attention was withdrawn from the conversation, fixed and held by something moving in the patio. First she had noted a slight change in Rod Norton's eyes, saw them grow keen and watchful, noted that they had turned toward the door opening into the little court where the fountain was, where the wall-lamp threw its rays wanly among the shrubs and through the grape-arbor. He had seen something move out there; from where she sat she could look the way he looked and mark how a clump of rose-bushes had been disturbed and now stood motionless again in the quiet night.

Wondering, she looked again to Norton. His eyes told nothing now save that they were keen and watchful. Whether or not he knew what it was so guardedly stirring in the patio, whether he, like herself, had merely seen the gently agitated leaves of the bushes, she could not guess. She started when Engle addressed some trifling remark to her; while she evaded the direct answer she was fully conscious of the sheriff's eyes steady upon her. He, no doubt, was wondering what she had seen.

It was only a moment later when Norton rose and went to Mrs. Engle, telling her briefly that he had had a day of it, in the saddle since dawn, wishing her good night. He shook hands with Engle, nodded to Patten, and coming to Virginia said lightly, but, she thought, with an almost sternly serious look in his eyes:

"We're all hoping you like San Juan, Miss Page. And you will, too, if the desert stillness doesn't get on your nerves. But then silence isn't such a bad thing after all, is it? Good night."

She understood his meaning and, though a thrill of excitement ran through her blood, answered laughingly:

"Shall a woman learn from the desert? Have I been such a chatter-box, Mrs. Engle, that I am to be admonished at the beginning to study to hold my tongue?"

Florence looked at her curiously, turned toward Norton, and then went with him to the door. For a moment their voices came in a murmur down the hallway; then Norton had gone and Florence returned slowly to the living-room.

Again Virginia looked out into the patio. Never a twig stirred now; all was as quiet as the sleeping fountain, as silent and mystery-filled as the desert itself. Had Roderick Norton seen more than she? Did he know who had been out there? Was here the beginning of some further sinister outgrowth of the lawlessness of Kid Rickard? of the animosity of Jim Galloway? Was she presently to see Norton himself slipping into the patio from the other side, was she again to hear the rattle of pistol-shots? He had asked that she say nothing; she had unhesitatingly given him her promise. Had she so unquestioningly done as he had requested because he was the sheriff who represented the law? or because he was Roderick Norton who stood for fine, upstanding manhood? . . . Again she felt Florence Engle's eyes fixed upon her.

"Florence is prepared at the beginning to dislike me," she thought. "Why? Just because I walked with him from the hotel?"

In the heat of an argument with Mrs. Engle there came an interruption. The banker's wife was insisting that Virginia "do the only sensible thing in the world," that she accept a home under the Engle roof, occupying the room

already made ready for her. Virginia, warmed by the cordial invitation, while deeply grateful, felt that she had no right to accept. She had come to San Juan to make her own way; she had no claim upon the hospitality of her kinswoman, certainly no such claim as was implied now. Besides, there was Elmer Page. Her brother was coming to join her to-morrow or the next day, and as soon as it could be arranged they would take a house all by themselves, or if that proved impossible, would have a suite at the hotel. At the moment when it seemed that a deadlock had come between Mrs. Engle's eagerness to mother her cousin's daughter and Virginia's inborn sense of independence, the interruption came.

It arrived in the form of a boy of ten or twelve, a ragged, scantily clothed, swarthy youngster, rubbing a great toe against a bare leg while from the front door he announced that Ignacio Chavez was sick, that he had eaten something *muy malo*, that he had pains and that he prayed that the doctor cure him.

Patten grunted his disgust.

"Tell him to wait," he said briefly. And, in explanation to the others: "There's nothing the matter with him. I saw him on the street just before I came. And wasn't he ringing his bell not fifteen minutes ago?"

But the boy had not completed his message. Ignacio was sick and did not wish to die, and so had sent him to ask the Miss Lady Doctor to come to him. Virginia rose swiftly.

"You see," she said to Mrs. Engle, "what a nuisance it would be if I lived with you? May I come to see you to-morrow?"

While she said good night Engle got his hat.

"I'll go with you," he said. "But, like Patten, I don't believe there is much the matter with Chavez. Maybe he thinks he'll get a free drink of whiskey."

"You see again," laughed Virginia from the doorway, "what it would be like, Mrs. Engle; if every time I had to make a call and Mr. Engle deemed it necessary to go with me . . . I'd have to split my fees with him at the very least! And I don't believe that I could afford to do that."

"You could give me all that Ignacio pays you," chuckled Engle, "and never miss it!"

The boy waited for them and, when they came out into the starlight, flitted on ahead of them. At the cottonwoods a man stepped out to meet them. "Hello," said Engle, "it's Norton."

"I sent the boy for Miss Page," said Norton quickly. "I had to have a word with her immediately. And I'm glad that you came, Engle. I want a favor of you; a mighty big favor of Miss Page."

The boy had passed on through the shadows and now was to be seen on the street.

"I guess you know you can count on me, Rod," said Engle quietly. "What now?"

"I want you, when you go back to the house, to say that you have learned that Miss Page likes horseback riding; then send a horse for her to the hotel stable, so that if she likes she can have it in the early morning. And say nothing about my having sent the boy."

Engle did not answer immediately. He and Virginia stood trying to see the sheriff's features through the darkness. He had spoken quietly enough and yet there was an odd new note in his voice; it was easy to imagine how the muscles about his lean jaw had tensed, how his eyes were again the hard eyes of a man who saw his fight before him.

"I can trust you, John," continued Norton quickly. "I can trust Ignacio Chavez; I can trust Julius Struve. And, if you want it in words of one syllable, I cannot trust Caleb Patten!"

"Hm," said Engle. "I think you're mistaken there, my boy."

"Maybe," returned Norton. "But I can't afford right now to take any unnecessary chances. Further," and in the gloom they saw his shoulders lifted in a shrug, "I am trusting Miss Page because I've got to! Which may not sound pretty, but which is the truth."

"Of course I'll do what you ask," Engle said. "Is there anything else?"

"No. Just go on with Miss Page to see Ignacio. He will pretend to be doubled up with pain and will tell his story of the tinned meat he ate for supper. Then you can see her to the hotel and go back home, sending the horse over right away. Then she will ride with me to see a man who is hurt . . . or she will not, and I'll have to take a chance on Patten."

"Who is it?" demanded Engle sharply.

"It's Brocky Lane," returned Norton, and again his voice told of rigid muscles and hard eyes. "He's hurt bad, John. And, if we're to do him any good we'd better be about it."

Engle said nothing. But the slow, deep breath he drew into his lungs could not have been more eloquent of his emotion had it been expelled in a curse.

"I'll slip around the back way to the hotel," said Norton. "I'll be ready when Miss Page comes in. Good night, John."

Silently, without awaiting promise or protest from the girl, he was gone into the deeper shadows of the cottonwoods.

CHAPTER VI

A RIDE THROUGH THE NIGHT

Ignacio Chavez, because thus he could be of service to *el señor* Roderico Nortone whom he admired vastly and loved like a brother, drew to the dregs upon his fine Latin talent, doubled up and otherwise contorted and twisted his lithe body until the sweat stood out upon his forehead. His groans would have done ample justice to the occasion had he been dying.

Virginia treated him sparingly to a harmless potion she had secured at her room on the way, put the bottle into the hands of Ignacio's withered and anxious old mother, informed the half dozen Indian onlookers that she had arrived in time and that the bell-ringer would live, and then was impatient to go with Engle to Struve's hotel. Here Engle left her to return to his home and to send the saddle-horse he had promised Norton.

"You can ride, can't you, Virginia?" he had asked.

"Yes," she assured him.

"Then I'll send Persis around; she's the prettiest thing in horseflesh you ever saw. And the gamest. And, Virginia . . ."

He hesitated. "Well?" she asked.

"There's not a squarer, whiter man in the world than Rod Norton," he said emphatically. "Now good night and good luck, and be sure to drop in on us to-morrow."

She watched him as he went swiftly down the street; then she turned into the hotel and down the hall, which echoed to the click of her heels, and to her room. She had barely had time to change for her ride and to glance at her "war bag" when a discreet knock sounded at her door. Going to the door she found that it was Julius Struve instead of Norton.

"You are to come with me," said the hotel keeper softly. "He is waiting with the horses."

They passed through the dark dining-room, into the pitch black kitchen and out at the rear of the house. A moment Struve paused, listening. Then, touching her sleeve, he hurried away into the night, going toward the black line of cottonwoods, the girl keeping close to his heels.

At the dry arroyo Norton was waiting, holding two saddled horses. Without a word he gave her his hand, saw her mounted, surrendered Persis's jerking reins into her gauntleted grip and swung up to the back of his own horse. In another moment, and still in silence, Virginia and Norton were riding away from San Juan, keeping in the shadows of the trees, headed toward the mountains in the north.

And now suddenly Virginia found that she was giving herself over utterly, unexpectedly to a keen, pulsing joy of life. She had surrendered into the sheriff's hands the little leather-case which contained her emergency bottles and instruments; they had left San Juan a couple of hundred yards behind, their horses were galloping; her stirrup struck now and then against Norton's boot. John Engle had not been unduly extravagant in praise of the mare Persis; Virginia sensed rather than saw clearly the perfect, beautiful creature which carried her, delighted in the swinging gallop, drew into her soul something of the serene glory of a starlit night on the desert. The soft thud of shod hoofs upon yielding soil was music to her, mingled as it came with the creak of saddle leather, the jingle of bridle and spur-chains. She wondered if there had ever been so perfect a night, if she had ever mounted so finely bred a saddle animal.

Far ahead the San Juan mountains lifted their serrated ridge of ebony. On all other sides the flat-lands stretched out seeming to have no end, suggesting to the fancy that they were kin in vastitude to the clear expanse of the sky. On all hands little wind-shaped ridges were like crests of long waves in an ocean which had just now been stilled, brooded over by the desert silence and the desert stars.

"I suppose," said Norton at last, "that it's up to me to explain."

"Then begin," said Virginia, "by telling me where we are going."

He swung up his arm, pointing.

"Yonder. To the mountains. We'll reach them in about two hours and a half. Then, in another two hours or so, we'll come to where Brocky is. Way up on the flank of Mt. Temple. It's going to be a long, hard climb. For you, at the end of a tiresome day. . . ."

"How about yourself?" she asked quickly, and he knew that she was smiling at him through the dark. "Unless you're made of iron I'm almost inclined to believe that after your friend Brocky I'll have another patient. Who is he, by the way?"

"Brocky Lane? I was going to tell you. You saw something stirring in the patio at Engle's? I had seen it first; it was Ignacio who had slipped in under the wide arch from the gardens at the rear of the house. He had been sent for me by Tom Cutter, my deputy. Brocky Lane is foreman of a big cattle-ranch lying just beyond the mountains; he is also working with me and with Cutter, although until I've told you nobody knows it but ourselves and John Engle. . . . Before the night is out you'll know rather a good deal about what is going on, Miss Page," he added thoughtfully.

"More than you'd have been willing for me to know if circumstance hadn't forced your hand?"

"Yes," he admitted coolly. "To get anywhere we've had to sit tight on the game we're playing. But, from the word Cutter brings, poor old Brocky is pretty hard hit, and I couldn't take any chances with his life even though it means taking chances in another direction."

He might have been a shade less frank; and yet she liked him none the less for giving her the truth bluntly. He was but tacitly admitting that he knew nothing of her; and yet in this case he would prefer to call upon her than on Caleb Patten.

"No, I don't trust Patten," he continued, the chain of thought being inevitable. "Not that I'd call him crooked so much as a fool for Jim Galloway to juggle with. He talks too much."

"You wish me to say nothing of to-night's ride?"

"Absolutely nothing. If you are missed before we get back Struve will explain that you were called to see old Ramorez, a half-breed over yonder toward Las Estrellas. That is, provided we get back too late for it to appear likely that you are just resting in your room or getting things shipshape in your office. That's why I am explaining about Brocky."

"Since you represent the law in San Juan, Mr. Norton," she told him, "since, further, Mr. Engle indorses all that you are doing, I believe that I can go blindfolded a little. I'd rather do that than have you forced against your better judgment to place confidence in a stranger."

"That's fair of you," he said heartily. "But there are certain matters which you will have to be told. Brocky Lane has been shot down by one of Jim Galloway's crowd. It was a coward's job done by a man who would run a hundred miles rather than meet Brocky in the open. And now the thing which we don't want known is that Lane even so much as set foot on Mt. Temple. We don't want it known that he was anywhere but on Las Cruces Rancho; that he was doing anything but give his time to his duties as foreman there."

"In particular you don't want Jim Galloway to know?"

"In particular I don't want Jim Galloway to so much as suspect that Brocky Lane or Tom Cutter or myself have any interest in Mt. Temple," he said emphatically.

"But if the man who shot him is one of Galloway's crowd, as you say. . . ."

"He'll do no talking for a while. After having seen Brocky drop he took one chance and showed half of his cowardly carcass around a boulder. Whereupon Brocky, weak and sick and dizzy as he was, popped a bullet into him."

She shuddered.

"Is there nothing but killing of men among you people?" she cried sharply. "First the sheepman from Las Palmas, then Brocky Lane, then the man who shot him. . . ."

"Brocky didn't kill Moraga," Norton explained quietly. "But he dropped him and then made him throw down his gun and crawl out of the brush. Then Tom Cutter gathered him in, took him across the county line, gave him into the hands of Ben Roberts who is sheriff over there, and came on to San Juan. Roberts will simply hold Moraga on some trifling charge, and see that he keeps his mouth shut until we are ready for him to talk."

"Then Brocky Lane and Tom Cutter were together on Mt. Temple?"

"Near enough for Tom to hear the shooting."

They grew silent again. Clearly Norton had done what explaining he deemed necessary and was taking her no deeper into his confidences. She told herself that he was right, that these were not merely his own personal secrets, that as yet he would be unwise to trust a stranger further than he was forced to. And yet, unreasonably or not, she felt a little hurt. She had liked him from the beginning and from the beginning she felt that in a case such as his she would have trusted to intuition and have held back nothing. But she refrained from voicing the questions which none the less insisted upon presenting themselves to her: What was the thing that had brought both Brocky Lane and Tom Cutter to Mt. Temple? What had they been seeking there in a wilderness of crag and cliff? Why was Roderick Norton so determined that Jim Galloway should not so much as suspect that these men were watchful in the mountains? What sinister chain of circumstance had impelled Moraga, who Norton said was Galloway's man, to shoot down the cattle foreman? And Galloway himself, what type of man must he be if all that she had heard of him were true; what were his ambitions, his plans, his power?

Before long Norton pointed out the shadowy form of Mt. Temple looming ever vaster before them, its mass of rock, of wind-blown, wind-carved peaks lifted in sombre defiance against the stars. It brooded darkly over the lower slopes, like an incubus it dominated the other spines and ridges, its gorges filled with shadow and mystery, its precipices making the sense reel dizzily. And somewhere up there high against the sky, alone, suffering, perhaps dying, a man had waited through the slow hours, and still awaited their coming. How slowly she and Norton were riding, how heartless of her to have felt the thrill of pleasure which had possessed her so utterly an hour ago!

Or less than an hour. For now again, wandering out far across the open lands, came the heavy mourning of the bell.

"How far can one hear it?" she asked, surprised that from so far its ringing came so clearly.

"I don't know how many miles," he answered. "We'll hear it from the mountain. I should have heard it to-day, long before I met you by the arroyo, had I not been travelling through two big bands of Engle's sheep."

Behind them San Juan drawn into the shadows of night but calling to them in mellow-toned cadences of sorrow, before them the sombre canons and iron flanks of Mt. Temple, and somewhere, still several hours away, Brocky Lane lying helpless and perhaps hopeless; grim by day the earth hereabouts was inscrutable by night, a mighty, primal sphinx, lip-locked, spirit-crushing. The man and girl riding swiftly side by side felt in their different ways according to their different characters and previous experience the mute command laid upon them, and for the most part their lips were hushed.

There came the first slopes, the talus of strewn, broken, disintegrating rock, and then the first of the cliffs. Now the sheriff rode in the fore and Virginia kept her frowning eyes always upon his form leading the way. They entered the broad mouth of a ravine, found an uneven trail, were swallowed up by its utter and impenetrable blackness.

"Give Persis her head," Norton advised her. "She'll find her way and follow me."

His voice, low-toned as it was, stabbed through the silence, startling her, coming unexpectedly out of the void which had drawn him and his horse gradually beyond the quest of her straining eyes. She sighed, sat back in her saddle, relaxed, and loosened her reins.

For an hour they climbed almost steadily, winding in and out. Now, high above the bed of the gorge, the darkness had thinned about them; more than once the girl saw the clear-cut silhouette of man and beast in front of her or swerving off to right or left. When, after a long time, he spoke again he was waiting for her to come up with him. He had dismounted, loosened the cinch of his saddle and tied his horse to a stunted, twisted tree in a little flat.

"We have to go ahead on foot now," he told her as he put out his hand to help her down. And then as they stood side by side: "Tired much?"

"No," she answered. "I was just in the mood to ride."

He took down the rope from her saddle strings, tied Persis, and, saying briefly, "This way," again went on. She kept her place almost at his heels, now and again accepting the hand he offered as their way grew steeper underfoot. Half an hour ago she knew that they had swerved off to the left, away from the deep gorge into whose mouth they had ridden so far below; now she saw that they were once more drawing close to the steep-walled cañon. Its emptiness, black and sinister, lay between them and a group of bare peaks which stood up like cathedral spires against the sky.

"This would be simple enough in the daytime," Norton told her during one of their brief pauses. "In the dark it's another matter. Not tired out, are you?"

"No," she assured him the second time, although long ago she would have been glad to throw herself down to rest, were their errand less urgent.

"We've got some pretty steep climbing ahead of us yet," he went on quietly. "You must be careful not to slip. Oh," and he laughed carelessly, "you'd stop before you got to the bottom, but then a drop of even half a dozen feet is no joke here. If you'll pardon me I'll make sure for you."

With no further apology or explanation he slipped the end of a rope about her waist, tying it in a hard knot. Until now she had not even known that he had brought a rope; now she wondered just how hazardous was the hidden trail which they were travelling; if it were in truth but the matter of half a dozen feet which she would fall if she slipped? He made the other end of the short tether fast about his own body, said "Ready?" and again she followed him closely.

There came little flat spaces, then broken boulders to clamber over, then steep, rugged climbs, when they grasped the rough rocks with both hands and moved on with painful slowness. It seemed to the girl that they had been climbing for long, tedious hours since they had slipped out of their saddles; though to him she said nothing, locking her lips stubbornly, she knew that at last she was tired, very tired, that an end of this laborious ascent must come soon or she would be forced to stop and lie down and rest.

"Fifteen minutes more," said the sheriff, "and we're there. We'll use the first five minutes of it for a rest, too."

He made her sit down, unstopped a canteen which, like the coil of rope, she had not known he carried, and gave her a drink of water which seemed to her the most wonderfully strength-making, life-giving draft in the world. Then he dropped down at her side, looked at his watch in the light of a flaring match carefully cupped in his hand, and lighted his pipe.

"Nearly midnight," he told her.

Without replying she lay back against the slope of the mountain, closed her eyes and relaxed, breathing deeply. Her chest expanded deeply to the long indrawn breath which filled her lungs with the rare air. She felt suddenly a little sleepy, dreaming longingly of the unutterable content one could find in just going to sleep with the cliff-scarred mountainside for couch.

She stirred and opened her eyes. Rod Norton, the sheriff of San Juan, a man who a few brief hours ago had been

unknown to her, his name unfamiliar, sat two paces from her, smoking. She and this man of whom she still knew rather less than nothing were alone in the world; just the two of them lifted into the sky, separated by a dreary stretch of desert lands from other men and women . . . bound together by a bit of rope. She tried to see his face; the profile, more guessed than seen, appeared to her fancy as unrelenting as the line of cliff just beyond him, clear-cut against the sky.

Yet somehow . . . she did not definitely formulate the thought of which she was at the time but dimly, vaguely conscious . . . she was glad that she had come to San Juan. And she was not afraid of the silent man at her side, nor sorry that circumstance had given them this night and its labors.

Norton knocked out his pipe. Together they got to their feet.

"More careful than ever now," he cautioned her. "Look out for each step and go slowly. We're there in ten minutes. Ready?"

"Ready," she answered.

CHAPTER VII

IN THE HOME OF CLIFF-DWELLERS

Those remaining ten minutes tried all that there was of endurance in Virginia Page. Often Norton, bidding her wait a moment, climbed on to some narrow ledge above her and, drawing the rope steadily through his hands, gave her what aid he could; often, clinging with hand and foot she thought breathlessly of the steep fall of cliff which the darkness hid from her eyes, but which grew ever steeper in her mind as she struggled on. He had said it would be easier in daylight; she wondered if after all it would not have been more difficult could she have seen just what were the chances she was taking at every moment. But more and more she came to have utter faith in the quiet man going on before her, and in the piece of rope which stretched taut between them.

"And now," said Norton at last, when once more he had drawn her up to him and they stood close together upon a narrow ledge, "we've got a good, safe trail under foot. Good news, eh?"

But as he moved on now he kept her hand locked tight in his own. Their "good, safe trail" was a rough ledge running almost horizontally along the cliffside, its trend scarcely perceptibly upward. Within twenty steps it led them into a wide, V-shaped fissure in the rocks. Then came a sort of cup in a nest of rugged peaks, its bottom filled with imprisoned soil worn from the spires above. As Norton, relinquishing her hand, went forward swiftly she heard a man's voice saying weakly:

"That you, Rod?"

"I came as soon as I could, Brocky." Norton, standing close to a big outjutting boulder upon the far side of the cup, was bending over the cattleman. "How are you making out, old man?"

"I've sure been having one hell of a nice little party," grunted Brocky Lane faintly. "A man's so damn close to heaven on these mountain tops. . . . Who's that?"

Virginia came forward quickly and went down on her knees at Lane's side.

"I'm Dr. Page," she said quietly. "Now if you'll tell me where you're hit . . . and if Mr. Norton will get me some sort of a light. A fire will have to do. . . ."

Another little grunt came from Brocky Lane's tortured lips, this time a wordless expression of his unmeasured amazement.

"I didn't want Patten in on this," Norton explained. "Miss Page is a doctor; just got into San Juan to-day. She's a cousin of Engle. And she knows her business a whole lot better than Patten does, besides."

"Will you get the fire started immediately, Mr. Norton?" asked Virginia somewhat sharply. "Mr. Lane has waited long enough as it is."

"I'll be damned!" said Brocky Lane weakly. And then, more weakly still, in a voice which broke despite a manful effort to make it both steady and careless, "I never cuss like that unless I'm delirious, anyhow I never cuss when there's a lady. . . ."

"If you'll keep perfectly still," Virginia admonished him quickly, "I'll do all the talking that is necessary. Where is the wound?"

"You don't have to have a light, do you?" Brocky insisted on being informed. "You see, we can't have it. Where'm I hurt, you want to know? Mostly right here in my side."

Virginia's hands found the rude bandage, damp and sticky.

"It's nonsense about not having a light," she said, turning toward Norton.

"No," said the wounded man. "Nonsense nothing, is it Rod? How're we going to have a fire when my matches are all gone and Rod's matches. . . ."

"Mr. Norton," Virginia cut in crisply, "in spite of your friend's talk and in spite of the bluff he is putting up he is pretty badly hurt. You give me some sort of a light, I don't care if they see it down at San Juan, or you shoulder the responsibility. Which is it?"

Norton turned and was gone in the darkness; to Virginia's eyes it seemed that he was swallowed up by the cliff's themselves, as though they had opened and accepted him and closed after him. She supposed that he had gone to seek what scanty dry fuel one might find here. But in a moment he was back carrying a lighted lantern.

"Look here, Rod. . . ." expostulated Brocky.

"Shut up, Brocky," answered Norton quietly. And, passing the lantern to the girl. "If you'll carry that I'll carry Brocky. It's only a few steps and I won't hurt him. We can make him more comfortable there; and besides, we can't leave him out here in the sun to-morrow."

Somewhat mystified, Virginia took the lantern and her own surgical case from the sheriff and watched him stoop and gather the tall form of his friend into his arms. Then going the way he indicated, straight across the tiny flat, she lighted the way. She heard the wounded man groan once; then, his teeth set to guard his lips, Brocky was silent.

After a dozen steps she came to a steep-sided, narrow chasm giving passageway not six feet wide which twisted this way and that before her.

"Look out," called Norton sharply. "Watch where you step now. Go slow."

Virginia swinging her lantern up shoulder-high, looking ahead, grew instantly stock-still, a shiver tingling along her spine. The narrow defile through which she had passed had led out of the ring of peaks and now abruptly debouched into nothingness. As she had turned with the twisting passageway, expecting to see another wall of rock before her, she saw instead the sky filled with stars. She stood almost at the edge of a sheer precipice.

"Throw the light to the left now," commanded Norton. "See what looks like the entrance to a cave? We go in there."

She walked on, moving slowly, warily, a little faint from the one startled view before her, her body tight pressed to the rocks upon the left, her feet only a pace from the edge of the cliff. Now she saw the mouth of the cave, a black ragged hole just above a flat rock which thrust itself outward so that it seemed hanging, balanced insecurely, over the abyss. By the pale rays of the lantern she saw the fairly smooth, gently sloping floor of the cavern; then, stooping, she passed in, turned, and held the light for Norton.

He came on steadily, bearing his burden lightly. Still holding the lantern for him, turning as he came closer, she saw that the cave was lofty and wide, that it ran farther back into the mountain than her lantern's rays could follow.

"Back there," said Norton, "you'll find blankets. I'll hold him while you spread some out for him."

She hurried toward the farther end of the cave, came to a tumble of blankets against the wall, dragged out two or three, spreading them quickly. And then, while Norton was stooping to lay Brocky's limp form down, she busied herself with her case.

"He has fainted," she said quickly. "I'd like to examine the wound before he is conscious; it's going to hurt him. Pour me some water into any sort of basin or cup or anything else you've got here. Then stand by to help me if I need you. . . . Hold the lantern for me."

Swiftly, but Norton marked with what skilful fingers, she removed the bandage and made her examination. Norton, squatting upon his heels at her side, holding the lantern, after one frowning look at the wound, kept his eyes fixed upon her face. Brocky Lane was near his death and the sheriff knew it after that one look; his life lay, perhaps, in the hands of this girl. Norton had brought her when he might have brought Patten. Had he chosen wrongly?

He had noted her hands before; now they seemed to him the most wonderful hands ever possessed by either man or woman, strong, sure, quick, sensitive, utterly capable. He thought of Caleb Patten's hands, thick, a little inclined to be flabby.

"Open that bottle," she directed coolly. "One tablet into the water. That box has cotton and gauze in it . . . don't touch them! I want everything clean; just open the box and set it where I can get it."

One by one she gave her directions and the man obeyed swiftly and unquestioningly. He watched her probe the wound, saw her eyes narrow, knew that she had made her diagnosis. As she washed the ugly hole in the flesh and made her own bandage Brocky Lane was wincing, his eyes again open. Both men were watching her now, the same look in each eager pair of eyes. But until she had done and, with Norton's help, had made Lane as comfortable as possible upon his crude bed, she gave no answer to their mute pleading. Then she sat down upon the stone floor, caught her knees up in her clasped hands, and looked long and searchingly into Brocky Lane's face. The cowboy struggled with his muscles and triumphed over them, summoning a sick grin as he muttered:

"You're mighty good to take all this trouble. . . . I'm sure a hundred times obliged. . . ."

"And," she cut in abruptly, "you mean to tell me that you shot that man after he had put this hole in you? And then you made him crawl out of the brush and come to you?"

"I sure did," grunted Brocky. "And if my aim hadn't been sort of bad, me being all upset this way, I wouldn't have just winged old Moraga that way, either! When he's all cured up and I'm all well again. . . ."

Then he broke off and again his eyes, like Norton's, asked their question. This time she answered it, speaking slowly and thoughtfully.

"Mr. Brocky Lane, I congratulate you on three things, your physique first, your luck second, and third, your nerve. They are a combination that is hard to beat. I am very much inclined to the belief that in a month or so you'll be about as good as new."

Norton expelled a deep breath of relief; he realized suddenly that whatever this gray-eyed, strong-handed girl had said would have had his fullest credence. Brocky's grin grew a shade less strained.

"When you add to that combination," he muttered, "a sure-enough angel come to doctor a man. . . ."

"Growing delirious again," laughed Virginia. "Give him a little brandy, Mr. Norton. Then a smoke if he's dying for one. Then we'll try to get a little sleep, all of us. You see, I had virtually no sleep on the train last night and to-day has been a big day for me. If I'm going to do your friend any good I've got to get three winks. And, unless you're made out of reinforced sheet-iron, it's the same for you. You can lie down close to Mr. Lane so that he can wake you easily if he needs us. Now," and she rose, still smiling, but suddenly looking unutterably weary, "where is the guest-chamber?"

She did not tell them that not only last night, but the night before she had sat up in a day coach, saving every cent she could out of the few dollars which were to give her and her brother a new start in the world; there were many things which Virginia Page knew how to keep to herself.

"This way," said Norton, taking up the lantern. "We can really make you more comfortable than you'd think."

At the very least he could count confidently on treating her to a surprise. She followed him for forty or fifty feet toward the end of the cave and to an irregular hole in the side wall, through this, and into another cave, smaller than the first, but as big as an ordinary room. The floor was strewn with the short needles of the mountain pine. As she turned, looking about her, she noted first another opening in a wall suggesting still another cave; then, feeling a faint breath of the night air on her cheek she saw a small rift in the outer shell of rock and through it the stars thick in the sky.

"May you sleep well in Jim Galloway's hang-out," said Norton lightly. "May you not be troubled with the ghosts of the old cliff-dwellers whose house this was before our time. And may you always remember that if there is anything in the world that I can do for you all you have to do is let me know. Good night."

"Good night," she said.

He had left the lantern for her. She placed it on the floor and went across her strange bedroom to the hole in the rock through which the stars were shining. It seemed impossible that those stars out there were the same stars which had shone upon her all of her life long. She could fancy that she had gone to sleep in one world and now had awakened in another, coming into a far, unknown territory where the face of the earth was changed, where men were different, where life was new. And though her body was tired her spirit did not droop. Rather an old exhilaration was in her blood. She had stepped from an old, outworn world into a new one, and with a quick stir of the pulses she told herself that life was good where it was strenuous and that she was glad that Virginia Page had come to San Juan.

"And now," she mused sleepily when at last she lay down upon heaped-up pine-needles and drew over her the blanket Norton had brought, "I am going to sleep in the hang-out of Jim Galloway and the old home of the cliff-dwellers! Virginia Page, you are a downright lucky girl!"

Whereupon she blew out her lantern, smiled faintly at the stars shining upon her, sighed wearily and went to sleep.

CHAPTER VIII

JIM GALLOWAY'S GAME

As full consciousness of her surroundings returned slowly to her, Virginia Page at first thought that she had been awakened by the aroma of boiling coffee. Then, sitting up, wide awake, she knew that Norton had come to the doorway of her separate chamber and had called. She threw off her blanket and got up hastily.

It was still dark. She imagined that she had merely dozed and that Norton was summoning her because Brocky Lane was worse. A dim glow shone through the cave entrance, that flickering, uncertain light eloquent of a camp-fire. As her hands went swiftly and femininely to her hair, she heard Norton's voice in a laughing remark. Only then she knew that she had slept three or four hours, that the dawn was near, that it was time for her to return to San Juan.

"Good morning," she said brightly.

Norton, squatting by the fire, frying-pan in hand, turned and answered her nod; Brocky Lane, flat on his back with his hands clasped behind his head, a cigarette in his mouth, twisted a little where he lay, his eyes eager upon his doctor. Virginia came on into the full light, striking the pine-needles from her riding-habit.

"Time to eat and ride," said Norton, turning again to his task. "Bacon and coffee and exercise. Have you rested?"

"Perfectly. And Mr. Lane?"

"Me?" said Brocky. "Feeling fine."

Norton gave her a cup of warm water to wash her hands. Then she made a second, very careful examination of Brocky's wound, cleansing it and adjusting a fresh bandage.

"I want to start in half an hour," said the sheriff. "There'll be light enough then so that we can make time getting down to the horses and yet not enough light to show us up to a chance early rider down below. Then we'll swing off to the west, make a wide bend, ride through Las Estrellas and get back into San Juan when we please. That is your will; I'll leave you outside of Las Estrellas, showing you the way. And, while we eat, I am going to tell you something."

"About Galloway?" she asked quickly. "Explaining what you meant by Galloway's hang-out?"

"Yes. And more than that."

For a little she stood, looking at him very gravely. Then she spoke in utter frankness.

"Mr. Norton, I think that I can see your position; you were so circumstanced through Mr. Lane's being hurt that you had to bring either Dr. Patten or me here. You decided it would be wiser to bring me. There is something of a compliment in that, isn't there?"

"You don't know Caleb Patten yet!" growled Brocky a bit savagely.

"Already it seems to me," she went on, "that you have a pretty hard row to hoe. It is evident that you have discovered a sort of thieves' headquarters here; that, for your own reasons, you don't want it known that you have found it. To say that I am not curious about it all would be talking nonsense, of course. And yet I can assure you that I hold you under no obligation whatever to do any explaining. You are the sheriff and your job is to get results, not to be polite to the ladies."

But Norton shook his head.

"You know what you know," he said seriously. "I think that if you know a little more you will more readily

understand why we must insist on keeping our mouths shut . . . all of us."

"In that case," returned the girl, "and before you boil that coffee into any more hopelessly black a concoction than it already is, I am ready to drink mine and listen. Coffee, Mr. Lane?"

"Had mine, thanks," answered Brocky. "Spin the yarn, Rod."

Norton put down his frying-pan, the bacon brown and crisp, and rose to his feet.

"Will you come this way a moment, Miss Page?" he asked. "To begin with, seeing is believing."

She followed him as she had, last night, back into the cave in which she had slept. But Norton did not stop here. He went on, Virginia still following him, came to that other hole in the rock wall which she had noted by the lantern light.

"In here," he said. "Just look."

He swept a match across his thigh, holding it up for her. She came to his side and looked in. First she saw a number of small boxes, innocent appearing affairs which suggested soda-crackers. Beyond them was something covered with a blanket; Norton stepped by her and jerked the covering aside. Startled, puzzled by what she saw, she looked to him wonderingly. Placed neatly, lying side by side, their metal surfaces winking back at the light of Norton's match, were a number of rifles. A score of them, fifty, perhaps.

"It looks like a young revolution!" she cried, her gaze held, her eyes fascinated by the unexpected.

"You've seen about everything now," he told her, the red ember of a burnt-out match dropping to the floor. "Those boxes contain cartridges. Now let's go back to Brocky."

"But they'll see that you have been here. . . ."

"I'll come back in a minute with the lantern; I want a further chance to look things over. Then I'll put the blanket back and see that not even that charred match gives us away. And we'd better be eating and getting started."

With a steaming tin of black coffee before her, a brown piece of bacon between her fingers, she forgot to eat or drink while she listened to Norton's story. At the beginning it seemed incredible; then, her thoughts sweeping back over the experiences of these last twenty-four hours, her eyes having before them the picture of a sheriff, grim-faced and determined, a wounded man lying just beyond the fire, the rough, rudely arched walls and ceiling of a cave man's dwelling about her, she deemed that what Norton knew and suspected was but the thing to be expected.

"Jim Galloway is a big man," the sheriff said thoughtfully. "A very big man in his way. My father was after him for a long time; I have been after him ever since my father's death. But it is only recently that I have come to appreciate Jim Galloway's caliber. That's why I could never get him with the goods on; I have been looking for him in the wrong places.

"I estimated that he was making money with the Casa Blanca and a similar house which he operates in Pozo; I thought that his entire game lay in such layouts and a bit of business now and then like the robbing of the Las Palmas man. But now I know that most of these lesser jobs are not even Galloway's affair, that he lets some of his crowd like the Kid or Antone or Moraga put them across and keep the spoils, often enough. In a word, while I've been looking for Jim Galloway in the brush he has been doing his stunt in the big timber! And now. . . ." The look in Norton's eyes suggested that he had forgotten the girl to whom he was talking. "And now I have picked up his trail!"

"And that's something," interposed Brocky Lane, a flash of fire in his own eyes. "Considering that no man ever knew better than Jim Galloway how to cover tracks."

"You see," continued Norton, "Jim Galloway's bigness consists very largely of these two things: he knows how to keep his hands off of the little jobs, and he knows how to hold men to him. Bisbee, of Las Palmas, goes down in the Casa Blanca; his money, perhaps a thousand dollars, finds its way into the pockets of Kid Rickard, Antone, and maybe another two or three men. Jim Galloway sees what goes on and does no petty haggling over the spoils; he

gets a strangle-hold on the men who do the job; it costs him nothing but another lie or so, and he has them where he can count on them later on when he needs such men. Further, if they are arrested, Jim Galloway and Galloway's money come to the front; they are defended in court by the best lawyers to be had, men are bribed and they go free. As a result of such labors on Galloway's part I'd say at a rough guess that there are from a dozen to fifty men in the county right now who are his men, body and soul.

"With a gang like that at his back, a man of Galloway's type has grown pretty strong. Strong enough to plan . . . yes, and by the Lord, carry out! . . . the kind of game he's playing right now.

"A half-breed took sick and died a short time ago, a man whom I'd never set my eyes on particularly. It happened that he was a superstitious devil and that he was a second or third cousin of Ignacio Chavez. He was quite positive that unless the bells rang properly for him he would go to hell the shortest way. So he sent for Ignacio and wound up by talking a good deal. Ignacio passed the word on to me. And that was the first inkling I had of Galloway's real game. In a word, this is what it is:

"He plans on one big stroke and then a long rest and quiet enjoyment of the proceeds. You have seen the rifles; he'll arm a crowd of his best men . . . or his worst, as you please . . . swoop down on San Juan, rob the bank, shooting down just as many men as happen to be in the way, rush in automobiles to Pozo and Kepple's Town, stick up the banks there, levy on the Las Palmas mines, and then steer straight to the border. And, if all worked according to schedule, the papers across the country would record the most daring raid across the border yet, blaming the whole affair on a detachment of Gringo-hating Mexican bandits and revolutionists."

Virginia stared at him, half incredulously. But the look in Norton's eyes, the same look in Brocky Lane's, assured her.

"Why do you wait then?" she asked sharply. "If you know all this, why don't you arrest the man and his accomplices now? Before it is too late?"

"And have the whole country laugh at me? Where's my evidence? Just the word of a dead Indian, repeated by another Indian, and a few rifles hid in the mountains? Even if we proved the rifles were Galloway's, and I don't believe we could, how would we set about proving his intention? No; I've talked it all over with the district attorney and we can't move yet. We've got our chance at last; the chance to watch and get Jim Galloway with the goods on. But we've got to wait until he is just ready to strike. And then we are going to put a stop to lawlessness in San Juan once and for all."

"But," she objected breathlessly, "if he should strike before you are ready?"

"It is our one business in life that he doesn't do it. We know what he is up to; we have found this hiding-place; we shall keep an eye on it night and day. He doesn't know that we have been here; no one knows but ourselves. You see now, Miss Page, why I couldn't bring Patten here? Patten talks too much and Galloway knows every thought in Patten's mind. And you understand how important it is for you to forget that you have been here?"

She sat silent, staring into the embers of the dying fire.

"The thing which I can't understand," she said presently, "is that if Jim Galloway is the 'big man' that you say he is he should do as much talking as he must have done; that he should have told his plans to such a man as the Indian who told them to Ignacio Chavez."

"But he didn't tell all of this," Norton informed her. "The Indian died without guessing what I have told you. He merely knew that the rifles were here because Galloway had employed him to bring them and because he was the man who told Galloway of this hiding-place. He believed that Galloway's whole scheme was to smuggle a lot of arms and ammunition south and across the border, selling to the Mexicans. But from what little he could tell Chavez and from what we found out for ourselves, the whole play became pretty obvious. No, Galloway hasn't been talking and he has been playing as safe as a man can upon such business as this. His luck was against him, that's all, when the Indian died and insisted on being rung out by the San Juan bells. There's always that little element of chance in any business, legitimate or otherwise. . . . And now, if you'll finish your breakfast I'll show you a view you'll never forget and then we'll hit the trail."

"But, Mr. Lane," she asked, "you don't intend to leave him here all alone? He will get well with the proper attention; but he must have that."

"Within another hour or so," Norton told her, "Tom Cutter will be back with one of Brocky's cowboys. They'll move Lane into a cañon on the other side of the mountain. Oh, I know he oughtn't to be moved, but what else can we do? Besides, Brocky insists on it. Then they'll arrange to take care of him; if necessary you'll come out again tomorrow night?"

"Of course," she said. She went to Brocky and held out her hand to him. "I understand now, I think, why you would refuse to die, no matter how badly you were hurt, until you had helped Mr. Norton finish the work you have set your hands to. It's an honor, Mr. Lane, to have a patient like you."

Whereupon Brocky Lane grew promptly crimson and tongue-tied.

"And now the view, Mr. Norton, and I am ready to go."

He led the way to the outer ledge from which last night they had entered the cave.

"In daylight you can see half round the world from here," he said as they stood with their backs to the rock. "Now you can get an idea of what it's like."

Below her was the chasm formed by these cliffs standing sheer and fronting other tall cliffs looming blackly, the stars beginning to fade in the sky above them. Norton pushed a stone outward with his boot; she heard it strike, rebound, strike again . . . and then there was silence; when the falling stone reached the bottom no sound came back to tell her how far it had dropped.

Turning a little to look southward, she saw the cliffs standing farther and farther back on each side so that the eye might travel between them and out over the lower slopes and the distant stretches of level land which, more now than ever, seemed a great limitless sea. The stars were paling rapidly; the first glint of the new day was in the air, the world lay shadowy and silent and lifeless, softened in the seeming, but, as in the daytime, slumbrous under an atmosphere of brooding mystery.

"When you told me last night . . . when you put your rope around me and said that I might fall half a dozen feet. . . ."

"Had we fallen it would have been a hundred feet, many a time," he said quietly. "But I knew we wouldn't fall. And," looking into her face with an expression in his eyes which the shadows hid, "I shouldn't have sought to minimize the danger to you had I known you as well as I think I know you now."

"Thank you," she said lightly. But she was conscious of a warm pleasurable glow throughout her entire being. It was good to live life in the open, it was good to stand upon the cliff tops with a man like Roderick Norton, it was good to have such a man speak thus.

Five minutes later they were making their way down the cliffs toward the horses.

CHAPTER IX

YOUNG PAGE COMES TO TOWN

Here and there throughout the great stretches of the sun-smitten southwest are spots which still remain practically unknown, wherein men come seldom or not at all, where no man cares to tarry. Barren mountains that are blistering hot, sucked dry long ago of their last vestige of moisture; endless drifts of sand where the silent animal life is scanty, where fanged cactus and stubborn mesquite fight their eternal battles for life; mesas and lomas little known, shunned by humanity. True, men have been here, some few poking into the dust of ancient ruins, more seeking minerals, and now and then one, fleeing the law, to be followed relentlessly by such as Roderick Norton. And yet there is the evidence, if one looks, that this desolate, shunned land once had its teeming tribes and its green fields.

Virginia and Roderick, having made their hazardous way down the cliffs and to their horses in silence, found their tongues loosened as they rode westward in the soft dawn. Virginia put her questions and he, as best he could, answered them. She asked eagerly of the old cliff-dwellers and he shrugged his shoulders. Aztecs, were they? Toltecs? What? *Quien sabe!* They were a people of mystery who had left behind them a silence like that of the desert wastes themselves. Whence they came, where they went, and why, must long remain questions with many answers and therefore none at all. But he could tell her a few things of the ancient civilization . . . and a civilization it truly was . . . and of the signs left for posterity to puzzle over.

They had builded cities, and the ruins of their pueblos still stand scattered across the weary, scorched land; they constructed mile after mile of aqueducts whose lines are followed to-day by reclamation engineers; they irrigated and cultivated their lands; they made abodes high up on the mountains, dwelling in caves, enlarging their dwellings, shaping homes and fortresses and lookouts. And just so long as the mountains themselves last, will men come now and then into such places as that wherein Jim Galloway's rifles lay hidden.

"I have lived in this part of the world all but two or three years of my life," said Norton at the end, "and yet I never heard of these particular caves until a very few days ago. I don't believe that there are ten people living who know of them; so Galloway, hiding his stuff out there was playing just as safe as a man can play--when he plays the game crooked, anyway."

"But won't he guess something when he misses Moraga?"

"I don't think so." Norton shook his head. "Tom Cutter and Brocky made Moraga talk. His job was to keep an eye on this end, but he was commissioned also to make a trip over to the county line. The first thing Jim Galloway will hear will be that Moraga got drunk and into a scrape and was taken in by Sheriff Roberts. Then I think that Galloway himself will slip out of San Juan himself some dark night and climb the cliffs to make sure. When he finds everything absolutely as it was left, when time passes and nothing is done, I think he will replace Moraga with another man and figure that everything is all right. Why shouldn't he?"

From Galloway and Moraga they got back to a discussion of the ancient peoples of the desert, venturing surmise for surmise, finding that their stimulated fancies winged together, daring to construct for themselves something of the forgotten annals of a forgotten folk who, perhaps, were living in walled cities while old Egypt was building her pyramids. Then, abruptly, in a patch of tall mesquite, Norton reined in his horse and stopped.

"You understand why I must leave you here," he said. "Yonder, beyond those trees straight ahead . . . you will see it from that little ridge . . . is Las Estrellas, a town of a dozen houses. But before you get there you will come to the house where old Ramorez, a half-breed, lives. You remember; if you are missed in San Juan, Struve will say that you have gone to see Ramorez. He is actually sick by the way; maybe you can do something for him. His shack is in those cottonwoods, this side of Las Estrellas. You'll find Ignacio there, too; he'll go back to San Juan with you. And, once again, thank you."

He put out his hand; she gave him hers and for a moment they sat looking at each other gravely. Then Norton smiled, the pleasant boyish smile, her lips curved at him deliciously, he touched his hat and was gone. And she,

riding slowly, turned Persis toward Las Estrellas.

From Las Estrellas, an unkempt, ugly village strangely named, it was necessary to ride some fifteen miles through sand and scrub before coming again into San Juan. Virginia Page, sincerely glad that she had made her call upon old Ramorez who was suffering painfully from acute stomach trouble and whose distress she could partially alleviate, made the return ride in the company of Ignacio. But first, from Ramorez's baking hovel, the Indian conducted her to another where a young woman with a baby a week old needed her. So it was well on in the afternoon and with a securely established alibi that she rode by the old Mission and to the hotel. As Ignacio rode listlessly away with the horses, as innocent looking a lazy beggar as the world ever knew, Virginia caught a glimpse of a white skirt and cool sunshade coming up the street.

"Florence Engle," she thought. "Who, no doubt, will cut me dead if I give her the opportunity."

A little hurriedly she turned in at the hotel door and went to her room. She had removed hat and gantlets, and was preparing for a bath and change of clothing when a light knock sounded on her door. The rap, preceded by quick little steps down the hall, was essentially feminine.

"Hello, Cousin Virginia," said Florence. "May I come in?"

Virginia brought her in, gave her a chair and regarded her curiously. The girl's face was flushed and pink, her eyes were bright and quite gay and untroubled, her whole air genuinely friendly. Last night Virginia had judged her to be about seventeen; now she looked a mere child.

"I was perfectly nasty last night, wasn't I?" Florrie remarked as she stood her sunshade by her chair and smiled engagingly. "Oh, I know it. Just a horrid little cat . . . but then I'm that most of the time. I came all this way and in all this dust and heat just to ask you to forgive me. Will you?"

For the moment Virginia was nonplussed. But Florence only laughed, clasped her hands somewhat affectedly and ran on, her words tumbling out in helter-skelter fashion.

"Oh, I know. I'm spoiled and I'm selfish, and I'm mean, I suppose. And, oh dear, I'm as jealous as anything. But I'm ashamed of myself this time. Whew! You ought to have listened in on the party after you left! If you could have heard mama scold me and papa jaw me about the way I acted it would have made you almost sorry for me."

"But you weren't horrid at all," Virginia broke in at last, her heart suddenly warming to this very obviously spoiled, futile, but none the less likable, Florrie. "You mustn't talk that way. And if your parents made you come. . . ."

"They didn't," said Florrie calmly. "They couldn't. Nobody ever made me do anything; that's what's the matter with me. I came because I wanted to. As the men say, I wanted to square myself. And, would you believe it, this is the third time I have called. Mr. Struve kept telling me that you had gone to see old Joe Ramorez . . . isn't he the awfulest old pirate you ever saw? And the dirtiest? I don't see how you can go near a man like that, even if he is dying; honestly I don't. But you must do all kinds of things, being a doctor."

Her clasped hands tightened, she put her head of fluffy hair to one side and looked at Virginia with such frank wonder in her eyes that Virginia colored under them.

"And," ran on Florrie, forestalling a possible interruption, "I was ready to poke fun at you last night just for being something capable and . . . and splendid. There was my jealousy again, I suppose. You ought to have heard papa on that score; 'Look here, my fine miss; if you could just be something worth while in the world, if you could do as much good in all of your silly life as Virginia Page does every day of hers,' . . . and so forth until he was ready to burst and mama was ready to cry, and I was ready to bite him!" She trilled off in a burst of laughter which was eloquent of the fact that Florence Engle, be her faults what they might, was not the one to hold a grudge.

"I am sorry," said Virginia, smiling a little, "if on my account . . ."

"You were just going to get cleaned up, weren't you?" asked Florrie contritely. "You look as hot and dusty as anything. My, what pretty hair you have; I'll bet it comes down to your waist, doesn't it? You ought to see mine when I take it down; it's like the pictures of the bush-whackers . . . you know what I mean, from South Africa or somewhere, you know . . . only, of course, mine's a prettier color. Sometime I'll come and comb yours for you, when you're tired out from curing sick Indians. But now," and she jumped to her feet, "I'll go out on the porch while you get dressed and then you come out, will you? It's cool there under the awning, and I'll have Mr. Struve bring us out some cold lemonade. But first, you do forgive me, don't you?"

Virginia's prompt assurance was incomplete when Florrie flitted out, banging the door after her, headed toward the lounging-chairs on the veranda.

"You pretty thing!" exclaimed Miss Florrie as Virginia joined her as coolly and femininely dressed, if not quite as fluffily, as the banker's daughter. "Oh, but you are quite the most stunning creature that ever came into San Juan! Oh, I know all about myself; don't you suppose I've stood in front of a glass by the long hours . . . wishing it was a wishing-glass all the time and that I could turn a pug-nose into a Grecian. I'm pretty; you're simply beautiful!"

"Look here, my dear," laughed Virginia, taking the chair which Florrie had drawn close up to her own in the shade against the adobe wall, "you have already made amends. It isn't necessary to . . ."

"I haven't half finished," cried Florrie emphatically. "You see it's a way of mine to do things just by halves and quit there. But to-day it is different; to-day I am going to square myself. That's one reason why I treated you so cattishly last night; because you were so maddeningly good to look upon. Through a man's eyes, you know; and that's about all that counts anyway, isn't it? And the other reason was that you came in with Roddy and he looked so contented. . . . Do you wonder that I am just wild about him? Isn't he a perfect dear?"

Florrie's utter frankness disconcerted Virginia. The confession of "wildness" about San Juan's sheriff, followed by the asseveration of his perfect dearness was made in bright frankness, Florrie's voice lowered no whit though Julius Struve at the moment was coming down the veranda bearing a tray and glasses. Virginia was not without gratitude that Struve lingered a moment and bantered with Florrie; when he departed she sought to switch the talk in another direction. But Florrie, sipping her tall glass and setting it aside, was before her.

"You see it was double-barrelled jealousy; so I did rather well not to fly at you and tear your eyes out, didn't I? Just because you and he came in together . . . as if every time a man and girl walk down the street together it means that they are going to get married! But you see, Roddy and I have known each other ever since before I can remember, and I have asked myself a million times if some day we are going to be Mr. and Mrs. Roderick Norton . . . and there are times when I think we are!"

"You have a long time ahead of you yet, haven't you, Florence, before you have to answer a question like that?" asked Virginia amusedly.

"Because I am so young?" cried Florrie. "Oh, I don't know; girls marry young here. Now there is Tita . . . she is our cook's sister . . . she has two babies already and she is only four months older than I am. And . . . Look, Virgie; there is the most terrible creature in the world. It is Kid Rickard; he killed the Las Palmas man, you know. I am not going even to look at him; I hate him worse than Caleb Patten . . . and that's like saying I hate strychnine worse than arsenic, isn't it? But who in the name of all that is wonderful is the man with him? Isn't he the handsome thing? I never saw him before. He is from the outside, Virgie; you can tell by the fashionable cut of his clothes and by the way he walks and . . . Isn't he distinguished!"

"It is Elmer!" exclaimed Virginia, staring at the two figures which were slowly approaching from the southern end of the street. "When did he get here? I didn't expect him. . . ."

Then she chose to forget all save the essential fact that her "baby brother" was here and ran out to the sidewalk, calling to him.

"Hello, Sis," returned Elmer nonchalantly. He was a thin, anaemic-looking young fellow a couple of years

younger than Virginia who affected a swagger and gloves and who had a cough which was insistent, but which he strove to disguise. And yet Florrie's hyperbole had not been entirely without warrant. He had something of Virginia's fine profile, a look of her in his eyes, the stamp of good blood upon him. He suffered his sister to kiss him, meantime turning his eyes with a faint sign of interest to the fair girl on the veranda. Florrie smiled.

"Sis," said Elmer, "this is Mr. Rickard. Mr. Rickard, shake hands with my sister, Miss Page."

A feeling of pure loathing swept over the girl as she turned to look into Kid Rickard's sullen eyes and degenerate, cruel face. But, since the Kid was a couple of paces removed and was slow about coming forward, not so much as raising his hand to his wide hat, she nodded at him and managed to say a quiet, non-committal, "How do you do?" Then she slipped her arm through Elmer's.

"Come, Elmer," she said hastily. "I want you to know Miss Florence Engle; she is a sort of cousin of ours."

"Sure," said Elmer off-handedly. "Come on, Rickard."

But the Kid, standing upon no ceremony, had drawn his hat a trifle lower over his eyes and turned his shoulder upon them, continuing along the street in his slouching walk. Elmer, summoning youth's supreme weapon of an affected boredom, yawned, stifled his little cough and went with Virginia to meet Florence.

Florence giggled over the introduction, then grew abruptly as grave as a matron of seventy and tactlessly observed that Mr. Page had a very bad cold; how could one have a cold in weather like this? Whereupon Mr. Page glared at her belligerently, noted her little row of curls, revised his first opinion of her, set her down not only as a cousin, but as a crazy kid besides, and removed half a dozen steps to a chair.

"I don't think much of your friends," remarked Florrie, sensing sudden opposition and flying half-way to meet it.

Elmer Page produced a very new, unsullied pipe from his pocket and filled it with an air, while Virginia looked on curiously. Having done so and having drawn up one trouser's leg to save the crease, crossed the leg and at last put the pipe stem into his mouth, he regarded Florrie from the cool and serene height of his superior age.

"If you refer to Mr. Rickard," he said aloofly, "I may say that he is not a friend . . . yet. I just met him this afternoon. But, although he hasn't had the social advantages, perhaps, still he is a man of parts."

Florrie sniffed and tossed her head. Virginia bit her lips and watched them.

"Been smoking too many cigs, I guess, Sis," Elmer remarked apropos of the initial observation of Miss Engle which still rankled. "Got a regular cigarette fiend's cough. Gave 'em up. Hitting the pipe now."

"If you knew," said Florrie spitefully, "that Mr. Rickard as you call him had just murdered a man yesterday, what would you say then, I wonder?"

There was a sparkle of excitement in Elmer's eyes as he swung about to answer.

"Murdered!" he challenged. "You've heard just one side of it, of course. Bisbee got drunk and insulted Mr. Rickard. They call him the Kid, you know. Say, Sis, he's had a life for you! Full of adventure, all kinds of sport. And Bisbee shot first, too. But the Kid got him!" he concluded triumphantly. "Galloway told me all about it . . . and what a blundering rummy the fool sheriff is."

"Galloway?" queried Virginia uneasily. "You know him too, already?"

"Sure," replied Elmer. "He's a good sort, too, You'll like him. I asked him around."

"For goodness' sake, Elmer, when did you get to San Juan? Have you been here a week or just a few hours?"

"Got in on the stage at noon, of course. But it doesn't take a man all year to get acquainted in a town this size."

"A man!" giggled Florrie.

"I can see," laughed Virginia, "that you two are going to be more kin than kind to each other; you'll be quarrelling in another moment."

Florrie looked delighted at the prospect; Elmer yawned and brooded over his pipe. But out of the tail of his eye he took stock again of her blonde prettiness, and she, ready from the beginning to make fun of him, repeated to herself the words she had used to Virginia:

"But he is handsome . . . and distinguished looking!"

CHAPTER X

A BRIBE AND A THREAT

Virginia Page found time passing swiftly in San Juan. Within two weeks she came almost to forget how she had heard a rattle of pistol-shots, how the slow sobbing of a bell in the Mission garden had bemoaned a life gone and a fresh crime upon a man's soul; at the end of a month it seemed to her that she had dreamed that ride through the night with Roderick Norton, climbing the cliffs, ministering to a stricken man in the forsaken abode of ancient cliff-dwellers. She was like one marooned upon a tiny island in an immense sea who has experienced the crisis of shipwreck and now finds existence suddenly resolved into a quiet struggle for the maintenance of life . . . that and a placid expectation. As another might have waited through the long, quiet hours for the sign of a white sail or a black plume of smoke, so did she wait for the end of a tale whose beginning had included her.

That the long days did not drag was due not so much to that which happened about her, as to that which occurred within her. She carried responsibility upon each shoulder; her life was in the shaping and she and none other must make it what it would be; her brother's character was at that unstable stage when it was ready to run into the mould. She had brought him here, from the city to the rim of the desert--the step had been her doing, nobody's but hers. And she had come here far less for the sake of Elmer Page's cough than for the sake of his manhood. She wanted him to grow to be a man one could be proud of; there were times when his eyes evaded her and she feared the outcome.

"He is just a boy," she told herself, seeking courage. It seemed such a brief time ago that she had blown his nose for him and washed his face. She made excuses for him, but did not close her eyes to the truth. The good old saw that boys will be boys failed to make of Elmer all that she would have him.

Further to this consideration was another matter which filled the hours for her. The few dollars with which she had established herself in San Juan marched in steady procession out of her purse and fewer other dollars came to take their places. The Indian Ramorez whose stomach trouble she had mitigated came full of gratitude and Casa Blanca whiskey and paid La Señorita Doctor as handsomely as he could; he gave her his unlimited and eternal thanks and a very beautiful hair rope. Neither helped her very greatly to pay for room and board. Another Indian offered her a pair of chickens; a third paid her seventy-five cents on account and promised the rest soon. When she came to know his type better she realized that he had done exceptionally well by her.

She went often to the Engles', growing to love all three of them, each in a different way. Florrie she found vain, spoiled, selfish, but all in so frank a fashion that in return for an admittedly half-jealous admiration she gave a genuine affection. And she was glad to see how Elmer made friends with them, always appearing at his best in their home. He and Florrie were already as intimate as though they had grown up with a back-yard fence separating their two homes; they criticised each other with terrible outspokenness, they made fun of each other, they very frequently "hated and despised" each other and, utterly unknown to either Florrie Engle or Elmer Page, were the best of friends.

Of Roderick Norton San Juan saw little through these weeks. He came now and then, twice ate with Virginia and Elmer at Struve's, talked seriously with John Engle, teased Florrie, and went away upon the business which called him elsewhere. Upon one of these visits he told Virginia that Brocky Lane was "on the mend" and would be as good as new in a month; no other reference was made to her ride with him.

But through his visits to San Juan, brief and few though they were, Roderick Norton was enabled to assure himself with his own eyes that Kid Rickard was still to be found here if required, that Antone, as usual, was behind the Casa Blanca bar; that Jim Galloway was biding his time with no outward show of growing restless or impatient. Tom Cutter, Norton's San Juan deputy, was a man to keep both eyes open, and yet there were times when the sheriff was not content with another man's vision.

Nor did the other towns of the county, scattered widely across the desert, beyond the mountains and throughout the little valleys, see much more of him. If a man wished word with Rod Norton these days his best hope of finding him lay in going out to *el Rancho de las Flores*.

It was Norton's ranch, having been Billy Norton's before him, one of the choice spots of the county bordering Las Cruces Rancho where Brocky Lane was manager and foreman. Beyond the San Juan mountains it lay across the head of one of the most fertile of the neighboring valleys, the Big Water Creek giving it its greenness, its value, and the basis for its name. Here for days at a time the sheriff could in part lay aside the cares of his office, take the reins out of his hired foreman's hands, ride among his cattle and horses, and dream such dreams as came to him.

"One of these days I'll get you, Jim Galloway," he had grown into the habit of musing. "Then they can look for another sheriff and I can do what I want to do."

And his desire had grown very clearly defined to him; it was the old longing of a man who comes into a wilderness such as this, the longing to make two blades of grass grow where one grew before his coming. With his water rights a man might work modern magic; far back in the hills he had found the natural site for his storage dams; slightly lower in a nest of hills there would be some day a pygmy lake whose seductive beauty to him who dwells on desert lands calls like the soft beauty of a woman; upon a knoll where now was nothing there would come to be a comfortable, roomy, hospitable ranch-house to displace forever the shacks which housed the men now farther down the slopes; and everywhere, because there was water aplenty, would there be roses and grape-vines and orange-trees. All this when he should get Jim Galloway.

From almost any knoll upon the Rancho de las Flores he could see the crests of Mt. Temple lifted in clear-cut lines against the sky. If he rode with Gaucho, his foreman, among the yearlings, he saw Mt. Temple; if he rode the fifty miles to San Juan he saw the same peaks from the other side. And a hundred times he looked up at them with eyes which were at once impatient and stern; he began to grow angry with Galloway for so long postponing the final issue.

For, though he did not go near the cliff caves, he knew that the rifles still lay there awaiting Jim Galloway's readiness. A man named Bucky Walsh was prospecting for gold upon the slopes of Mt. Temple, a silent, leather-faced little fellow, quick-eyed and resourceful. And, above the discovery of color, it was the supreme business of Bucky Walsh to know what happened upon the cliffs above him. If there were anything to report no man knew better than he how to get out of a horse all there was of speed in him.

In the end Norton called upon the reserves of his patience, saying to himself that if Jim Galloway could bide his time in calmness he could do the same. The easier since he was unshaken in his confidence that the time was coming when he and Galloway would stand face to face while guns talked. Never once did he let himself hope for another ending.

Giving what time he had free to ranch matters at Las Flores the sheriff found other things to occupy him. There was a gamblers' fight one night at the camp at Las Palmas mines, a man badly hurt, an ill-starred bystander dead, the careless gunman a fugitive, headed for the border. Norton went out after him, shifted saddle from jaded beast to fresh again and again, rode two hundred miles with only the short stops for hastily taken food and water and got his man willy-nilly a mile below the border. What was more, he made it his personal business that the man was convicted and sentenced to a long term; about San Juan there was no crime less tolerable than that of "shooting wild."

But all this brought him no closer to Jim Galloway; Galloway, meeting him shortly afterward in San Juan, laughed and thanked him for the job. It appeared that the man whom Norton had brought back to stand trial was not only no friend of the proprietor of the Casa Blanca, but an out-spoken enemy.

"You'll be asking favors of me next, Norton," grinned the big, thick-bodied man. "I'd pay you real money for getting a few like him out of my way. Get me, don't you?" and he passed on, his eyes turned tauntingly.

Yes, Norton "got" him. No man in the southwest harbored more bitter ill-will for the lawless than Jim Galloway . . . unless the lawless stood in with him. Aforetime many a hardy, tempestuous spirit had defied the crime-dictator; here of late they were few who hoped to slit throats or cut purses and not pay allegiance to the saloon-keeper of San Juan.

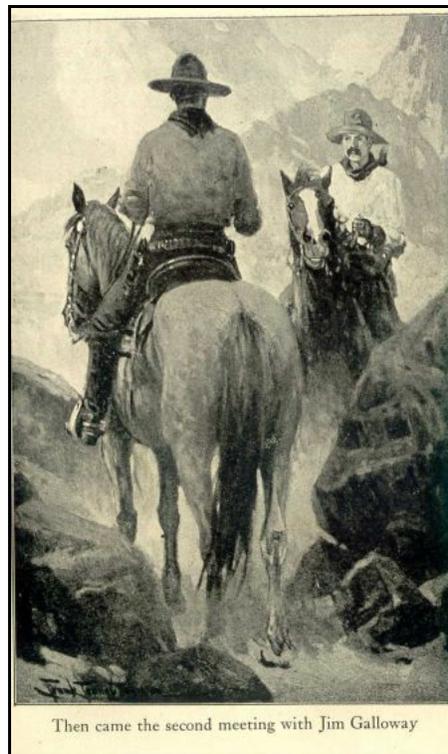
Upon the heels of this affair, however, came another which was destined to bring Roderick Norton to a crisis in his life. Word reached him at Las Flores that a lone prospector in the Red Hills had been robbed of a baking-powder

tin of dust and that the prospector, recovering from the blows which had been rained on his head, had identified one of his two assailants. That one was Vidal Nuñez; circumstances hinted that the other well might be Kid Rickard.

Norton promptly instructed Tom Cutter to find out what he could of Rickard's movements upon the day of the robbery, and himself set out to bring in Vidal Nuñez, taking a grim joy in his task when he remembered how Nuñez had been the man who, with a glance, had cautioned Antone to hold his tongue after the shooting of Bisbee at the Casa Blanca.

"Here's a man Jim Galloway won't thank me for rounding up," he told himself. "And we are going to see if his arm is long enough to keep Nuñez out of the penitentiary."

He went to San Juan, learned that nothing had been seen of the Mexican there, set the machinery of the man hunt in full swing, doubled back through the settlements to the eastward, and for two weeks got nothing but disappointment for his efforts. Nuñez had disappeared and none who cared to tell knew where. But Norton kept on doggedly; confident that the man had not had the opportunity to get out of the country, he was equally confident that, soon or late, he would get him. Then came the second meeting with Jim Galloway.



Then came the second meeting with Jim Galloway

[Illustration: Then came the second meeting with Jim Galloway.]

The two men rode into each other's view on the lonely trail half-way between San Juan and Tecolote, which is to say where the little, barren hills break the monotony of the desert lands some eight or ten miles to the eastward of San Juan. It was late afternoon, and Galloway, riding back toward town, had the sun in his eyes so that he could not have known as soon as did Norton whom he was encountering. But Galloway was not the man to ride anywhere that he was not ready for whatever man he might meet; Norton's eyes, as the two drew nearer on the blistering trail, marked the way Galloway's right hand rested loosely on the cantle of his saddle and very near Galloway's right hip.

Norton, merely eying him sharply, was for passing on without a word or a nod. The other, however, jerked in his horse, clearly of a mind for parley.

"Well?" demanded Norton.

"I was just thinking," said Galloway dryly, "what an exceptionally fitting spot we've picked! If I got you or you got me right now nobody in the world need ever know who did the trick. We couldn't have found a much likelier place if we'd sailed away to an island in the South Seas."

"I was thinking something of the same kind," returned Norton coolly. "Have you any curiosity in the matter? If you think you can get your gun first . . . why, then, go to it!"

Galloway eased himself in the saddle.

"If I thought I could beat you to it," he answered tonelessly, "I'd do it. As you know. If I even thought that I'd have an even break with you," he added, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully as they took stock of the sheriff's right hand swinging free at his side and never far from the butt of the revolver fitting loosely in his holster, "I'd take the chance. No, you're a shade too lively in the draw for me and I happen to know it."

For a little they sat staring into each other's eyes, the distance of ten steps between them, their right hands idle while their left hands upon twitching reins curbed the impatience of two mettled horses. As was usual their regard was one of equal malevolence, of brimming, cold hatred. But slowly a new look came into Norton's eyes, a probing, penetrating look of calculation. Galloway was again opening his lips when the sheriff spoke, saying with contemptuous lightness:

"Jim Galloway, you and I have bucked each other for a long time. I guess it's in the cards that one of us will get the other some day. Why not right now and end the whole damned thing?--When I'm up against a man as I am against you I like to make it my business to know just how much sand has filtered into his make-up. You'd kill me if you had the chance and weren't afraid to do it, wouldn't you?"

"If I had the chance," returned Galloway as coolly, though a spot of color showed under the thick tan of his cheek. "And I'll get it some day."

"If you've got the sand," said Norton, "you don't have to wait!"

"What do you mean?" snapped Galloway sharply.

Norton's answer lay in a gesture. Always keeping such a rein on his horse that he faced Galloway and kept him at his right, he lifted the hand which had been hanging close to his gun. Slowly, inch by inch, his eyes hard and watchful upon Galloway's eyes, he raised his hand. Understanding leaped into Galloway's prominent eyes; it seemed that he had stopped breathing; surely the hairy fingers upon the cantle of his saddle had separated a little, his hand growing to resemble a tarantula preparing for its brief spring.

Steadily, slowly, the sheriff's hand rose in the air, brought upward and outward in an arc as his arm was held stiff, as high as his shoulder now, now at last lifted high above his head. And all of the time his eyes rested bright and hard and watchful upon Jim Galloway's, filled at once with challenge and recklessness . . . and certainty of himself.

Galloway's right hand had stirred the slight fraction of an inch, his fingers were rigid and still stood apart. As he sat, twisted about in his saddle, his hand had about seven inches to travel to find the gun in his hip pocket. Since, when they first met, he had thrown his big body to one side, his left boot loose in its stirrup while his weight rested upon his right leg, his gun pocket was clear of the saddle, to be reached in a flash.

"You'll never get another chance like this, Galloway," said Norton crisply. "I'd say, at a guess, that my hand has about eight times as far to travel as yours. You wanted an even break; you've got more than that. But you'll never get more than one shot. Now, it's up to you."

"Before we start anything," began Galloway. But Norton cut him short.

"I am not fool enough to hold my hand up like this until the blood runs out of my fingers. You've got your chance; take it or leave it, but don't ask for half an hour's option on it."

Swift changing lights were in Galloway's eyes. But his thoughts were not to be read. That he was tempted by

his opportunity was clear; that he understood the full sense underlying the words, "You'll never get more than one shot," was equally obvious. That shot, if it were not to be his last act in this world, must be the accurate result of one lightning gesture; his hand must find his gun, close about the grip, draw, and fire with the one absolutely certain movement. For the look in Rod Norton's eyes was for any man to read.

Jim Galloway was not a coward and Rod Norton knew it. He was essentially a gambler whose business in life was to take chances. But he was of that type of gambler who plays not for the love of the game but to win; who sets a cool brain to study each hand before he lays his bet; who gauges the strength of that hand not alone upon its intrinsic value but upon a shrewd guess at the value of the cards out against it.

At that moment he wanted, more than he wanted anything else in the wide scope of his unleashed desires, to kill Rod Norton; he balanced that fact with the other fact that less than anything in the world did he want to be killed himself. The issue was clear cut.

While a watch might have ticked ten times neither man moved. During that brief time Galloway's jaw muscles corded, his face went a little white with the strain put upon him. The restive horses, tossing their heads, making merry music with jingling bridle chains, might have galloped a moment ago from an old book of fairy-tales, each carrying a man bewitched, turned to stone.

"If you've got the sand!" Norton taunted him, his blood running hot with the fierce wish to have done with sidestepping and procrastination. "If you've got the sand, Jim Galloway!"

"It's better than an even break that I could get you," said Galloway at last. "And, at that, it's an even break or nearly so, that as you slipped out of the saddle you'd get me, too. . . . You take the pot this time, Norton; I'm not betting." Shifting his hand he laid it loosely upon the horn of his saddle. As he did so his chest inflated deeply to a long breath.

Norton's uplifted hand came down swiftly, his thumb catching in his belt. There was a contemptuous glitter in his eyes.

"After this," he said bluntly, "you'll always know and I'll always know that you are afraid. I make it a part of my business not to under-estimate the man I go out to get; I think I have overestimated you."

For a moment Galloway seemed not to have heard as he stared away through the gray distances. When he brought his eyes back to Norton's they were speculative.

"Men like you and me ought to understand each other and not make any mistakes," he said, speaking slowly. "I have just begun to imagine lately that I have been doping you up wrong all the time. Now I've got two propositions to make you; you can take either or neither."

"It will probably be neither; what are they? I've got a day's ride ahead of me."

"Maybe you have; maybe you haven't. That depends on what you say to my proposition. You're looking for Vidal Nuñez, they tell me?"

"And I'm going to get him; as much as anything for the sake of swatting the devil around the stump."

"Meaning me?" Galloway shrugged. "Well, here's my song and dance: This county isn't quite big enough; you drop your little job and clear out and leave me alone and I'll pay you ten thousand dollars now and another ten thousand six months from now."

"Offer number one," said Norton, manifesting neither surprise nor interest even. "Twenty thousand dollars to pull my freight. Well, Jim Galloway, you must have something on the line that pulls like a big fish. Now, let's have the other barrel."

"I have suggested that you clean out; the other suggestion is that, if you won't get out of my way, you get busy on your job. Vidal Nuñez will be at the Casa Blanca to-night. I have sent word for him to come in and that I'd look out for him. Come, get him. Which will you take, Rod Norton? Twenty thousand iron men or your chances at the

Casa Blanca?"

It was Norton's turn to grow thoughtful. Galloway was rolling a cigarette. The sheriff reached for his own tobacco and papers. Only when he had set a match to the brown cylinder and drawn the first of the smoke did he answer.

"You've said it all now, have you?" he demanded.

"Yes," said Galloway. "It's up to you this time. What's the word?"

Norton laughed.

"When I decide what I am going to do I always do it," he said lightly. "And as a rule I don't do a lot of talking about it beforehand. I'll leave you to guess the answer, Galloway."

Galloway shrugged and swung his horse back into the trail.

"So long," he said colorlessly.

"So long," Norton returned.

CHAPTER XI

THE FIGHT AT LA CASA BLANCA

It was something after six o'clock when Jim Galloway rode into San Juan. Leaving his sweat-wet horse in his own stable at the rear of the Casa Blanca he passed through the patio and into a little room whose door he unlocked with a key from his pocket. For ten minutes he sat before a typewriting machine, one big forefinger slowly picking out the letters of a brief note. The address, also typed, bore the name of a town below the border. Without signing his communication he sealed it into its envelope and, relocking the door as he went out, walked thoughtfully down the street to the post-office.

As he passed Struve's hotel he lifted his hat; upon the veranda at the cooler, shaded end, Virginia was entertaining Florence Engle. Florrie nodded brightly to Galloway, turning quickly to Virginia as the big man went on.

"Do you actually believe, Virginia dear," she whispered, "that that man is as wicked as they say he is? Did you watch him going by? Did you see the way he took off his hat? Did you ever know a man to smile quite as he does?"

"I don't believe," returned Virginia, "that I ever had him smile at me, Florrie."

"His eyes are not bad eyes, are they?" Florrie ran on. "Oh, I know what papa thinks and what Rod thinks about him; but I just don't believe it! How could a man be the sort they say he is and still be as pleasant and agreeable and downright good-looking as Mr. Galloway? Why," and she achieved a quick little shudder, "if I had done all the terrible deeds they accuse him of I'd go around looking as black as a cloud all the time, savage and glum and remembering every minute how wicked I was."

Virginia laughed, failing to picture Florrie grown murderous. But Florrie merely pursed her lips as her eyes followed Galloway down the street.

"I just ask you, Virginia Page," she said at last, sinking back into the wide arms of her chair with a sigh, "if a man with murder and all kinds of sin on his soul could make love prettily?"

Virginia started.

"You don't mean . . ." she began quickly.

Florrie laughed, but the other girl noted wonderingly a fresher tint of color in her cool cheeks.

"Goosey!" Florrie tossed her head, drew her skirts down modestly over her white-stockinged ankles and laughed again. "He never held my hand and all that. But with his eyes. Is there any law against a man saying nice things with his eyes? And how is a girl going to stop him?"

Virginia might have replied that here was a matter which depended very largely upon the girl herself; but instead, estimating that there was little serious love-making on Galloway's part to be apprehended and taking Florrie as lightly as Florrie took the rest of the world, she was merely further amused. And already she had learned to welcome amusement of any sort in San Juan town.

But again here was Galloway, stopping now in front of Struve's, drawing another quick, bright smile from the banker's daughter, accepting its invitation and coming into the little yard and down the veranda. Only when he fairly towered over the two girls did he push back the hat which already he had touched to them, standing with his hands on his hips, his heavy features bespeaking a deep inward serenity and quiet good humor.

It would have required a blinder man than Jim Galloway not to have marked the cool dislike and distrust in Virginia's eyes. But, though he turned from them to the pink-and-white girl at her side, he gave no sign of sensing that he was in any way unwelcome here.

He had greeted Virginia casually; she, observing him keenly, understood what Florrie had meant by a man's making love with his eyes. His look, directed downward into the face smiling up at him, was alive with what was obviously a very genuine admiration. While Florrie allowed her flattered soul to drink deep and thirstily of the wine of adulation Virginia, only half understanding the writing in Galloway's eyes, shivered a little and, leaning forward suddenly, put her hand on Florrie's arm; the gesture, quick and spontaneous, meant nothing to Florrie, nothing to Galloway, and a very great deal to Virginia Page. For it was essentially protective; it served to emphasize in her own mind a fear which until now had been a mere formless mist, a fear for her frivolous little friend. Galloway's whole being was so expressive of conscious power, Florrie's of vacillating impulsiveness, that it required no considerable burden laid upon the imagination to picture the girl coming if he called . . . if he called with the look in his eyes now, with the tone he knew to put into his voice.

Social lines are none too clearly drawn in towns like San Juan; often enough they have long ago failed to exist. A John Engle, though six days of the seven he sat behind his desk in a bank, was only a man, his daughter only the daughter of a mere man; a Jim Galloway, though he owned the Casa Blanca and upon occasion stood behind his own bar, might be a man and look with level eyes upon all other men, their wives, and their daughters. Here, with conditions what they always had been, there could stand but one barrier between Galloway and Florrie Engle, the barrier of character. And already the girl had cried: "His eyes are not bad eyes, are they?" A barrier is a silent command to pause; what is the spontaneous answer of a spoiled child to any command?

Galloway spoke lightly of this and that, managing in a dozen little ways to compliment Florrie who chattered with a gayety which partook of excitement. In ten minutes he went his way, drawing her musing eyes after him. Until he had reached his own door and turned it at the Casa Blanca the two girls on Struve's veranda were silent. Florrie's thoughts were flitting hither and yon, bright-winged, inconsequential, fluttering about Jim Galloway, deserting him for Roderick Norton, darting off to Elmer Page, coming home to Florrie herself. As for Virginia, conscious of a sort of dread, she was oppressed with the stubbornly insistent thought that if Jim Galloway cared to amuse himself with Florrie he was strong and she was weak; if he called to her she would follow. . . .

Virginia was not the only one whom Galloway had set pondering; certain of his words spoken to the sheriff when the two faced each other on the Tecolote trail gave Norton food for thought. For the first time Jim Galloway had openly offered a bribe, one of no insignificant proportions, prefacing his offer with the remark: "I have just begun to imagine lately that I have doped you up wrong all the time." If Galloway had gone on to add: "Time was when I didn't believe I could buy you, but I have changed my mind about that," his meaning could have been no plainer. Now he held out a bribe in one hand, a threat in the other, and Norton riding on to Tecolote mused long over them both.

In Tecolote, a straggling village of many dogs and swarthy, grimy-faced children, he tarried until well after dark, making his meal of coffee, *frijoles*, and *chili con carne*, thereafter smoking a contemplative pipe. Abandoning the little lunch-room to the flies and silence he crossed the road to the saloon kept by Pete Nuñez, the brother of the man whom it was Norton's present business to make answer for a crime committed. Pete, a law-abiding citizen nowadays, principally for the reason that he had lost a leg in his younger, gayer days, swept up his crutch and swung across the room from the table where he was sitting to the bar, saying a careless "Que hay?" by way of greeting.

"Hello, Pete," Norton returned quietly. "Haven't seen Vidal lately, have you?"

Besides Vidal's brother there were a half dozen men in the room playing cards or merely idling in the yellow light of the kerosene lamp swung from the ceiling, men of the saloon-keeper's breed to the last man of them. Their eyes, the slumbrous, mystery-filled orbs of their kind, had lifted under their long lashes to regard the sheriff with seeming indifference. Pete shrugged.

"Me, I ain't seen Vidal for a mont'," he answered briefly. "I see Jim Galloway though. Galloway say," and Pete ran his towel idly back and forth along the bar, "Vidal come to la Casa Blanca to-night. I dunno," and again he shrugged.

Norton allowed himself the luxury of a mystifying smile as Pete Nuñez lifted probing eyes to his face.

"Jim Galloway has been known to lie before now, like other men," was all of the information he gave to the questioning look. "And," his face suddenly as expressionless as Pete's own, "it wouldn't be a bad bet to look for Vidal in Tres Robles, would it? Eh, Pete?"

With that he went out. Quite willing that Pete and his crowd should think what they pleased, Tres Robles lay twenty miles northeast of Tecolote, and if Pete cared to send word to Galloway that the sheriff had ridden on that way, well and good.

Half an hour later, with the deeper dark of the night settling thick and sultry over the surface of the desert lands, he rode out of town following the Tres Robles trail. He knew that Pete had come to his door and was watching; he had the vague suspicion that it was quite possible that Vidal was watching, too, with eyes smouldering with hatred. That was only a guess, not even for a man to hazard a bet upon. But the feeling that the fugitive was somewhere in Tecolote or in the mesquite thickets near abouts had been strong enough to send him travelling this way in the afternoon, would have been strong enough for him to have acted upon, searching through shack after shack, were it not that deep down in his heart he did not believe that Jim Galloway had lied. Here, while he came in at one door Vidal might slip out at another, safe among friends. But in the Casa Blanca Norton meant that matters should be different.

For an hour he rode toward the northeast. Then, turning out of the trail and reining his horse into the utter blackness offered by the narrow mouth of an arroyo, he sat still for a long time, listening, staring back through the night toward Tecolote. At last, confident that he had not been followed, he cut across the low-lying lomas marking the western horizon and in a swinging gallop rode straight toward San Juan.

He had had ample time for the shaping of his simple plans long before catching the first winking glimpse of the lights of the Casa Blanca. He left his horse under the cottonwoods, hung his spurs over the horn of the saddle, and went silently to the back of Struve's hotel. Certain that no one had seen him, he half-circled the building, came to the window which he had counted upon finding open, slipped in, and passed down the hall to Struve's room. At his light tap Struve called, "Come in," and turned toward him as the door opened. Norton closed it behind him.

"I am taking a chance that Vidal Nuñez is at Galloway's right now," he told the hotel keeper. "I am going to get him if he is. I want you to watch the back end of the Casa Blanca and see that he doesn't slip out that way. A shotgun is what you want. Blow the head off any man who doesn't stop when you tell him to. Is Tom Cutter in his room yet?"

While Struve, wasting neither time nor words, went to see, Norton unbuttoned his shirt, removed the thirty-eight-caliber revolver from the holster slung under his left arm, whirled the cylinder, and kept the gun in his left hand. In a moment Struve had returned, the deputy at his heels.

"What's this about Vidal being here?" Cutter asked sharply.

Norton explained briefly and as briefly gave Tom Cutter his orders. While Struve mounted guard at the rear, Cutter was to look out for the front of the building.

"Going in alone, are you, Rod?" Cutter shook his head. "If Vidal is in there, and Galloway and the Kid and Antone are all on the job, the chances are there's going to be something happen. Better let me come in along with you."

But Norton, his mouth grown set and grim and chary of words, shook his head. Followed by Struve and Cutter he was outside in the darkness five minutes after he had entered the hotel.

Struve, a shotgun in his hands, took his place twenty steps from the back door of the Casa Blanca, his restless eyes sweeping back and forth continually, taking stock of door and window; a lamp burning in a rear room cast its light out through a window whose shade was less than half drawn. Tom Cutter, accustomed to acting swiftly upon his superior's suggestions, listened wordlessly to the few whispered instructions, nodded, and did as he was told, effacing himself in the shadows at the corner of the building, prepared when the time came to spring out into the street whence he could command the front and one side of the Casa Blanca. Norton, before leaving Cutter, had drawn the heavy gun from the holster swinging at his belt.

"It's some time since we've had any two-handed shooting to do, Tommy," he said as his lean fingers curved to the familiar grip of the Colt 45. "But I guess we haven't forgotten how. Now, stick tight until you hear things wake up."

He was gone, turning back to the rear of the house, passing close to Struve, going on to the northeast corner, slipping quietly about it, moving like a shadow along the eastern wall. Here were two windows, both looking into the long barroom, both with their shades drawn down tight.

At the first window Norton paused, listening. From within came a man's voice, the Kid's, in his ugly snarl of a laugh, evil and reckless and defiant, that and the clink of a bottle-neck against a glass. Norton, his body pressed against the wall, stood still, waiting for other voices, for Galloway's, for Vidal Nuñez's. But after Kid Rickard's jarring mirth it was strangely still in the Casa Blanca; no noise of clicking chips bespeaking a poker game, no loud-voiced babble, no sound of a man walking across the bare floor.

"They're waiting for me," was Norton's quick thought. "Galloway knew I'd come."

He passed on, came to the second window and paused again. The brief, almost breathless silence within, which had followed the Kid's laugh, had already been dissipated by the customary Casa Blanca sounds; a guitar was strumming, chips clicked, a bottle was set heavily upon the bar, a chair scraped. Norton frowned; a moment ago something happened in there to still men's tongues. What was it? It was Galloway who gave him his answer.

"So you came, did you, Vidal?" There was a jeer in the heavy voice. "Scared to come, eh? And scared worse to stay away!" Galloway's short laugh was as unpleasant as ever Rickard's had been.

"Si; I am here," the voice of Vidal Nuñez was answering, quick, eager, sibilant with its unmistakable nervous excitement. "Pete tell me what you say an' I come." He lifted his voice abruptly, breaking into a soft Southern oath. "Like a cat, to jump through the little window an' roll on the floor an' by God, jus' in time. There is one man at the back with a gun an' one man in front an' another man . . ."

"Let 'em come," cried Galloway loudly, a heavy hand smiting a table top so that a glass jumped and fell breaking to the floor. "Only," and he sent his voice booming out warningly, "any man who chips in unasked and starts trouble in my house can take what's coming to him."

So then Vidal had just arrived, it had been his sudden entrance which had invoked the silence in the barroom. Norton merely shrugged; there had been a chance of taking Vidal alone, intercepting him. But that chance had not been one to wait for; now it was past, negligible, not to be regretted. At last he knew where Vidal Nuñez was and it was his business to make an arrest and not to wait upon further chance. The man who is not ready to go into a crowd to get his law-breaker is not the man to stand for sheriff in the southwest country.

"Coming, Galloway!" Norton's ringing shout came back in answer. Suddenly the steady pulse of his blood had been stirred, the hot hope stood high in his heart again that he and Jim Galloway were going to look into each other's eyes with guns talking and an end of a long devious trail in sight. For the moment he half forgot Vidal Nuñez whom he could fancy cowering in a corner.

Then when he knew that every man in the Casa Blanca had turned sharply at his voice he ran from the window to the street, turned the corner of the building and in at the wide front doorway. A short hall, a closed door confronting him . . . then that had been flung open and on its threshold, a gun in each hand, his hat far back on his head, his eyes on fire, he stood looking in on a half dozen men and three glinting steel barrels which, describing quick arcs, were whipped from the window toward him. A gun in Galloway's hand, one in the hand of Vidal Nuñez, the third already spitting fire as Kid Rickard's narrowed eyes shone above it. The other men had fallen back precipitately to right and left; Norton noted that Elmer Page was among them, a pace or two from Rickard's side.

The Kid, being young, had something of youth's impatience, perhaps the only reminiscence of youth left in a calloused soul. So it was that he had shot a second too soon. Norton, as both hands rose in front of him, answered Kid Rickard with the smaller-caliber gun while the Colt in his right hand was concerned impartially with Galloway and Vidal Nuñez, standing close together. The Kid cursed, his voice rose in a shriek of anger rather than pain, and he spun about and fell backward, tripping over an overturned chair.

"Shoot, Galloway!" cried Norton. "Shoot, damn you, shoot!"

Now, as for the second time that day the two men confronted each other, naked, hot hatred glaring out of their eyes, each man knew that he stood balancing a crucial second, midway between death and triumph. Jim Galloway, who never until now had come out into the open in defiance of the law, must swallow his words under the eyes of his own gang, or once and for all forsake the semi-security behind his ambush. Again issues were clear cut.

He answered the sheriff with a curse and a stream of lead. As he fired he threw himself to the side, the old trick, his gun little higher than his hip, and fired again. And shot for shot Norton answered him.

Though but half the length of a room lay between them, as yet, neither man was hurt. For no longer were they in the rich light of the swinging coal-oil lamp; the room was gathered in pitch darkness; their guns spat long tongues of vivid flame. For, just as Kid Ricard was falling, while Jim Galloway's finger was crooked to the trigger, while Antone was whipping up his gun behind the bar, there had come a shot from the card-room door shattering the lamp. Neither Norton nor Galloway, Rickard nor Vidal Nuñez, nor Antone nor any of the other men in the room saw who had fired the shot.

As the light went out Norton leaped away from the door, having little wish to stand silhouetted against the rectangle of pale light from the outer night; and, leaping, he poured in his fourth and fifth and sixth shots in the quarter where he hoped to find Galloway. But always he remembered where he had seen Elmer Page standing, and always he remembered Antone behind the bar, and Vidal Nuñez drawn back into a corner. His forty-five emptied, he jammed it back into its holster and stood rigid, staring into the blackness about him, every sense on the *qui vive*. Galloway had given over shooting; he might be dead or merely waiting. Vidal had held his fire, seeming frightened, uncertain, half stunned. Antone would be leaning forward, peering with frowning eyes, trying to locate him.

It swept into Norton's mind suddenly that thus, in utter and unexpected darkness, he had the upper hand. He could shoot, the law riding upon each flying pellet of lead, and be it Jim Galloway or Antone or Vidal, or any other of Galloway's crowd who fell, it would be a man who richly deserved what his fate was bringing him. They, on the other hand, being many against one, must be careful which way they shot.

He had come for Vidal Nuñez. The man he wanted was yonder, but a few feet from him. Duty and desire pointed across the room to the obscure corner. He moved a cautious foot. The floor complained under his shifting weight and from Galloway's quarter came a spit of fire. Twin with it came a shot from behind the bar. That was Antone talking. And now at last came the other shot from Vidal himself.

Rod Norton's was that type of man which finds caution less to his liking than headlong action; furthermore, in the present crisis, caution had seemed the acme of foolhardiness. There are times when true wisdom lies in taking one's chance boldly, flying half-way to meet it. Now, as three bullets sang by him, he gathered himself; then, before the sharp reports had died in his ears, he sprang forward, hurling himself across the room, striking with his lifted gun as he went, missing, striking again and experiencing that grinding, crunching sensation transmitted along the metal barrel as it struck a man fair upon the head. The man went down heavily and Norton stood over him, praying that it was Vidal Nuñez.

Then it was that Julius Struve, having deserted his post at the rear, smashed through a window with the muzzle of his shotgun, sending the shade flipping up, springing back from the square of faint light as he cried out sharply:

"All right, Nort?"

"All right!" cried Norton. "I'm against the north wall; rake the other side and the bar with your shotgun if they don't step out. You and Cutter together. I've got Rickard and Nuñez out of it. Drop your gun, Galloway; lively, while you've got the chance. Antone, Struve's got a shotgun!"

Antone cursed, and with the snarl of his voice came the clatter of a revolver slammed down on the bar. Galloway cursed and fired, emptying his second gun, crazed with hatred and blind anger. Again, shot for shot Norton answered him. And again it grew very silent in the Casa Blanca.

"Out through the window, one by one, with your hands up and your guns down," shouted Struve; "or I start in.

Which is it, boys?"

There was a scramble to obey, the several men who had taken no part leading the way. As they went out their forms were for a moment clearly outlined, then swallowed up in the outer darkness. At Struve's command they lined up against the wall, watched over by the muzzle of his shotgun. Antone, crying out that he was coming, followed. Elmer Page, sick and dizzy, was at Antone's heels.

Tom Cutter had gathered up some dry grass, and with that and a chance-found bit of wood started a blaze near the second window; in its wavering, uncertain light the faces of the men stood out whitely.

"Galloway is not here yet," he snapped. And, lifting his voice: "Come on, Galloway."

A crowd had gathered in the street, asking questions that went unanswered. Other hands added fuel to Cutter's fire. The increasing light at last penetrated the blackness filling the barroom.

"Come out, Galloway," said Struve coldly. "I've got you covered."

Since things were bad enough as they were, and he had no desire to make them worse and saw no opportunity to better them, Jim Galloway, his hand nursing a bleeding shoulder, stumbled awkwardly through the opening.

"Is that all of 'em, Roddy?" called Cutter. Norton didn't answer. The deputy called again. Then, while the crowd surged about door and window. Cutter came in, a revolver in his right hand, a torch of a burning fagot in his left, held high.

Vidal Nuñez was dead; not from a blow upon the head, but from a chance bullet through the heart after he had fallen. Kid Rickard, his sullen eyes wide with their pain, lay half under a poker table. Lying across the body of Nuñez, as though still guarding his prisoner, was the quiet form of Rod Norton, his face bloodlessly white save for the smear of blood which had run from the wound hidden by the close-cropped, black hair.

CHAPTER XII

WAVERING IN THE BALANCE

Ignacio Chavez, waiting to ask no questions, had raced away through the darkness to beat out a wild alarm upon his bells. Later he would learn how many were dead and would set the Captain mourning. But already had San Juan poured out her handful of citizens upon the street.

"Keep those men where they are," called Tom Cutter to Struve. "Every damned one of them; there'll be an answer wanted for to-night's work. Get a doctor, somebody; Patten or Miss Page."

Candles were brought; presently a lamp was found and set on the bar. The curious began to desert Struve and his prisoners outside, and to crowd about Cutter and the two forms lying still in the corner. Kid Rickard, cursing now and then, had dragged himself a little away and grew quiet, half propped up against the wall. Struve, as the fire of fagots and grass began to burn low, commanded Galloway to lead the way back into the barroom and herded five other men after him, the shotgun promising a mutilated body to any man of them who sought to run for it.

"Nuñez is dead," reported the deputy sheriff, getting up from his knees. "Norton is alive and that's about all. A shot along the side of the head."

He turned slowly toward Galloway who, with steady hands and his face set in hard, inscrutable lines, was pouring himself a generous glass of whiskey.

"Looks like you'd got him, Jim," he said harshly, his eyes glittering. "And it looks like I'd got you. Where I want you, by God!"

Galloway drank his whiskey and made no reply. He was thinking, thinking fast. His eyes were never still now, but roved from Rod Norton's white face to the faces of Tom Cutter, Struve, and the other men gathering in the room.

Borne upon one of the Casa Blanca's doors Norton was carried to Struve's hotel, the nearest place where an attempt could be made to care for him. Word came in that Virginia Page had been summoned upon one of her rare calls and was in Las Estrellas. Patten, however, would be on hand in a moment. It was suggested that Kid Rickard also be carried to the hotel. But he himself asked to be left where he was until Patten came, and Cutter raised no objection. It was clear that the Kid was too badly hurt to think of making an escape, were such his desire.

Galloway and Antone alone were put under arrest, the others merely advised to be on hand if they were wanted later. Galloway coolly demanded the charge against him.

"Resisting an officer is as good as any right now," snapped Cutter.

As quiet claimed the town again Caleb Patten became the most important figure in San Juan. At such moments he seemed to swell visibly. He drove the curious from the room while he examined the unconscious sheriff and, when he had finished, merely shook his head, looked grave, and refused to commit himself. He ordered Norton undressed and put to bed, went down the street to see Kid Rickard, probed the wound in the upper chest, ordered him to bed, and returned to Norton at the hotel.

"Well?" asked John Engle who had arrived, talked with Struve, and now looked anxiously to Patten. Patten shrugged.

"Heavy-caliber bullet ripped along the side of his head," he said thoughtfully. "I am going to make a second examination now. Doubtless just the shock stunned him. That or striking his head as he pitched forward; there's another slight wound, a scalp wound, showing where his head hit as he fell."

A moment later Tom Cutter came in hastily, stood for a little staring with frowning, troubled eyes at the quiet form on the bed, and went away, tugging at his lip, his frown deepening. He had his hands full to-night, had Tom Cutter, and no one but himself knew how he wanted Rod Norton to tell him just what to do, to show him the way to

make no mistake. Leaving the room he had gone no farther than the front door when he swung about and returned.

"May I have a word with you, Mr. Engle?" he asked.

Engle nodded and followed him silently. Out in the street, in the full light of Struve's porch-lamp, Cutter stopped, glancing about him to make sure that he was not overheard.

"You know all about the shooting of Brocky Lane up in the mountains," he said hurriedly. "Rod told me you did. Well, I just gathered in Moraga!"

"Moraga?" muttered Engle. "He has seen Galloway, then? And told him all about our knowing the rifles were cached in the old caves?"

"I found him at the Casa Blanca," said Cutter, the worried look in his eyes. "Somebody shot out the light when the mix-up started, you know. I've a notion it was Moraga. He was in one of the little card-rooms . . . putting on his shoes! I got his gun; he'd fired just one shot. The muzzle of it was bloody."

"If he has told Galloway. . . ."

"But I don't believe he has. Struve says that just as Norton started things he saw a man run in from the cottonwoods and duck into the house. It was Struve's job to see that nobody got out and he let him go by. If it wasn't Moraga, who was it? And, when I grabbed him just now, the first thing he said was: 'I want to talk with Galloway.'"

"You didn't let him?" demanded Engle quickly.

"No. A couple of the boys have walked him off down the road. I've got Galloway and Antone in the jail. Now, what I want is some advice. What am I going to do with this job until Rod Norton comes to and takes a hand . . . if he ever does," he muttered heavily.

"It's clear that you've got to keep Moraga away from Galloway; if they haven't already had a chance to talk it's a pure Godsend and it's up to you that they don't get that chance."

"Yes," admitted Cutter slowly. "But I'm the first man to admit that I'm all muddled up. What did Moraga have his shoes off for? If he shot out the light, why did he do it? And how'd he get blood on his gun?"

Engle shook his head.

"All questions for the district attorney later, Tom," he answered. "But, if you want any advice from me, here it is: Get Moraga out of the way on the jump. He is supposed to be in jail in the next county; he must have broken out. Send a man to Las Palmas to telephone to Sheriff Roberts; send Moraga along with him. And, whatever you do, keep Jim Galloway where you've got him. I think we've got our case against him to-night."

"That's what I've been thinking. I guess that's what Norton would do, eh?"

"Sure of it," said Engle promptly. "Find out, if you can, whether Moraga got a chance to talk with Galloway. I'm going back to the house to let my wife and Florrie know what has happened."

Engle hurried to his home, told what had happened, and, leaving his wife anxious, his daughter weeping hysterically, returned to the hotel.

"I've done all that any one could do for him," said Patten, as though defending himself because of Norton's continued unconsciousness. "He's in pretty bad shape, Engle. Oh, I guess I can pull him through, but at that it's going to be a close squeak. Lucky I was right on hand, though." And he grew technical, spoke of blood pressures taken, of traumatism superinducing prolonged coma, of this and that which made no impression on the banker.

"You mentioned two wounds," Engle reminded him. "The one made by the bullet and another. . . ."

"By his head striking as he fell? Yes; that would have completed the work of the first shock in knocking him

unconscious. But it is a negligible affair now; he wouldn't know anything about it in the morning if it weren't for the lump that'll be there. And since the other injury, the long gouging cut made by the bullet, has just plowed along the outer surface of the skull, I think that I can promise you he'll be all right pretty soon now. We ought to have some ice, but I've made cold compresses do."

Engle went again to look in upon Norton. The sheriff lay as before, on his back, his limbs lax, his face deathly white, a bandage about his head. A lump came into the banker's throat and he turned away. For he remembered that just so had Billy Norton lain, that Billy Norton had never regained consciousness . . . and that the blow then as now had been struck by Galloway or Galloway's man. The sudden fear was upon him that Rod Norton was even more badly hurt than Caleb Patten admitted. The fear did not lessen as the night drew on and finally brightened into another day. When the sun flared up out of the flatlands lying beyond Tecolote the wounded man at Struve's hotel lay as he had done all night giving no sign to tell whether he was life's or death's.

CHAPTER XIII

CONCEALMENT

The eyes of San Juan were upon Caleb Patten throughout the night and during the long hours of the following day. Under them his inflated ego grew further distended while, waxing more technical than ever, he explained how a man in Rod Norton's condition could live and yet lie like a man dead. So prolific and involved were his medical phrases that men like John Engle and Struve began to ask themselves if Patten understood his case. When, after twelve hours, the wounded man awoke to a troubled consciousness Patten's relief was scarcely less visible than that of Norton's friends. Patten felt his prestige taking unto itself new wings and immediately grew more wisely verbose than ever. It was a rare privilege to have the most talked of and generally liked man of the community under his hands; it was wine to Patten's soul to have that man show signs of recovering under his skill.

So he drove well-wishers from the room, drew the shades, commanded quiet and came and went eternally, doing nothing whatever and appearing to be fighting, sleeves rolled up, for a threatened life. Long before noon there were those who had laughed at Patten before, but who now accused themselves of having failed to do him justice.

Virginia Page had remained all night with her patient in Las Estrellas. The first rumor she had of the fight in the Casa Blanca was borne to her ears by Ignacio's bell as she rode back toward San Juan. Only a few hours ago she had talked with Galloway, watching him banter with Florrie Engle; but a little before that, earlier in the same day, she had seen Rod Norton. Before she galloped up to the old Mission garden her heart was beating excitedly, and she was asking herself, a little fearfully: "Is it Galloway or is it Rod Norton?" For she was so sure that in the end Ignacio would ring the Captain for one of them.

Ignacio told her the story. Norton was lying in the hotel, unconscious, Patten working over him; Jim Galloway and Antone were in the little jail and soon would be taken to the county-seat; Kid Rickard was shot through the lung but would live, Patten said; Vidal Nuñez, over whom the whole thing had started, was dead.

"If *mi amigo* Roderico die," mumbled Ignacio, "it will be two Nortones, two sheriffs, that die because of Galloway. If Roderico live, then the next time he will kill Galloway. You will see, *señorita*."

She made no answer as she rode slowly down the street. She was thinking how, only a few weeks ago, she had heard the bells ring for the first time, how then Galloway and Norton had been but meaningless names to her, how she had been little moved by either the sound of pistol-shots or the Captain's heavy tolling. Now things were different. Just in what were they "different" and to what degree? She could not answer her own question before she was at the hotel.

Struve came immediately, noted her pale face, attributed it to a sleepless night, and made her take a cup of coffee. He rounded out the information she already had from Ignacio. Norton was still unconscious though, only a few minutes ago, Patten had reported signs of improvement. Mrs. Engle had been with him, was still there acting nurse; he was being given every attention possible.

Patten himself entered, drawn by the aroma of coffee. He nodded carelessly to the girl and remarked to Struve, with a flash of triumph in his eyes, that at last he had "brought him around." Norton was very weak, sick, dizzy, perhaps not yet out of danger. But Patten had won in the initial skirmish with old man Death.

At least, so Struve was given to feel. Virginia, with a quick look at Patten's complacent face, was moved with sudden, almost insistent longing, that Rod Norton's life might be given into her own hands rather than remain in the pudgy hands of a man she at once disliked as an individual and failed to admire as a physician. For she had needed no long residence in San Juan to form her own estimate of the man's ability . . . or lack of ability. But plainly this was Patten's case, not hers; she got up from the table and went into her own room.

Elmer she found lying fully dressed upon a couch in her office, sleeping heavily. She stood over him a moment, her eyes tender; he was still, would always be, her baby brother. Then she went to her own room and threw herself down upon her bed, worn out, anxious, vaguely fearful for the future.

It was a long day for San Juan. Mrs. Engle came now and then to Virginia's room to wipe her eyes and force a hopeful smile; Florrie ran in like a young tempest to weep copiously and hyperbolically invest poor dear Roddy with all imaginable heroic attributes; Engle and Struve and Tom Cutter were grave-eyed and distressed. Every hour Ignacio came to the hotel to ask quietly for news.

In his own way, it appeared that Elmer Page was as deeply concerned as any one. It was long before he told Virginia that he had been in the Casa Blanca when the shooting occurred; haltingly he gave her his version of it.

"Don't you think, Elmer," suggested the girl somewhat wearily, "that you have gotten hold of the wrong end of things here? I mean in choosing your friends? Certainly after this you will have nothing to do with men like Galloway and Rickard?"

Ten minutes' talk with Elmer gave her a deeper understanding of his attitude than she had been able to guess until now. Spontaneously he had leaned toward Kid Rickard because the Kid was a "killer" and Elmer was a boy; in other words, because young Page's imagination made of Rickard a truly picturesque figure. Since Rickard admired Jim Galloway as he had never known how to admire aught else that breathed and walked, Elmer's eyes had from the first rested approvingly upon the massive figure of Casa Blanca's owner. That both Galloway and Rickard were fighting against persecution, were merely individuals wronged by the law and too fearlessly independent to submit to the high hand of sheriff or judge, was easily implanted in the boy's mind. Yesterday his fancies were ready to make heroes of Galloway and his crowd, to make of Norton a meddler hiding behind the bulwark of his office, and hounding those who were too manly to step aside for him. But now Elmer was all at sea, no land in sight.

"A gun in each hand, Sis," he cried warmly, his cheeks flushed, as the almost constantly recurring picture formed again in his memory. "And if you could have only seen his eyes! Talk about hiding behind anything . . . no sir! And him only one against Galloway and the Kid and Nuñez and a whole room full."

Here was Elmer's trouble drawn to the surface; he was touched with leaping admiration for the man who lay now in the darkened room, he couldn't admire both Norton, the sheriff, and Galloway and Rickard, the sheriff's sworn enemies! Which way should Elmer Page turn? Virginia very wisely held her tongue.

Tom Cutter, having conferred with Engle and Struve, left San Juan in the early afternoon, convoying his prisoners to the greater security of the county jail. It seemed the wisest step, the one which Norton would have taken. Besides, Galloway insisted upon it and upon being allowed to send a message to his lawyer.

"I am willing to stand trial," said Galloway indifferently. "I'll arrange for bail to-morrow and be back to-morrow night."

The question which Tom Cutter, Struve, and Engle all asked of themselves and of each other, "Did Moraga get his chance to talk with Galloway?" went unanswered. There was nothing to do but wait upon the future to know that, unless Moraga, now on his way back to Sheriff Roberts, could be made to talk. And Moraga was not given to garrulity.

Meantime Patten brought hourly reports of Norton. He was still in danger, to be sure; but he was doing as well as could be expected. No one must go into the room except Mrs. Engle as nurse. Norton was fully conscious, but forbidden to talk; he recognized those about him, his eyes were clear, his temperature satisfactory, his strength no longer waning. He had partaken of a bit of nourishment and to-morrow, if there were no unlooked-for complications, would be able to speak with John Engle for whom he had asked.

During the days which followed, days in which Rod Norton lay quiet in a darkened room, Virginia Page was conscious of having awakened some form of interest in Caleb Patten. His eyes followed her when she came and went, and, when she surprised them, were withdrawn swiftly, but not before she had seen in them a speculative thoughtfulness. While she noted this she gave it little thought, so occupied was her mind with other matters. She had postponed, as long as she could, a talk with Julius Struve, her spirit galled that she must in the end go to him "like a beggar," as she expressed it to herself. But one day, her head erect, she followed the hotel keeper into his office. In the hallway she encountered Patten.

"May I have a word with you?" Patten asked.

But Virginia had steeled herself to the interview with Struve and would no longer set it aside, even for a moment.

"If you care to wait on the veranda," she told Patten, "I'll be out in a minute. I want to see Mr. Struve now."

Patten stood aside and watched her pass, the shrewdly questioning look in his eyes. When she disappeared in the office he remained where she had left him, listening. When she began to speak with Struve, her voice rapid and hinting at nervousness, he came a quiet step nearer the door she had closed after her.

"I am ashamed of myself, Mr. Struve," said Virginia, coming straight to the point. "I owe you already for a month's board and room rent for myself and Elmer. I . . ."

"That's perfectly all right, Miss Virginia," said Struve hurriedly. "I know the sort of job you've got on your hands making collections. If you can wait I am willing to do so. Glad to do so, in fact."

Patten, fingering his little mustache, then letting his thick fingers drop to the diamond in his tie, smiled with satisfaction. Smiling, he tiptoed down the hall and went out upon the veranda where he smoked his cigar serenely. When Virginia came out to him her face was flaming. Had he not heard Struve's words, he would have thought that his answer to her apology had been an angry demand for immediate payment. Patten failed to understand how the girl's fine, independent nature writhed in a situation all but intolerable. That she appreciated gratefully Struve's quick kindness did not minimize her own mortification.

Patten watched her seat herself; then he launched himself into his subject. Virginia listened at first with faint interest, then with quickened wonder. For the life of her she could not tell if the little man were seeking to flatter or insult her.

"I have leased an old, deserted ranch-house just on the edge of town," he told her. "Got it for a song, too. Some first-rate land goes with it; I'll probably buy the whole thing before long. There's plenty of good water. Now, what am I up to, eh? Just the same thing all the time, if you want to know. And that means making money." Leaning forward he knocked the ash from his cigar and brought himself confidentially nearer.

"An open-air sanatorium," he announced triumphantly. "For tuberculosis patients. There are lots of them," and he waved his arm in a wide half circle, "coming out of the East on the run, scared to death, and with more or less money in their pockets. It's a big proposition, a sure money-getter."

He grew more animated than she had ever dreamed he could be, as he sketched his plans. While she was wondering why he had come to her with them he gave his explanation, made her his double offer. Then it was that she was puzzled to know whether he meant to compliment her or merely to insult her.

In a word he assured her from the heights of superiority to which he had ascended these last few days of importance, the practice of medicine was no woman's work at best; certainly not in a land like this, where a man's endurance, breadth or mind, and keener innate ability to cope with big situations were indicated. No work for a slip of a girl like Virginia Page. Of that Caleb Patten assured her unhesitatingly. But there was work for such as her and in a place which he would create for her. Fairly bewildered at his audacity she found herself listening to his suggestion that she marry Caleb Patten and become a sort of head nurse in an institution which he would found!

In spite of her she was moved to sudden, impulsive laughter. She had not meant to laugh at the man who might be sincere, who, it was possible, was merely a fool. But laugh she did, so that her mirth reached Rod Norton where he lay upon his bed and made him stir restlessly.

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Patten, a flush in his cheeks.

"I mean," stammered Virginia at last, "that I thank you very much, Dr. Patten, but that I can avail myself of neither the opportunity of being your wife or your head nurse. As for my inability to do for myself what I have set out to accomplish . . . well, I am not afraid yet. There is work to be done here and I don't quite agree with you that it's all man's work. There's always a little left over for a woman, you know," she added brightly.

But Patten was obviously angered. He flung to his feet and glared down at her. Perhaps it had not entered his

thought that she could make other than the answer he wanted; it had been very clear to him that he was offering to become responsible for one who was embarked upon a voyage already destined to failure, that he would support her, merely doing as many other men of his ilk did and make her work for all that she got.

"It's silly nonsense, your thinking you can make a living here," he said irritably. "I'm already established, I'm a man, I can have all of the cases I want, you'll get only a few breeds who haven't a dollar to the dozen of them. If you are already broke and can't even pay for your room and board . . ."

"Who told you that?" she asked quickly.

"I can hear, can't I?" he demanded coarsely. "Didn't you go just now to beg Struve to hold you over? And . . ."

She slipped out of her chair and stood a moment staring coldly and contemptuously at him. Then she was gone, leaving Patten watching her departure incredulously.

"A man who hasn't any more sense than Caleb Patten," she cried within herself, "has no business with a physician's license. It's a sheer wonder he didn't kill Roderick Norton!"

Already she had forgotten her words with Struve, or rather the matter for the present was shoved aside in her mind by another. She had come here to make good, she had her fight before her, and she was going to make good. She had to . . . for herself, for her own pride, for Elmer's sake. She went straight to Elmer and made him sit down and listen while she sketched actual conditions briefly and emphatically.

He was old enough to do something for himself in the world, continued idleness did him no earthly good and might do him no end of harm morally, mentally, and physically. He had been her baby brother long enough; it was time that he became a man. She had supported him until now, asking nothing of him in return save that he kept out of mischief a certain percentage of the time. Now he was going to work and help out. He could go to John Engle and get something to do upon one of Engle's ranches.

Somewhat to her surprise Elmer responded eagerly. He had been thinking the matter over and it appealed to him. What he did not tell her was that he had seen some of the vaqueros riding in from one of the outlying ranges, lean, brown, quick-eyed men who bestrode high-headed mounts and who wore spurs, wide hats, shaggy chaps, and who, perhaps, carried revolvers hidden away in their hip pockets, men who drank freely, spent their money as freely at dice and cards, and who, all in all, were a picturesque crowd. Elmer took up his hat and went down to the bank and had a talk with John Engle. Virginia's eyes followed him hopefully.

That day Norton was allowed for the first time to receive callers. He had his talk with Engle, limited to five minutes by Patten who hung about curiously until Norton said pointedly that he wanted to speak privately with the banker. Later Florrie came with her mother, bringing an immense armful of roses culled by her own hands, excited, earnest, entering the shaded room like a frightened child, speaking only in hushed whispers.

"Won't you come in too for a moment, Virginia?" asked Mrs. Engle. "Roddy will be glad to see you; he has asked about you."

But Virginia made an excuse; it was Patten's case and after what had occurred between herself and Patten she had no intention of so much as seeming to overstep the professional lines. The following day, however, she did go to see him. Patten himself, stiff and boorish, asked her to. His patient had asked for her several times, knowing that she was in the building and marking how she made an exception and refused to look in on him while all of his other friends were doing so, some of them coming many miles. Patten told her that Norton was not well by any means yet and that he did not intend to have him worried up over an imagined slight. So Virginia did as she was bid.

Mrs. Engle was in the room, bending over the bed with a dampened towel to lay upon Norton's forehead; he showed a sign of fever and his head ached constantly. He looked about quickly as the girl came in, his hand stirring a little, offering itself. She took it by way of greeting and sat down in the chair drawn up at his side.

"It's good of you to come!" he said quickly, his eyes brightening. "I was beginning to wonder if I had offended you in some way? You see, everybody has run in but you. A man gets spoiled when he's laid up like this, doesn't he? Especially when it's the first time he can remember when he has stuck in bed for upward of twenty-four hours

running."

Despite her familiarity with the swift ravages of illness she received a positive shock as she looked at him; she had visualized him during these latter days as she had last seen him, brown, vitally robust, the embodiment of lean, clean strength. Now sunless inaction had set its mark in his skin which had already grown sallow; his eyes burned into her own, his hand fell weakly to the coverlet as she removed her own, his fingers plucking nervously. And yet she summoned a cheerful smile to answer his.

"I was satisfied just in hearing that you were doing well," she said. "And I know that the fewer people a sick man sees the better for him."

He moved his head restlessly back and forth on his pillow.

"Not for a man like me," he told her. "I'm not used to this sort of business. Just lying here with my eyes shut or staring at the ceiling, which is worse, drives a man mad. I told Patten to-day that if he didn't let me see folks I'd get up and go out if I had to crawl."

Virginia laughed, determined to be cheerful.

"I am afraid that you make a rather troublesome patient, don't you?" she asked lightly.

Norton made no answer but lay motionless save for the constant plucking at his coverlet, his eyes moodily fixed upon the wall. Mrs. Engle, finding the water-pitcher empty and saying that she would be back in two seconds, went out to fill it. Promptly Norton's eyes returned to Virginia's face, resting there steadily.

"I've been dizzy and sick and half out of my head a whole lot," he said abruptly. "I've been thinking of you most of the time, dreaming about you, climbing cliffs with you. . . ."

He broke off suddenly, but did not remove his eyes from hers. It was she who turned away, pretending to find it necessary to adjust the window-curtain. It was impossible to sit quietly while he looked at her that way, his eyes all without warning filling with a look for any girl to read a look of glowing admiration, almost a look of pure love-making. Norton sighed and again his head moved restlessly on his pillow.

"I've had time to think here of late," he said after a little. "More time to think than I've ever had before in my life. About everything; myself and Jim Galloway and you. . . . I have decided to send word to the district attorney to let Galloway go," he added, again watching her. "I am not going to appear against him and there's no case if I don't."

"But . . ." she began, wondering.

"There are no buts about it. Suppose I can get him convicted, which I doubt; he'd get a light sentence, would appeal, at most would be out of the way a couple of years or so. And then it would all be to do over again. No; I want him out in the open, where he can go as far as he wants to go. And then . . ."

She saw how his body stiffened as he braced himself with his feet against the foot-board.

"We won't talk shop," she said gently. "It isn't good for you. Don't think about such things any more than you have to."

"I've got to think about something," he said impatiently. "Can I think about you?"

"Why not?" she answered as lightly as she had spoken before.

"Maybe that isn't good for me either," he answered.

"Nonsense. It's always good for us to think about our friends."

His eyes wandered from hers, rested a moment upon the little table near his bedhead and came back to her, narrowing a little.

"Will you set a chair against that window-shade?" he asked. "The light at the side hurts my eyes."

It was a natural request and she turned naturally to do what he asked. But, even with her back turned, she knew that he had reached out swiftly for something that lay on the table, that he had thrust it out of sight under his pillow.

Mrs. Engle returned and Virginia, staying another minute, said good-by. As she went out she glanced down at the table. In her room she asked herself what it was that he had snatched and hidden. It seemed a strange thing to do and the question perplexed her; while she attached no importance to it, it was there like a pebble in one's shoe, refusing to be ignored.

That night, just as she was going to sleep, she knew. Out of a half doze she had visualized the table with its couple of bottles, a withering rose, a scrap of note-paper, a fountain pen. The pen . . . it was Patten's . . . had evidently leaked and had been wiped carelessly upon the sheet of paper, left lying with the paper half wrapped around it. She had noted carelessly a few scrawled words in Patten's slovenly hand. And she knew that it had been removed while she turned her back, removed by a hand which, in its haste, had slipped the pen with it under the pillow.

She went to sleep incensed with herself that she gave the matter another thought. But she kept asking herself what it was that Patten had written that Roderick Norton did not want her to read.

CHAPTER XIV

A FREE MAN

"I am a free man, if you please." The sheriff stood in the hotel doorway, looking down upon her as she sat in her favorite veranda chair. "I have given my keeper his fee and sent him away. May I watch you while you read?"

Virginia closed her book upon her knee and gave him a smile by way of welcome. He looked unusually tall as he stood in the broad, low entrance; his ten days of sickness and inactivity had made him gaunt and haggard.

"I shouldn't be reading in this light, anyway," she said. "I hadn't noticed that the sun was down. It is good to be what you call free again, isn't it?"

He laughed softly, put back his head, filled his lungs. Then he came on to her and stood leaning against the wall, his hat cocked to one side to hide the bandage.

"The world is good," he announced with gay positiveness. "Especially when you've been away from it for a spell and weren't quite sure what was next. And especially, too, when you've had time to think. Did you ever take off a week and just do nothing but think?"

"One doesn't have time for that sort of thing as a rule," she admitted. "There's a chair standing empty if you care to let me in on your deductions."

"I don't want to sit down or lie down until I'm ready to drop," he grinned down at her. "A bed makes me sick at my stomach and a chair is pretty nearly as bad. I'd like almighty well to get a horse between my knees . . . and *ride!* Suppose I'd fall to pieces if I tried it right now?"

"Sure of it. And not so sure that you haven't discharged your keeper prematurely. You mustn't think of such things."

"There you go. Forbidding me to think again! . . . Believe I will sit down; would you believe that a full-grown man like me could get as weak as a cat this quick?"

He took the chair just beyond her, tilted it back against the wall, his booted heels caught under its elevated legs, and glanced away from her to the colorful sky above San Juan's scattered houses in the west.

"Yes, sir," he continued his train of thought, "I'd like a horse between my knees; I'd like to ride out yonder into the sunset, to meet the night as it comes down; I'd like the feeling of nothing but the stars over me instead of the smothery roof of a house. Doesn't it appeal to you, too?"

"Yes," she said.

"You on Persis, with me on my big roan, riding not as we rode that other night, but just for the fun of it. I'd like to ride like the devil. . . . You don't mind my saying what I mean, do you? . . . to go scooting across the sage-brush letting out a yell at every jump, boring holes in the night with my gun, making all of the racket and dust that one man can make. Ever feel that way? just like getting outside and making a noise? Let me talk! I'm the one who has been shut up for so long my tongue has started to grow fast to the roof of my mouth. At first I could do nothing but lie flat on my back in a sort of fog, seeing nothing clearly, thinking not at all. Then came the hours in which I could do nothing but think, under orders to keep still. Think? Why, I thought about everything that ever happened, most things that might happen, and a whole lot that never will. Now comes the third stage; I can talk better than I can walk. . . . Do you mind listening while a man raves?"

"Not in the least." She found his mood contagious and, smiling in that quick, bright way natural to her, showed for a moment the twin dimples of which together with a host of other things he had had ample time to think during his bedroom imprisonment. "Please rave on."

"In due course," he mused, "the fourth stage will arrive and I can be doing something besides talk, can't I? Now let me tell you about the King's Palace."

"You begin well."

"The King's Palace is where we are going on our first outing. That was decided three days ago at four minutes after 6 A.M. You and I and, if you like, Florrie and your kid brother. We'll ride out there in the very early morning, in the saddle before the stars are gone. We'll lunch and loaf there all day. For lunch we will have bacon and coffee, cooked over a fire in one of the Palace anterooms. We will have some trout, fried in the bacon-grease, trout whipped out of the likeliest mountain-stream you ever saw or heard about. We will have cheese, perhaps, and maybe a box of candy for dessert. We'll ride home in the dusk and the dark."

"The King's Palace?" she asked curiously. "I never heard of such a place. Are you making it all up?"

"Not a bit of it. It's all that's left of some of the old ruins of the same folk who lived in the caves up on the cliffs. . . . Do you know why I am bound to get Jim Galloway's tag soon or late?"

Her mind with his had touched upon the hidden rifles, and the abrupt digression was no digression to her, reached by the span of suggestion.

"Because he is in the wrong and you are in the right; or, in other words, because he opposes the law and you represent it."

"Because he plays the game wrong! Some more results of a long week of nothing to do but think things out. There is just one way for a law-breaker to operate if he means to get away with it."

"You mean that a man can get away with it? Surely not for good?"

But he nodded thoughtfully at the slowly fading strata of shaded colors splashed across the sky.

"A man can get away with it for keeps . . . if he plays the game right. Jim Galloway isn't that man and so I'll get him. He has ignored the first necessary principle, which is the lone hand."

"You mean he takes men into his confidence?"

"And he goes on and ignores the second necessary principle; a man must stop short of murder. If he turns gangman and killer, he ties his own rope around his neck. If a man like Galloway, a man with brains, power, without fear, without scruple, should decide to loot this corner of the world or any other corner, and set about it right, playing the lone hand invariably, he would be a man I couldn't bring in in a thousand years. But Galloway has slipped up; he has too many Moragas and Antonos and Vidals at his heels; he has been the cause, directly or indirectly, of too many killings. . . . A theft will be forgotten in time, the hue and cry die down; spilled blood cries to heaven after ten years."

"Galloway is back in San Juan."

"I know. I wanted him back. I wanted him free and unhampered. He'll be bolder than ever now, won't he, if this case is dropped? He's come out a little into the open already, he'll be tempted out a little farther. There'll be more of his work soon, a robbery here or there, and he will grow so sure of himself that he'll get careless. Then I'll get him."

"But have you the right?" she asked quickly. "Knowing him a lawbreaker, have you the right to allow him to go farther and farther, just because in the end you hope to get him?"

He met her look with a smile which puzzled her.

"I'll answer your question when you define right and wrong for me," he said quietly.

They grew silent together, watching the gradual sinking of day into twilight and early dusk. Norton, for all his vaunted ravings, had grown thoughtful; Virginia turning her eyes toward him while his were staring out beyond the

house-tops saw in them a look of deep, frowning speculation. And through this look, like a little fire gleaming through a fog, was another look whose meaning baffled her.

"What do you think of Patten?" he asked.

Startled by his abruptness, characteristic of him though it was to-day, she asked in puzzled fashion:

"What do you mean?"

"Not as a man," he said, withdrawing his gaze from the sunset and bestowing it gravely upon her. "As a physician. Do you size him up as capable or as something of a quack?"

She hesitated. But finally she made the only reply possible.

"Of course you don't expect any answer, knowing that you should not come to one member of a profession for an estimate of another. And, besides, you realize that I know nothing whatever of Dr. Patten, either as a man or as a physician."

He laughed softly.

"Hedging, pure, unadulterated hedging! I didn't look for that from you. Shall I tell you what we both think of him? He is a farce and a fake, and I rather think that I am going to run him out of the State pretty soon. . . . What would you say of a doctor who couldn't tell the difference between a wound made by a man bumping his head when he fell and by a smashing blow with a gun-barrel? Patten doesn't guess yet that it was the blow Moraga gave me the other night which came so close to ringing down the sable curtains for me."

"Moraga?" she asked with quickened interest. "Not the same Moraga who shot Brocky Lane?"

"The same little old Moraga," he assured her lightly. "You needn't mention it abroad, of course; I don't think Galloway got a chance to talk with him and we are not sure yet that he even knows Moraga was here. But I know somebody put me out in the dark by hammering me over the head; and Tom Cutter found blood on Moraga's revolver. But we wander far afield. Coming back to Patten, do we agree that he is something of a dub?"

"I'd rather not discuss him."

"Exactly. And I, being in the talkative way, am going to tell you that he has made blunders before now; that at least one man died under his nice little fat hands who shouldn't have died outside of jail; that long ago I had my suspicions and began instituting inquiries; that now I am fully prepared to learn that Caleb Patten has no more right to an M.D. after his name than I have."

"You must be mistaken. I hope you are. Men used to do that sort of thing, but under existing laws . . ."

"Under existing laws men do a good many things in and about San Juan which they shouldn't do. I have found out that there was a Caleb Patten who was a young doctor; that there was a Charles Patten, his brother, who was a young scamp; that they both lived in Baltimore a few years ago; that from Baltimore they both went hastily no man knows where. This gentleman whom we have with us might be either one of them. . . . Here comes Ignacio. *Que hay*, Ignacio!"

"*Que hay*, Roderico?" responded Ignacio, coming to lean languidly against the veranda post. He removed his hat elaborately, his liquid eyes doing justice to Virginia's dainty charm. "*Buenos tardes, señorita*," he greeted her.

"What is new, Ignacio?" queried Norton, "No bells for you to ring for the last ten days! You grow fat in idleness, *amigo mio*."

Ignacio sighed and rolled his cigarette.

"What is new, you ask? No? *Bueno*, this is new!" He lifted his eyes suddenly and they were sparkling as with suppressed excitement. "The Devil himself has made a visit to San Juan. *Si, señor; si, señorita*. It is so."

Virginia smiled; Norton gravely asked the explanation. Why should his satanic majesty come to San Juan?

"Why? *Quien sabe?*" Ignacio shrugged all responsibility from his lazy shoulders. "But he came and more bad will come from his visit, more and more of evil things. One knows. *Seguro que si*; one knows. But I will tell you and the señorita; no one else knows of it. It was while in the Casa Blanca men are shooting, while Roderico Nortone will make his arrest of poor Vidal who is dead now." He crossed himself and drew a thoughtful puff from his cigarette. "I run fast to ring the bells. I come into the garden and it is dark. I come under the bells. And while my hand cannot find the rope . . . *Si, señor y señorita!* . . . before I touch the rope the Captain begins to ring! Just a little; not long; low and quiet and . . . angry! And then he stop and I shiver. It is hard not to run out of the garden. But I cross myself and find the ropes and make all the bells dance. But I know; it was the Devil who was before me."

CHAPTER XV

THE KING'S PALACE

Not only was Galloway back in San Juan but, as Norton had predicted of him, he appeared to have every assurance that he stood in no unusual danger. There had been a fight in a dark room and one man had been killed, certain others wounded. The dead man was Galloway's friend, hence it was not to be thought that Galloway had killed him. Kid Rickard was another friend. As for the wound Rod Norton had received, who could swear that this man or that had given it to him?

"The chances are," Galloway had already said in many quarters, "that Tom Cutter, getting excited, popped over his own sheriff."

True, it was quite obvious that a charge lay at Galloway's door, that of harboring a fugitive from justice and of resisting an officer. But with Galloway's money and influence, with the shrewdest technical lawyer in the State retained, with ample perjured testimony to be had as desired, the law-breaker saw no reason for present uneasiness. Perhaps more than anything else he regretted the death of Vidal Nuñez and the wounding of Kid Rickard. For these matters vitally touched Jim Galloway and his swollen prestige among his henchmen; he had thrown the cloak of his protection about Vidal, had summoned him, promised him all safety . . . and Vidal was dead. He knew that men spoke of this over and over and hushed when he came upon them; that Vidal's brother, Pete, grumbled and muttered that Galloway was losing his grip, that soon or late he would fall, that falling he would drag others down with him. More than ever before the whole county watched for the final duello between Galloway and Norton. In half a dozen small towns and mining-camps men laid bets upon the result.

For the first time, also, there was much barbed comment and criticism of the sheriff. He had gotten this man and that, it was true. And yet, after all this time, he seemed to be no nearer than at the beginning to getting the man who counted. There were those who recalled the killing of Bisbee of Las Palmas, and reminded others that there had been no attempt at prosecution. Now there had come forth from the Casa Blanca fresh defiance and lawlessness and still Jim Galloway came and went as he pleased. Those who criticised said that Norton was losing his nerve, or else that he was merely incompetent when measured by the yardstick of swift, incisive action wedded to capability.

"If he can't get Jim Galloway, let him step out of the way and give the chance to a man who can," was said many times and in many ways. Even John Engle, Julius Struve, Tom Cutter, and Brocky Lane came to Norton at one time or another, telling him what they had heard, urging him to give some heed to popular clamor, and to begin legal action.

"Put the skids under him, Roddy," pleaded Brocky Lane. "We can't slide him far the first trip, maybe. But a year or so in jail will break his grip here."

But Norton shook his head. He was playing the game his way.

"The rifles are still in the cache," he told Brocky. "He is getting ready, as we know; further, just as my friends are beginning to find fault with me, so are his hangers-on beginning to wonder if they haven't tied to the wrong man. Just to save his own face he'll have to start something pretty pronto. And we know about where he is going to strike. It's up to us to hold our horses, Brocky."

Brocky growled a bit, but went away more than half-persuaded. He called at the hotel, paid his respects to Virginia, and affording her a satisfaction which it was hard for her to conceal, also paid her for her services rendered him in the cliff-dweller's cave.

Often enough the man who tilts with the law is in most things not unlike his fellows, different alone perhaps in the one essential that he is born a few hundreds of years late in the advance of civilization. Going about that part of his business which has its claims to legitimacy, mingling freely with his fellows, he fails to stand out distinctly from them as a monster. Given the slow passing of uneventful time, and it becomes hard and harder to consider him as a social menace. When the man is of the Jim Galloway type, his plans large, his patience long, he may even pass out from the shadow of a gallows-tree and return to occupy his former place in the quiet community life, while his

neighbors are prone to forget or condone.

As other days came and slipped by and the weeks grew out of them, Galloway's was a pleasant, untroubled face to be seen on the street, at the post-office, behind his own bar, on the country roads. He ignored any animosity which San Juan might feel for him. If a man looked at him stonily, Galloway did not care to let it be seen that he saw; if a woman turned out to avoid him, no evidence that he understood darkened his eyes. He had a good-humored word to speak always; he lifted his hat to the banker's wife, as he had always done; he mingled with the crowd when there were "exercises" at the little schoolhouse; he warmly congratulated Miss Porter, the crabbed old-maid teacher, on the work she had accomplished and made her wonder fleetingly if there wasn't a bit of good in the man, after all. Perhaps there was; there is in most men. And Florrie Engle was beginning to wonder the same thing. For Rod Norton, recovered and about his duties, was not quite the same touchingly heroic figure he had been while lying unconscious and in danger of his life. Nor was it any part of Florrie Engle's nature to remain long either upon the heights or in the depths of an emotion. The night of the shooting she had cried out passionately against Galloway; as days went their placid way and she saw Galloway upon each one of them . . . and did not see a great deal of Norton, who was either away or monopolizing Virginia, . . . she took the first step in the gambler's direction by beginning to be sorry for him. First, it was too bad that Mr. Galloway did the sort of things which he did; no doubt he had had no mother to teach him when he was very young. Next, it was a shame that he was blamed for everything that had to happen; maybe he was a . . . a bad man, but Florrie simply didn't believe he was responsible for half of the deeds laid at his door. Finally, through a long and intricate chain of considerations, the girl reached the point where she nodded when Galloway lifted his hat. The smile in the man's eyes was one of pure triumph.

"Oh, my dear!" Florrie burst into Virginia's room, flushed and palpitant with her latest emotion. "He has told me all about it, and do you know, I don't believe that we have the right to blame him? Doesn't it say in the Bible or . . . or somewhere, that greater praise or something shall no man have than he who gives his life for a friend? It's something like that, anyway. Aren't people just horrid, always blaming other people, never stopping to consider their reasons and impulses and looking at it from their side? Vidal Nuñez was a friend of Mr. Galloway's; he was in Mr. Galloway's house. Of course . . ."

"I thought that you didn't speak to him any more."

"I didn't for a long time. But if you could have only seen the way he always looks at me when I bump into him. Virgie, I believe he is sad and lonely and that he would like to be good if people would only give him the chance. Why, he is human, after all, you know."

Virginia began to ask herself if Galloway were merely amusing himself with Florrie or if the man were really interested in her. It did not seem likely that a girl like Florrie would appeal to a man like him; and yet, why not? There is at least a grain of truth, if no more, in the old saw of the attraction of opposites. And it was scarcely more improbable that he should be interested in her than that she should allow herself to be ever so slightly moved by him. Furthermore, in its final analysis, emotion is not always to be explained.

Virginia set herself the task of watching for any slightest development of the man's influence over the girl. She saw Florrie almost daily, either at the hotel to which Florrie had acquired the habit of coming in the cool of the afternoons or at the Engle home. And for the sake of her little friend, and at the same time for Elmer's sake, she threw the two youngsters together as much as possible. They quarrelled rather a good deal, criticised each other with startling frankness, and grew to be better friends than either realized. Elmer was a vaquero now, as he explained whenever need be or opportunity arose, wore chaps, a knotted handkerchief about a throat which daily grew more brown, spurs as large and noisy as were to be encountered on San Juan's street, and his right hip pocket bulged. None of the details escaped Florrie's eyes . . . he called her "Fluff" now and she nicknamed him "Black Bill" . . . and she never failed to refer to them mockingly.

"They tell me, Black Bill," she said innocently, "that you fell off your horse yesterday. I was so *sorry*."

She had offered her sympathy during a lull in the conversation, drawing the attention of her father, mother, and Virginia to Elmer, whose face reddened promptly.

"Florrie!" chided Mrs. Engle, hiding the twinkle in her own eyes.

"Oh, her," said Elmer with a wave of the hand. "I don't mind what Fluff says. She's just trying to kid me."

Toward the end of the evening, having been thoughtful for ten minutes, Elmer adopted Florrie's tactics and remarked suddenly and in a voice to be heard much farther than his needed to carry:

"Say, Fluff. Saw an old friend of yours the other day." And when Florrie, "gun-shy" as Elmer called her, was too wise to ask any questions, he hastened on: "Juanito Miranda it was. Sent his best. So did Mrs. Juanito."

Whereupon it was Florrie's turn to turn a scarlet of mortification and anger. For Juanito had soft black eyes and almost equally soft black mustaches, with probably a heart to match, and only a year ago Florrie had been busied making a hero of him when he, the blind one, took unto himself an Indian bride and in all innocence heaped shame high upon the blonde head. How Elmer unearthed such ancient history was a mystery to Florrie; but none the less she "hated" him for it. They saw a very great deal of each other, each serving as a sort of balance-wheel to the other's self-centred complacency. Perhaps the one subject upon which they could agree was Jim Galloway; Elmer still liked to look upon the gambler as a colossal figure standing serene among wolves, while Florrie could admit to him, with no fear of a chiding, that she thought Mr. Galloway "simply splendid!"

When one evening, after having failed to show himself for a full month, Rod Norton came to the Engles', found Elmer and Virginia there, and suggested the ride to the King's Palace, he awakened no end of enthusiasm. Elmer had a day off, thanks to the generosity of his employer, Mr. Engle, and had just secretly purchased a fresh outfit consisting of a silver-mounted Spanish bit, a new pair of white and unspeakably shaggy, draggy chaps, a wide hat with a band of snake hide, and boots that were the final whisper in high-heeled discomfort. Florrie disappeared into her room to make her own little riding-costume as irresistible as possible. They were to start with the first streaks of dawn to-morrow, just the four of them, since the banker and his wife, lukewarmly invited, had no desire for a forty-mile ride between morning and night.

It was Rod Norton's privilege to lead his merry party into what for them was wonderland. Even Florrie, though so much other life had been passed in San Juan, had never before visited the King's Palace. Clattering through the street while most folk were asleep, they took advantage of the cool of the dawn and rode swiftly. Elmer and Florrie racing on ahead laid aside their accustomed weapons and were, for the once, utterly flattering to each other. Each wishing to be admired, admired the other, and was paid back in the coveted coin. Norton and Virginia, at first a little inclined toward silence, soon grew as noisily merry as the others, drawing deep enjoyment from the moment.

And at the portals of the King's Palace, reached after four hours in the saddle, followed by thirty minutes on foot, they stood hushed with wonder. High upon the southern slope of Mt. Temple they had come abruptly into the unexpected. Here a rugged plateau had caught and held through the ages the soil which had weathered down from the cliffs above; here were trees to replace the weary gray brush, shade instead of glare, birds as welcome substitutes for droning insects, water and flowers to make the cañons doubly cool and fragrant for him who had ascended from the dry reaches of sand below the talus.

"It's just like fairy-land!" cried the ecstatic Florrie. "Roddy Norton, I think you're real mean not to have brought me here ages ago!"

"Ages ago, my dear miss," laughed Norton, "you were too little to appreciate it. You should thank me for bringing you now."

Down through the middle of the plateau from its hidden source ran the purling stream which was destined to yield to sun and thirsty earth long before it twisted down the lower slopes of the hills. Along its edges the grass was thick and rich, shot through everywhere with little blue blossoms and the golden gleam of the starflowers. Further promise of yellow beauty was given by the stalks of the evening-primrose scattered on every hand, the flowers furred now, sleeping. In the groves were pines, small cedars, and a sprinkling of sturdy dwarf oaks. And from their shelter came the welcome sound of a bird's twitter.

"It's always about as you see it," Norton explained. "Too hard to get to, too small when one makes the climb to afford enough pasturage for sheep. And now the Palace itself."

Straight ahead the cliffs overhung the farther rim of the plateau. And there, under the out-jutting roof of rock, an

ancient people had fashioned themselves a home which stood now as when their hands laboriously set it there. The protected ledge which afforded eternal foundation was slightly above the plateau's level, to be reached by a series of "steps" in the rock, steps which were holes worn deep, perhaps five hundred years ago. The climb was steep, hazardous unless one went with due precaution, but the four holiday-makers hurried to begin it.

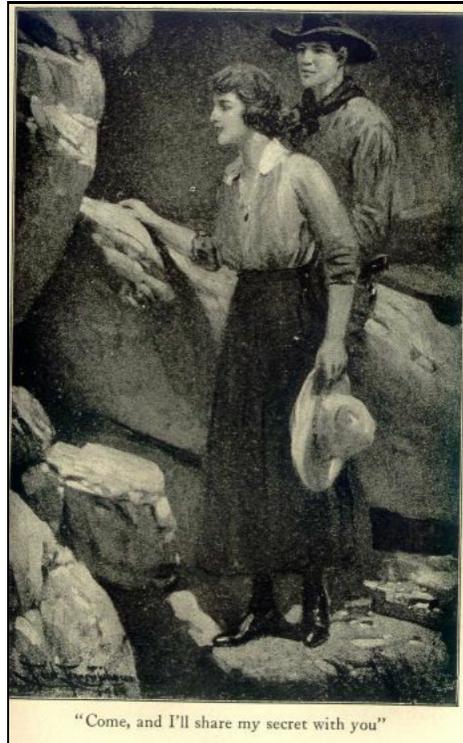
So close to the edge of the rock ledge did the walls of the ruin stand that there was barely room to edge along it to come to the narrow doorway. Holding hands, Norton in the lead, Elmer in the rear, they made their breathless way. And then they were in the hushed, shaded anteroom.

The dust of untroubled ages lay upon the surprisingly smooth floor. Walls of cemented rock rose intact on two sides, broken here and there on a third, while the cliff itself made the fourth at the rear. And unusually spacious, wide, and high-ceiled was this room, which may have had its use when time was younger as a council-chamber. At one end was another door, small and dark and forbidding, leading to another room. Beyond lay other quarters, a long line of them, which might have housed scores in their time.

While Florrie, letting out little shrieks now and then interspersed with gay cries of delight, led a half-timorous way and Elmer went with her upon the tour of discovery, Virginia and Norton stood a moment at the front entrance looking down upon the fertile plateau and across it to the level miles running out to San Juan and beyond.

"Who were they?" asked Virginia, unconscious of a half-sigh as she withdrew abstracted eyes from the wide panorama which had filled the vision of so many other men and women and little children before the white man came to claim the New World. "They who builded here and lived and died here. What has become of them? Where did they go?"

"All questions asked a thousand times and never answered. I don't know. But they were good builders, good engineers, good pottery-makers, good farmers and hunters and fighters; rather a goodly crowd, I take it. Come, and I'll share my secret with you while Florrie and Elmer discover the skeleton a little farther on and stop to exclaim over it."



"Come, and I'll share my secret with you"

[Illustration: "Come, and I'll share my secret with you."]

Norton's secret was a hidden room of the King's Palace. While many men knew of the Palace itself, he believed that none other than himself had ever ferreted out this particular chamber which he called the Treasure Chamber. It was to be reached by clambering through an orifice of the eastern wall, over a clutter of fallen blocks of stone and a score of feet along the narrowing ledge. Just before they came to the point where the encroaching wall of cliff denied farther foothold they found a fissure in the rock itself wide enough to allow them to slip into it. Again they climbed, coming presently to a ledge smaller than the one below and hidden by an outthrust boulder. Here was the last of the rooms of the King's Palace, cunningly masked, to be found only by accident, even the cramped door concealed by the branches of a tortured cedar. Norton pushed them aside and they entered.

"I have cached a few of my things here," he told her as they confronted each other in the gloom of the room's interior. "And the joke of it is that my hiding-place is almost if not quite directly below the caves where Galloway's rifles are. This is a secret, mind you! . . . If you'll look around, you'll find some of the articles our friends the cliff-dwellers left behind them when they made their getaway."

In a dark corner she found a blackened coffee-pot and a frying-pan, proclaiming anachronistically that here was the twentieth century interloping upon the fifteenth, articles which Norton had hidden here. In another corner were jumbled the things which the ancient people had left to mark their passing, an earthenware water-jar, half a dozen spear and arrow points of stone, a clumsy-looking axe still fitted to its handle of century-seasoned cedar, bound with thongs.

"But," exclaimed the girl, "the wood, the raw-hide . . . they would have disintegrated long ago. They must belong to the age of your coffee-pot and frying-pan!"

"The air is bone-dry," he reminded her. "What little rain there is never gets in here. Nothing decays; look yonder."

He showed her a basket made of withes, a graceful thing skilfully made, small, frail-looking, and as perfect as the day it had come from a pair of quick brown hands under a pair of quick black eyes. She took it almost with a sense of awe upon her.

"Keep it, will you?" he asked lightly. "As a memento. Presented by a caveman through your friend the sheriff. Now let's get back before they miss us. I may have need of this place some time and I'd rather no one else knew of it."

They made their way back as they had come and in silence, Virginia treasuring the token and with it the sense that her friend the sheriff had cared to share his secret with her.

They made of the day an occasion to be remembered, to be considered wistfully in retrospect during the troubled hours so soon to come to each one of the four of them. While Elmer and Florrie gathered fire-wood, Norton showed Virginia how simple a matter it was here in this seldom-visited mountain-stream to take a trout. Cool, shaded pools under overhanging, gouged-out banks, tiny falls, and shimmering riffles all housed the quick speckled beauties. Then, as Norton had predicted, the fish were fried, crisp and brown, in sizzling bacon-grease, while the thin wafers of bacon garnished the tin plate bedded in hot ashes. They nooned in the shady grove, sipping their coffee that had the taste of some rare, black nectar. And throughout the long lazy afternoon they loitered as it pleased them, picked flowers, wandered anew through the ruins of the King's Palace, lay by the singing water, and were quietly content. It was only when the shadows had thickened over the world and the promise of the primroses was fulfilled that they made ready for the return ride. Before they had gone down to their horses the moths were coming to the yellow flowers, tumbling about them, filling the air with the frail beating of their wings.

At Struve's hotel . . . Elmer and Virginia had ridden on to Engle's home . . . Virginia told Norton good night, thanking him for a perfect day. As their hands met for a little she saw a new, deeply probing look in his eyes, a look to be understood. He towered over her, physically superb. As she had felt it before, so now did she experience that odd little thrill born from nearness to him go singing through her. She withdrew her hand hastily and went in. In her own room she stood a long time before her glass, seeking to read what lay in her own eyes.

Tom Cutter was waiting for Norton--merely to tell him that a stranger had come to San Juan, a Mexican with all the earmarks of a gentleman and a man of means. The Mexican's name was Enrique del Rio. He evidently came from below the border. He had lost no time in finding Jim Galloway, with whom he had been all afternoon.

CHAPTER XVI

THE MEXICAN FROM MEXICO

Enrique del Rio promptly became known to San Juan as the Mexican from Mexico, this to distinguish him from the many Mexicans, as San Juan knew them, who had never seen that turbulent field of intrigue and revolt from which their sires had come. He showed himself from the outset to be a gentleman of culture, discernment, and ability. He was suave, he was polished, he gave certain signs of refinement.

His first afternoon and evening he bestowed upon Jim Galloway. The second day found him registered at Struve's hotel. The following morning he presented himself with a sheaf of credentials at the bank, asking for John Engle. With him came Ignacio Chavez in the rôle of interpreter. Del Rio spoke absolutely no English and had informed himself that Engle's Spanish was inadequate for the occasion.

"He is Señor Don Enrique del Rio," explained Ignacio, touched by the spell of the other's munificence and immaculate clothes. "He would like to shake the hand of Señor Engle to become acquainted and then friends. . . . He brings papers to tell who and what he is in Mexico City, whence he has departed because of too damn much fight down there; he wishes to put some money here in the *banco*, which he can take away again to buy a big ranch and many cattle and horses. He has the other money in a *banco* in New York, where he sent it out from Mexico two, three months ago."

And so on, while Engle gravely listened and shrewdly, after his fashion in business hours, probed for the inner man under the outer polish, while del Rio nodded and smiled and never withdrew his night-black eyes from Engle's face.

Del Rio, it appeared, had gone first to the Casa Blanca because he had heard of Jim Galloway as one of the most influential men of the county. Since arriving in San Juan, however, he had heard this and that, mere rumors, which caused him to come to Engle. He, a stranger, could ill afford in the beginning to have his name coupled with that of any man not known for his spotless integrity. Señor Engle understood? . . . Later, when del Rio had found the properties to his liking and had builded a home, his wife and two daughters would arrive. Now they travelled in California.

In the end Engle accepted the Mexican's deposits, which amounted to approximately a thousand dollars, and which were to be drawn against merely as an expense account until del Rio found his ranch. And the first item of expense was the purchase from Engle himself of a fine saddle-animal, a pure-blooded, clean-limbed young mare, sister to Persis. After which the Mexican spent a great deal of his time riding about the country, looking at ranches. He visited Engle's two places, called upon Norton at Las Flores, ferreting out prices, looking at water and feed, examining soil.

It was a bare fortnight after the coming of del Rio when out of Las Palmas came word of fresh lawlessness. The superintendent of the three Quigley mines had been surprised the night before pay-day, forced at the point of a revolver to open his own safe, and robbed of several thousand dollars. A man on horseback rushed word to San Juan, found Tom Cutter, who located Norton the same afternoon at his ranch at Las Flores.

"Rod, old man," cried Cutter angrily, "this damned thing has got to stop! You haven't a much better friend than I am, I guess, and I'm telling you straight that the whole county is getting sore on you. They will talk more than ever now, saying that it's up to you to get results and that you don't get them."

"The stick-up was last night?" asked the sheriff coolly.

"Yes," snapped Cutter.

"You were in San Juan?"

"Yes."

"Where was Jim Galloway? Was he in town?"

"No, he wasn't. I don't know where he was. But I do know where he ought to be. . . ."

"Was that Mexican gent, del Rio, in town?"

Cutter opened his eyes.

"No. I don't think so. You haven't got anything on him, have you?"

"Only what you told me. Remember that his first day in San Juan he went to Galloway like a homing pigeon."

Norton went for his horse, saddled, and rode swiftly to Las Palmas. In the mining-camp he went immediately to the office of Nate Kemble, the superintendent, whom he found cursing volubly.

"It's up to you," were the sharp words of greeting as Kemble wheeled upon the sheriff. "What the hell do you think you're for, anyway? Good Lord, man, if you can't cut the mustard, why don't you crawl out and let a man who *can* wear your star?"

"Easy there, Kemble," said Norton quietly. "You can do your raring and pitching after I'm gone. Tell me about it. What time did it happen?"

"It was hardly dark."

"How many men jumped you?"

"Just one. But . . ."

"Just one, eh?" He pondered the information. "That isn't the usual brand of Galloway work, is it? Get a good slant at him?"

"At his clothes," growled Kemble, slamming himself down dejectedly in his chair. "His face was hid, of course."

"Ever see a Mexican named del Rio?"

Like Cutter before him, Kemble started.

"Don't ask me what I mean," Norton cut him short. "Del Rio is a pretty big man for a Mexican; was this highwayman about his size?"

Kemble hesitated.

"It's hard to say just how big a man is when he comes in on you like that," he said at last. "At a guess I'd say that the man who stuck me up was a little taller than del Rio. But I wouldn't swear to it."

"It might have been del Rio himself, then?" Norton insisted.

"Yes. Or it might have been the Devil's grandmother. I don't . . ."

"See anything of del Rio the last few days?"

"Saw him yesterday. He was in camp. Was talking mines."

"See anything of Galloway hereabouts of late?"

"No. Haven't seen him for a month or two."

Norton asked a few other questions, kept his own thoughts to himself, and rode away. Less than a mile from the

camp he met Jim Galloway riding a sweat-wet horse. The two men reined in sharply, each man's eyes matching the other's for hardness. Galloway's face was red, the fiery red of anger.

"Going back for what you forgot, Jim?" asked Norton.

For a moment Galloway, staring back at him, seemed utterly speechless in the grip of his wrath. Norton did not remember ever having seen such blazing anger in the prominent eyes.

"Between you and me, Rod Norton," muttered Galloway at last, "I have turned a trick or two in my time. But this job is none of my doing and if I wise up as to who put it over he'll go under the sand or into the pen, and I'll put him there."

Norton laughed.

"In other words, some free-lance has made a bid to break your corner on the crime market, eh?" he jeered. "Put one over on you without your knowledge and consent? And without splitting two ways? That what you mean?"

"I mean that I'd pay five hundred dollars out of my own pocket right now for the dead-wood on the man who robbed Kemble."

"Kid Rickard is around once more; sure he didn't do it?"

"Yes, I am. Kid Rickard didn't do it."

Norton eased himself in the saddle, thoughtfully regarding Galloway. And then, very abruptly:

"How about your friend, del Rio?"

It was the third time that he had mentioned del Rio's name in this connection and to the third man. And now, but slightly different in degree only, he saw the same look in Galloway's eyes which he had brought into Cutter's and Kemble's.

"Del Rio?" repeated Galloway frowningly. "What makes you say that?"

"I'll collect your five hundred later," was Norton's laughing response. Swerving out a little as he passed, he rode on.

CHAPTER XVII

A STACK OF GOLD PIECES

John Engle rapidly came to assume the nature and proportions of a stubborn bulwark standing sturdily between Roderick Norton and the fires of criticism, which, springing from little, scattered flames were now a wide-spread blaze amply fed with the dry fuel of many fields. Again there had been a general excitement over a crime committed, much talk, various suspicions, and, in the end, no arrest made. Men who had stood by the sheriff until now began to lose faith in him. They recalled how, after the fight in the Casa Blanca, he had let Galloway go and with him Antone and the Kid; their memories trailed back to the killing of Bisbee of Las Palmas and the evidence of the boots. They began to admit, at first reluctantly, then with angry eagerness, that Norton was not the man his father had been before him, not the man they had taken him to be. And all of this hurt Norton's stanch friend, John Engle. All the more that he, too, saw signs of hesitancy which he found it hard to condone.

"Let him alone," he said many a time. "Give him his chance and a free hand. He knows what he is doing."

From that point he began to make excuses, first to himself and then to others. People were forgetting that only a short time ago the sheriff had lain many days at the point of death; that his system had been overtaxed; that not yet had his superb strength come back to him. Wait until once more he was physically fit.

It was merely an excuse, and at the outset no man knew it better than the banker himself. But as time went by without bringing results and tongues grew sharper and more insistent everywhere, Engle grew convinced that there was a grain of truth in his trumped-up argument. He invited Norton to his home, had him to dinner, watched him keenly, and came to the conclusion that Norton was riding on his nerves, that he had not taken sufficient time to recuperate before getting his feet back into the official stirrups, that the strain of his duties was telling on him, that he needed a rest and a change or would go to pieces.

But Norton, the subject broached, merely shook his head.

"I'm all right, John," he said a little hurriedly and nervously. "I am run down at the heels a bit, I'll admit. But I can't stop to rest right now. One of these days I'll quit this job and go back to ranching. Until then . . . Well, let them talk. We can't stop them very well."

Suspicion of the Quigley mines robbery had turned at first toward del Rio. But he had established an alibi. So had Galloway. So had Antone and the Kid.

"There is nothing to do but wait," Norton insisted. "It won't be long now."

Engle, having less than no faith in Patten's ability, went to Virginia Page. She saw Norton often; what did she think? Was he on the verge of a collapse? Was he physically fit?

"All of this criticism hurts him," said the banker thoughtfully. "I know Rod and how he must take it, though he only shrugs. It's gall and wormwood to him. He's up against a hard proposition, as we all know; if he is half-sick, I wonder if the proposition isn't going to be too much for him? Can't you advise him, persuade him to knock off for a couple of weeks and clear out? Get into a city somewhere and forget his work. Why, it's the most pitiful thing in the world to see a man like him lose his grip."

"He is not quite himself," she admitted slowly. "He is more nervous, inclined to be short and irritable, than he used to be. You may be right; or it may be simply that his continued failure to stop these crimes is wearing him down. I'll be glad to watch him, to talk with him if he will listen to me."

But first she forced herself to what seemed a casual chat with Patten, finding him loitering upon the hotel veranda. She suggested to him that Norton was beginning to show the strain, that he looked haggard under it, and wondered if he had quite recovered from his recent illness?

Patten, after his pompous way, leaned back in his chair, his thumbs in his armholes, his manner that of a most

high judge.

"He's as well as I am," he announced positively. "Thin, to be sure, just from being laid up those ten days. And from a lot of hard riding and worry. That's all."

Out of Patten's vest-pocket peeped a lead-pencil. Curiously enough, it carried her mind back to Patten's incompetence. For it suggested the fountain pen which of old occupied the pencil's place and which the sheriff had taken in his haste to secrete a bit of paper with Patten's scrawl upon it. She wondered again just what had been on that paper, and if it were meant to help Norton prove that Patten had no right to the M.D. after his name? The incident, all but forgotten, remained prominently in her mind, soon to assume a position of transcendent importance.

And then, one after the other, here and there throughout the county came fresh crimes which not only set men talking angrily but which drew the eyes of the State and then of the neighboring States upon this corner of the world. Newspapers in the cities commented variously, most of them sweepingly condemning the county's sheriff for a figurehead and a boy who should never have been given a man's place in the sun. New faces were seen in San Juan, in Las Estrellas, Las Palmas, Pozo, everywhere, and men said that the undesirable citizens of the whole Southwest were flocking here where they might reap with others of their ilk and go scot free. Naturally, the Casa Blanca became headquarters for a large percentage of the newcomers.

"The condition in and about San Juan," commented one of the most reputable and generally conservative of the attacking dailies, "has become acute, unprecedented for this time in our development. The community has become the asylum of the lawless. The authorities have shown themselves utterly unable to cope with the situation. A well-known figure of the desert town who long ago should have gone to the gallows is daily growing bolder, attaching to himself the wildest of the insurging element, and is commonly looked upon as a crime dictator. Unless there comes a stiffening in the moral fiber of the local officers, we dread to consider the logical outcome of these conditions."

And so forth from countless quarters. Galloway openly jeered at Norton. New faces, looking out from the Casa Blanca, grinned widely as the sheriff now and then rode past. Engle and Struve and Tom Cutter, anxious and beginning to be afraid of what lurked in the future, met at the hotel and sought to hit upon a solution of the problem.

"Norton has got something up his sleeve," growled the hotel keeper, "and he's as stubborn as a mule. He's after Galloway, and it begins to look as though he were forgetting that his job is to serve the county first and his own private quarrels next. I've jawed him up and down; it only makes him shake his head like a horse with flies after him."

The three, hoping that their combined arguments might have weight with Norton, went to him and did not leave him until they had made clear what their thoughts were, what the whole State was saying of him. And, as Struve had predicted, he shook his head.

"These later robberies haven't been Galloway's work," he told them positively. "They were pulled off by the same man who stuck up Kemble of the Quigley mines. Inside of a week I'll get something done; I'll promise you that. But let me do it my way."

Engle alone of the three drew a certain satisfaction from the interview.

"He has promised something definite," he told them. "Did you ever know him to do that and fail to keep his word? Maybe we're getting a little excited, boys."

The latest crime had been the robbery of the little bank at Packard Springs. The highwayman had gone in the night to the room of the cashier, forced him to dress, go to the bank, and open his safe. The result was a theft of a couple of thousand dollars, no trace left behind, and a growing feeling of insecurity throughout the county. It was for this crime that Norton meant and promised to make an arrest.

Exactly seven days from the day of his promise Norton rode into San Juan and asked for Tom Cutter. Struve, meeting him at the hotel door, looked at him sharply.

"Made that arrest yet, Norton?" he demanded. Norton smiled.

"No, I haven't," he admitted coolly. "But I've got a few minutes before my week's up, haven't I? Fix me up with something to eat and I'll have a talk with you and Tom while I attend to the inner man."

But over his meal, while Cutter and Struve watched him impatiently, he did little talking other than to ask carelessly where del Rio was.

"Damn it, man," cried Struve irritably. "You've hinted at him before now. If he's a crook, why don't you go grab him? He's in his room."

Norton swung about upon Struve, his eyes suddenly filled with fire.

"Look here, Struve," he retorted, "I've had about a bellyful of badgering. I'm running my job and it will be just as well for you to keep your hands off. As for why I don't make an arrest . . . Come on, Tom. You, too, Julius," his smile coming back. "I'm going to get del Rio."

"I don't believe . . ." began Struve.

"Seeing is believing," returned Norton lightly. "Come on."

Followed by the two men, Norton went direct to del Rio's room, at the front of the house, just across the hall from Virginia's office. At del Rio's quick "*Entra*," he threw open the door and went in. Del Rio, seated smoking a cigar, looked up with curious eyes which did not miss the two men following the sheriff.

"You are under arrest for the bank robbery at Packard Springs," said Norton crisply.

"*Que quiere usted decir?*" demanded the Mexican, to whom the English words were meaningless.

Norton threw back his vest, showing his star. And while he kept his eye upon del Rio he said quietly to Cutter:

"Look through his trunk and bags."

Del Rio, understanding quickly enough, sat smoking swiftly, his eyes narrowing as they clung steadily to Norton's. Cutter, a rising hope in his breast that at last his superior had made good, went to the trunk in the corner. Del Rio shrugged and remained silent.

Cutter began tumbling out upon the floor an assortment of clothing, evincing little respect for the Mexican's finery. Suddenly, when his hands had gone to the bottom, he sat back upon his heels, a leaping light in his eyes.

"Caught with the goods on, by God!" he cried. "Look here, Struve!"

He had whipped out a canvas bag which gave forth the chink of gold. Another came after it. And across each bag was stamped "Packard Springs Bank."

Del Rio's eyes had wandered a moment to Cutter and the evidence. Then they came back to Norton, filled with black malevolence. One did not need to understand the southern language to grasp the meaning of the words muttered under his breath.

Within the half-hour Strove, Cutter, and Engle had apologized to Norton; after this, they promised him to keep their hands off and their mouths shut.

That evening Virginia and Norton sat long together on Struve's veranda. There was more silence than talk between them. Norton seemed abstracted; the girl was plainly constrained, anxious, and found it difficult to keep her mind upon the thin thread of conversation joining their occasional remarks. Abruptly, out of one of their wordless intervals, she said quickly:

"Congratulate me on being a rich woman! I got a check from an old, almost forgotten, patient-to-day. A

hundred dollars, all in one lump! It's a fortune in San Juan, isn't it?"

Norton laughed with her.

"I feel like spending it all in a breath," she ran on. "I went right away to Mr. Engle and had him cash it so that I could see what five twenty-dollar gold pieces looked like. And I chinked them and played with them like a child! Do you think I am growing greedy for gold in my old age? . . . You ought to see them piled up, though; five twenties. Isn't gold a pretty thing? I've a notion to go get them and show them to you; they're right on my table ..."

She broke off suddenly, her hand on his arm.

"Did you see some one out there at the corner of the house?" she asked quickly. "Do you think . . ."

Then she laughed again and settled back in her chair.

"Already thinking somebody is going to steal my gold! My five twenties. Just to punish myself I am going to leave them on my office table all night; do you suppose I'll be wondering all the time if somebody is crawling in at a window and taking them?"

Five minutes later she said good night and left him.

"I'll be up early in the morning," she said laughingly. "Just to make sure that my gold is there!"

An hour later Virginia Page, sitting fully dressed in the darkness of her bedroom, got quietly to her feet and went to the door leading to her office. With wildly beating heart she stood listening, seeking to peer through the crack of the door she had left ajar. She had heard the faint, expected sound of some one moving cautiously.

Now she heard it again, then the rustling of loose papers lying on her table, then the faint, golden chink of yellow-minted disks. As she suddenly scratched the match in her hand, drawing it along the wall, she threw the door open. The tiny flame, held high, retrieved the room from darkness into sufficient pale light. The man at her table whirled upon her, an exclamation caught in his throat, one hand going to his hip, the other closing tight upon what it held.

She came in, her eyes steadily upon his, her face deathly pale. As the match fell from her fingers she went to the open window and drew down the shade. Then she lit a second match, set it to her lamp, and sank wearily into her chair.

"Shall we thresh matters out, Mr. Norton?" she asked.

CHAPTER XVIII

DESIRE OUTWEIGHS DISCRETION

Following Virginia's barely audible words there was a long silence. Her eyes, dark with the trouble in them, rested upon Norton's face and saw the frown go from his brows while slowly the red seeped into his bronzed cheeks. For the first time in her life she saw him staggered by the shock of surprise, held hesitant and uncertain. For a little there was never a movement of his rigid muscles; one hand rested upon the butt of his revolver, the other was closed upon the stack of gold pieces. When at last he found his tongue it was to accuse her.

"You trapped me," he said bitterly.

"With golden bait," she admitted, her voice oddly spiritless. "Yes."

"Well," he challenged, "what are you going to do about it?"

"Do? I don't know!"

Again they grew silent, studying each other intently. Norton, his poise coming back to him as the unusual color receded from his face, smiled at her with an affectation of his old manner. Suddenly he stepped back to her table, noiselessly set down the coins, eased himself into a chair.

"You wished to thresh things out? I am ready. And in case we should be interrupted, you know, I have called on you in your official capacity. We'll say that I am troubled by the old wound in the head; that will do as well as anything, won't it?"

"It was you who robbed the bank at Pozo!" she cried softly, leaning toward him, the look in her eyes one of dread now. "And the mine superintendent at Las Palmas? And I don't know how many other people. It was you!"

She had startled him in the beginning; she knew she would not draw another sign of surprise from him. He had himself under control, and long years of severe training made that control complete. He merely looked interested under her sweeping accusation.

"You must have a reason for a charge like that," he remarked evenly.

"Do you deny it?"

"I deny nothing, I affirm nothing right now. I say that you must have a reason for what you state."

"You put the incriminating evidence in del Rio's trunk," she ran on hurriedly. "The canvas bags of gold. Didn't you?"

"Reason?" he insisted equably.

"You took Caleb Patten's fountain pen! I saw you."

He lifted his brows at her. Then he laughed softly.

"In the first place," he replied thoughtfully, "I really believe that he is not Caleb at all but Charles Patten. We'll talk of that later, however. In the second place isn't it rather humorous to wind up by accusing a man with the theft of a fountain pen after your other charges?"

"Answer one question," she urged earnestly. "Please. It is only a small matter. Give me your word of honor that you will answer it truthfully."

He was very grave as he sat for a moment, head down, twirling his big hat in slow fingers. Then he smiled again as he looked up.

"Either truthfully or not at all," he promised her. "My word of honor."

She was plainly excited as she set him her question, seeming at once eager and afraid to have his response.

"I saw you take Patten's fountain pen and a scrap of note-paper from the table by your bed when you were hurt-- the first time I called to see how you were doing. I thought that perhaps there was something of importance written on the paper, that, if nothing else, you wanted a bit of Patten's handwriting to use in your proof that he was not the man he pretended to be. You slipped both pen and paper under your pillow. Tell me just this: Was that paper of any importance whatever, of any interest even, to you?"

"No," he said steadily, without hesitation. "It was not. I did not so much as look at it."

She leaned back in her chair with a long sigh, her eyes wide on his. And while he marvelled at it, he saw that now her look was one of pure pity.

"Just what has that got to do with the robberies you mention?"

"Everything!" she burst out. "Everything! Can't you see? Oh, my God!"

She dropped her face into her hands and he saw her shoulders lift and slump. Glancing aside swiftly, he saw the five golden disks on the table, almost to be reached from where he sat.

"No doubt," he said hastily, as her head was lifted again, "you think that you would like to send me to jail?"

"Jail, no! A thousand times no! But you must, you must let me send you to a hospital!"

He frowned at her while he gave over twirling his hat and grew very still.

"You think I am crazy?" he asked sharply. "That it?"

"No. You are as sane as I am. I don't think that at all. But . . . Oh, can't you understand?"

"No, I can't. You accuse me of this and that, you give no reasons for your wild suspicions, you end up by suggesting medical treatment. What's the answer, Virginia Page?"

"The answer, Roderick Norton, is a very simple one. But first I am going to ask you another question or so. You sought to commit a theft to-night, I saw you, so there is no use denying it to me, is there?"

"Go ahead. What next?"

"While you lay ill during a week or ten days you had time to think. You remember having told me that you had had time to think about everything in the world? It was at that time, wasn't it, that you came to the decision which you mentioned to me that a man to commit crime and play safe at the same time must keep in mind two essential matters: First, the lone hand; second, not to kill?"

"I thought it out then; yes. In fact, I suppose I told you so."

"The crimes committed recently have been characterized by these two essentials, haven't they? Nearly all of them?"

He nodded, watching her keenly, holding back his answers for just a second or two each time.

"I believe so."

"Did you ever have an impulse to steal before you were knocked unconscious at the Casa Blanca?"

"No."

"And you have had that impulse almost all the time ever since? Answer me, tell me the truth! I am right, am I

not?"

Now again he laughed softly at her.

"Virginia Page, the medico, speaks," he returned lightly. "She has a theory. A man may have such an accident, leaving such and such pressure on the brain, with the result that he becomes a thief or worse! Virginia . . ."

"Theory! It is no theory. It is an established, undeniable, and undenied fact! It has occurred time and again, physicians have observed, have made cures! Can't you see now, Rod Norton? Won't you see?"

She was upon her feet, her hands clasped before her, her eyes shining, her figure tense, her cheeks stained with the color of her excitement.

"I don't care whether Patten is a physician or not," she ran on. "He is a bungler. It is a sheer wonder he did not let you die. You told me yourself that he attributed the second wound to your fall and that you knew that Moraga had struck you a terrible blow with his gun-barrel. Patten did not treat that wound; he cared for the lesser injury like a fool and allowed the major one to take care of itself. And the result . . . Oh, dear God! Think of what might have happened. If any one but me had learned what I have learned to-night."

He rose with her, stood still, regarding her with eyes like drills. Then he shook his head.

"You are wrong, Virginia, dead wrong," he told her with quiet emphasis. "You have called me a thief? Well, perhaps I am. You have given your explanation; let me give mine."

He paused, shaping the matter in mind. His face was stern and very, very grave. Presently, his lowered voice guarded against any chance ears, he continued.

"I lay on my bed a week, a long, utterly damnable week. I could do nothing but think. So I thought, as I told you, of everything. Most of all I thought of you, Virginia Page. Shall I tell you why? No; we'll let that go until we understand each other. I thought of myself, of my life, of my eternal striving with Jim Galloway. Some day I should get Galloway or he would get me. In either case, what good? Was not Galloway a wiser man than I? He took what he wanted; I merely wasted my time chasing after such bigger men as he. If he desired a thousand dollars or five, ten thousand, he went out for it like a man and took it. Why shouldn't he? Oh, I tell you I had the time to dwell upon the little meaningless words of honesty and dishonesty, honor and dishonor, and all of their progeny and forebears! They are empty; empty, I tell you, Virginia! When I stood on my feet again I was a free man. I knew it then, I know it now. Free, I tell you. Free, most of all from shackles of empty ideas. What I wanted I would take."

She looked at him helplessly, his dominant vigor for the moment seeming a thing not to be restricted or tamed.

"What you have done," she told him gently, "is to find argument to bolster up impulse. That is generally very easy to do, isn't it? If one wants a thing, it is not hard convincing himself that it is right that he should have it."

"At least I have decided sanely what I wanted, there is no call for hospitals."

"You sustained a fracture of the skull. That fracture had improper treatment. It is a wonder you did not die. The wound healed and there remains a pressure of a bit of bone upon the brain. Until that pressure is removed by an operation you are doomed to be a criminal. A kleptomaniac," she said steadily, "if not much worse."

"I believe that you mean what you say. You are just mistaken, that is all. I'd know if there were anything physically wrong."

She came closer, laid her hand upon his arm, and lifted her eyes pleadingly to his.

"I have had the best of medical training," she said slowly. "I have specialized in brain disorders, interested in that branch of my work until I decided to bring Elmer out here. I know what I am saying. Will you at least promise to do as I ask? Have a thorough examination by a specialist? And have the operation if he advises it?"

"Such an operation is a serious matter?" "Yes. It must be. But think . . ."

"A man might die under the hands of the surgeon?"

"Yes. There is always the danger, there is always the chance of death resulting from any but the most minor of operations. But you are not the man to be afraid, Rod Norton. I know that."

"You say that you have specialized In this sort of thing." He was probing for her thoughts with keen, narrowed eyes. "Would you be willing to perform that operation for me?"

She shrank back suddenly, her hand dropping from his arm.

"No," she cried. "No, no."

He smiled triumphantly.

"Then we'll let it go for a while. If you wouldn't care to do it, afraid that I might die under your knife, I guess I don't want it done at all. I am quite content with things as they are. I see the way to gain the ends I desire; I am gaining them; if there is a brain pressure, well, I'm quite ready to thank God and Moraga for it! Which you may take as absolutely final, Dr. Page!"

She was beaten then and she knew it. She went back to her chair in a sort of bewildered despair, her hands dropping idly to her lap.

"It would be just as well," he said presently, "if I left before any one came in. Before I go, do you mind telling me what you mean to do? Shall you denounce me? Are you going to spread your suspicions abroad?"

"What do you leave me to do? Have I the right to sit still and say nothing? You would go on as you have begun; you would commit fresh crimes. In spite of your 'two essentials' you would be led to kill a man sooner or later. Or you yourself would be killed. Have I the right to allow all of that to continue?"

"Then you have decided to accuse me?"

"It is so hard to decide anything. You make it so hard; can't you see that you do? . . . But, after all, my part is clear; if you will consent to an examination and an operation I will say nothing of what has happened. If you won't do that . . . you will drive me to tell what I know."

"Our trails divide to-night, then? I had hoped for better than that, Virginia."

Though her cheeks flushed, she held her eyes steadily upon his.

"I, too, had hoped for better than that," she confessed, finding this no time for faltering. "I should continue to hope if you would just do your part."

He came a swift step toward her. Then he stopped suddenly, his hands falling to his sides. But the light in his eyes did not diminish.

"Denounce me to-morrow, if you wish," he said slowly, indifferently it seemed to her. "Accept my promise that I will attempt no theft of more gold to-night; give me this one last chance to talk with you. Before some one comes, come out with me. You are not afraid of me; you admit that I am sane. Then let us ride together. And let me talk with you freely. Will you, Virginia? Will you do that one favor for me?"

The high desire was upon her to accede to his request; her calmer judgment forbade it. But to-night was to-night; to-morrow would be to-morrow. And, after all, in her talk with him, she might save the man to himself and to his truer manhood.

But even that hope was less than her desire when she answered him.

"Have my horse saddled," she said. "I'll let Struve think I have to make a call at Las Estrellas. I'll be out in five minutes."

He thanked her with his eyes, opened the hall door, and went out.

CHAPTER XIX

DEADLOCK

Virginia, having changed swiftly to her riding-togs, took up her little black emergency kit, which would lend an air of business urgency to her nocturnal ride with Norton, and stepped out into the hall.

"There's a call for you from Las Estrellas," said Struve, appearing from the front, whence his voice had come to her mingled with the excited tones of a Mexican. "Tony Garcia has been hurt; pretty badly, I expect. His brother says that Tony got his hand caught in some kind of machinery he was fooling with late this afternoon and crushed so that it's all but torn off."

Into the light cast by the hotel porch-lamp Norton, leading Persis, rode around the corner of the building.

"I was just going out," said Virginia. "But I'll go on this case first. Mr. Norton is riding with me. Please ask him to wait while I get my other bag."

In her room again, the lamp lighted on her table, she stood a moment frowning thoughtfully into vacancy. Then with a quick shake of the head she snatched up the two other bags which might be needed in treating Tony's hurt and again hastened out. Norton bending from his saddle took them from her. As Struve relinquished into her gantleted hands the reins of Persis's bridle she swung lightly up to the mare's back.

"The poor fellow must be suffering all kinds of torture," she said as Norton reined in with her. "Let's hurry."

He offered no answer as they clattered out of San Juan and turned out across the level lands toward Las Estrellas. So, as upon another night when speeding upon a similar errand, they rode for a long time in silence. Again they two alone were pushing out into the dark and the vast silence that was broken only by the soft thudding of their own horses' hoofs and the creak of saddle leather and jingle of spur and bit chains.

"You wanted to talk with me?" suggested the girl after fifteen minutes of wordless restraint between them.

"Yes," he answered. "But not now. That is, if you will give me a further chance after you have done what you can for poor old Tony. You will hardly need to stay at Las Estrellas all night, I imagine. When we leave you can listen to me. Do you mind?"

"No," she said slowly. "I don't mind. I'd rather it was then. You and I have a good bit to think about before we do any talking. Haven't we?"

They fell silent again. The soft beauty of the night over the southern desert lands . . . and there is no other earthly beauty like it . . . touched the girl's soul now as it had never done before; perhaps, similarly, it disturbed shadows in the man's. She was distressed by the position in which she found herself, and the night's infinite quiet and utter peace was grateful to her. As she left the hotel her thoughts were in chaos; she was caught in a fearsome labyrinth whence there appeared no escape. Now, though no way out suggested itself, still the stars were shining.

At last the twinkling lights of Las Estrellas, seeming at first fallen stars caught in the mesquite branches, swam into view. Plainly Tony's accident had stimulated much local interest; among the few straggling houses men came and went, while a knot of women, children, and countless mongrel dogs had congregated just outside of the hut where the injured man lay. A brush fire in the street crackled right merrily, its sparks dancing skyward.

"You promise me," said Norton as they drew their horses down to a trot, "not to say anything until we can have had time to talk?"

"I promise," she said wearily.

She entered the sufferer's room first, Norton delaying to tie the horses and lift down the instrument cases from the saddle-strings. She stopped abruptly just beyond the threshold; the smell of chloroform was heavy upon the air,

Tony lay whitefaced upon a table, Caleb Patten with coat off and sleeves rolled up was bending over him.

"Oh, señorita!" cried a woman, hurrying forward, her hands twisting nervously in her apron. And a torrential outpouring in Spanish greeted the mystified Virginia.

"I thought that I was wanted here," she said, looking about her at the four or five grave faces. "Tony's brother came for me."

One of the men shambled forward to explain. "Tony want you," he said quickly. "Tony ver' bad hurt. Dr. Patten come in Las Estrellas by accident, he say got to cut off the arm, can't wait too long or Tony die. He just beginnin' now."

The woman, who, it appeared was Tony's wife and the mother of two of the ragged children out by the fire, joined her voice eagerly to the man's. He translated.

"Eloisa say she thank God you come; Tony want you, she want you. Patten charge one hundred dollar an'. . . ." He shrugged eloquently. "She say you do for Tony; you do better than Patten."

Virginia's eyes flashed upon Patten. He came a step toward her, his attitude half belligerent.

"The man has to be operated upon immediately," he said sharply. "He was hurt in the afternoon out on the end of the ranch; has been all day getting in; fainted half a dozen times, I guess. The arm has to come off at the elbow."

"Thank you," returned Virginia quietly, going to the table. "I'll take the case now, Dr. Patten."

"You?" Patten laughed, his eyes jeering. "You operate? Do you think that they want you to cut a skein of silk with a pair of scissors? Cut off a man's arm . . . how far would you go before you fainted?"

"That'll be about all, Patten," came Norton's voice sternly from the door. "This is Dr. Page's case. Clear out."

"Thank you, Mr. Norton," said Virginia quickly. She was already making an examination of the blood covered arm and hand, and did not look around. "And please clear the room, will you? Let Tony's wife stay, that is all. Eloisa."

The woman came forward, her eyes wide and frightened. Virginia smiled at her reassuringly.

"*No muy malo*," she said in the few Spanish words which she could summon for the occasion from those she had picked up from the desert people. "*Muy bueno mañana*. And now get me some warm water . . . *agua caliente*. Mr. Norton, if you will open my instrument case . . . no; the other one. And then stand by to help with the anaesthetic if Patten hasn't already given him enough to keep him asleep all night!"

She gave her directions concisely and was obeyed. Norton put the last of the undesired onlookers out of the door, closed it after them, found another lamp and some candles, did all that he could think of to help and all that was asked of him. Eloisa, having brought the water, withdrew to a corner and kept her fascinated eyes upon Virginia's face and stubbornly away from her husband's.

Virginia, when she had completed a very thorough examination, turned toward Norton, her eyes blazing.

"Patten has no more right to an M.D. after his name than you have," she cried angrily. "Not so much, for he hasn't even any brains! Cut the man's arm off! Why, there is only a simple fracture above the wrist which won't cause a bit of trouble. The hand is another matter; but even it isn't half as badly mangled as it looks. . . . The second and third fingers are terribly crushed; they've got to come off. We might as well do it now, while he is already under the chloroform. . . . Tell Eloisa just how matters stand and then send her out."

Eloisa, already prepared for the greater operation, gasped her gratitude for the lesser and allowed herself to be gently thrust from the room. Then Norton came back to the table, his eyes wonderingly upon Virginia. He knew that she was capable; he had read that fact the first day when he had seen her hands. But it struck him as rather unusual that a girl, any girl no matter what her training, should take hold as she was doing.

And as she selected her instruments, laid them out upon a bit of sterilized gauze upon a chair, cleansed her hands and prepared to operate he began to feel a sense of utter confidence in her. Rapidly his own anger rose at the thought of the crime Patten would have perpetrated.

Tony Garcia, when in due time his consciousness came back to him bringing the attendant dizzy nausea in its wake, looked down at his side curiously, wondering how it would be to go without an arm. And when his Eloisa told him. . . .

"We are going to sell our cow and the goats to-morrow!" vowed Tony faintly. "And give her all the money!"

"*Si, si*, Tony," wept the wife.

Whereupon the small children, who were teaching the goats to pull a wagon, set up a wail of grief and rebellion.

It struck both Virginia and Norton as a shade odd that Patten should be still in Las Estrellas when they rode out of it long after midnight. They saw him standing in the doorway of the one still lighted building of the village as they galloped past. It was the Three Star saloon. Patten's horse was tied in front of it. Since Patten neither drank nor played at dice or cards here might have been matter to ponder on. But in neither mind was there place now for any interest other than that which again held them silent and constrained.

Las Estrellas lost behind them, they drew their horses down into a rocking trot, then to a slow walk. Virginia rode with her head up, her eyes upon the field of stars. Her face, as Norton kept close to her side, looked very white in the starlight. He would have given much to have seen her eyes when a little later he began to talk. And she was conscious of a kindred wish.

"Look yonder," she said. "The late moon is coming up. There will be a little more light then and. . . . And I want to look at you, Rod Norton, while we thresh it out."

The thin curved sliver of silver thrusting up over the edge of the world in the east, ghostly and pale, added little to the throbbing gleam of the stars; but the waiting for it had put Las Estrellas a mile behind them, had set them alone together out in the heart of the silences, had given them that last excuse to be had to set back an evil moment. Virginia, with a sigh, brought her eyes down from the glitter of the wide heavens and sought Norton's.

"I am afraid," she said listlessly, "that there is no way out for us, Rod Norton."

"There is a way!" he began quickly

"There is no way unless you do what I say. If you would only give me your word to take the stage to-morrow, to go to a competent surgeon, to submit to the operation. If you would only give me your word. . . ."

"I give you my word," he said sharply, "that that is just the thing which I will never do. Virginia, breathe deep, fill your lungs with the wonder of the night; realize what it means to live; think what it means to die! You say that I am not afraid of death; well, maybe not if it comes in a guise I have grown up to be familiar with. But to lie as I saw Tony Garcia lying just now, powerless, unconscious, without will or knowledge of what was coming to me, and to let a man cut into me. . . . I'd rather die, I think, standing upon my two feet and fighting it out with a gun! You would go on and tell me that the chances would be highly in favor of my recovery; and yet you would admit that the danger would be grave."

"Then you are afraid, after all? That is it? That holds you back?" She found it hard to believe that he was telling her his true emotion.

"I am merely measuring the chances," he said steadily. "I am satisfied with life as I find it; I do not believe that there is anything wrong with me; I see at least the possibility of death and nothing to be gained by submitting to an operation."

"Then," she said again wearily, "there is no way out."

"But there is! My way, not the one you have thought of. You have stumbled upon a thing which you must forget; that is all. Give me the free swing to finish Jim Galloway, to complete certain other undertakings. Promise me that you will do this; in return I will promise you not to . . ."

And here he hesitated.

"Not to commit another theft?" She set the matter squarely before him. "Can you promise that, Rod Norton? Could you keep the promise were it once made?"

"Yes."

"No! You could not. You don't understand or you won't understand. You would obey the impulse which would come just as certainly as the sun will rise and set again. So I can neither accept your promise . . . nor give you mine."

"You will tell what you have guessed?"

"Rather what I know! Even if you were my own brother. . . ."

"Or your lover?" he demanded, a challenge in his voice.

"Or my lover. For his sake if not for the sake of others."

For a little while he made no answer. Again there was absolute silence between him, a troubled silence filled with pain. Then suddenly he leaned close to her, threw out his hand for Persis's rein, jerked both horses back to a fretful standstill.

"Can't you see what you force me to do?" he demanded half angrily. "Do you picture what your denunciation would do for me? Do you think that I can let you make it?"

His face was so near hers that she could see it clearly in the pallid light. He could see hers and that it was lifted fearlessly.

"How will you stop me?" she asked quietly.

"I will finish Jim Galloway out of hand," he told her savagely. "It will no longer be the representative of the law against the lawbreaker; it will just be Norton and Galloway, both men! I will accomplish the one other matter I have planned. Both will require not over three or four days. During that time . . . I tell you, Virginia, I have grown into a free man, a man who does what he wants to do, who takes what he wants to take, who is not bound by flimsy shackles of other men's codes. During those three or four days I shall see that you do no talking!"

Once more, her voice quickened, she asked:

"How will you stop me?"

"We have come to a deadlock; argument does no good. Either I must yield to you or you to me. There is too much at stake to allow of a man being squeamish. I don't care much for the job, but by high Heaven I am of no mind to watch life run by through the bars of a penitentiary. After all action becomes simplified when a crisis comes; doesn't it? There is just one answer, just one way out. You will come with me, now. I will put you where you will have no opportunity to do any talking for the few days in which I shall finish what I have to do." His hand on Persis's rein drew the two horses still closer together. "Give me your promise, Virginia; or come with me!"

Her quick spurt of anger rose, flared, and dwindled away like a little flame extinguished by a splash of rain; the tears were stinging her eyes almost before the last word. For she felt that here was no Roderick Norton speaking, but rather a bit of bone pressing upon the delicate machinery which is a man's brain.

"Where would you take me?" she asked faintly.

"To the King's Palace," he answered bitterly. "Where we had one perfect, happy day, Virginia; where, I had hoped, we would have other perfect days. Oh, girl, can't you see," and his voice went thrilling through her, "can't you see what I have hoped, what I have dreamed. . . ."

"You might still hope," she told him steadily. "You might still dream."

"I will!" His eyes shone at her, his erect form outlined against the black of the earth and the gleam of the stars was eloquent of mastery. "There will come a time when you will see life as I see it. . . . And now, for the last time, will you give me your promise, Virginia? It is forced upon you; you will be blameless in giving it. Will you do so?"

She only shook her head, her lips trembling, not trusting her voice. . . . And then, in a sort of daze, she knew that they had turned off to the left, that no longer was San Juan ahead of them, that they were riding toward the gloomy bulwark of the mountains.

CHAPTER XX

FLUFF AND BLACK BILL

Fluff and Black Bill were quarrelling.

Elmer, while Norton and Virginia were on their way from San Juan to Las Estrellas, had dropped in at the hotel to see his sister. He found upon her office table the card which she always left for him; this merely informed him that she was "out on a case at Las Estrellas." Elmer had come for her purposing to suggest a call upon the Engles. For not yet had he summoned the hardihood to present himself alone at Florrie's home. Now, disgruntled, seeing plainly that Virginia would never get back in time, he went out on the veranda and took solace from the pipe to which he had grown fairly accustomed. To him came the girl of whom he was thinking. "Hello, Fluff," he said from the shadows.

"Hello, Black Bill," she greeted him. "Where's Virgie?"

"Gone," he informed her, waving his pipe. "On a case to Las Estrellas. I'm waiting for her. Did you want to see her?"

Florrie, coming down the veranda to him, giggled.

"No," she told him flippantly. "I'm looking for the Emperor of China. I never was so lonesome. . . ."

"So'm I," said Elmer. He pushed a chair forward with his foot. "Sit down and we'll wait for her. And I'll go in and bring out a couple of bottles of ginger ale or something."

"Will she be back real soon?" asked Florrie pretending to hesitate.

"Sure," he assured her positively.

"All right then." Florrie with a great rustling of skirts sat down. "But you must be nice to me, Black Bill."

"It's always you who starts it," he muttered at her. "I'd be friends if you would. What's the good of spating like two kids, anyway?"

"We're really not kids any longer, are we?" she agreed demurely. "I feel terribly grown up sometimes, don't you?"

From which point they got along swimmingly for perhaps five minutes longer than it had ever been possible for them to talk together without "starting something." Elmer, very emphatic in his own mind concerning his matured status, yearned for her to understand it as he did. With such purpose clearly before him . . . and before her, too, for that matter, since Miss Florrie had a keen little comprehension of her own . . . he spoke largely of himself and his blossoming plans. He was a vaquero, to begin with; he had ridden fifty miles yesterday on range business; he was making money; he was putting part of that money away in Mr. Engle's bank. There was a little ranch on the rim of Engle's big holding which belonged to an old half-breed; Elmer meant to acquire it himself one of these days. And before so very long, too. Mr. Engle had been approached and was looking into it, might be persuaded to advance the couple of thousand dollars for the property, taking as security a mortgage until Elmer could have squared for it. Then Black Bill would begin stocking his place, a cow now, a horse, another cow, and so on.

He had launched himself valiantly into his tale. But at a certain point he began to swallow and catch at his words and smoke fast between sentences. He had located a dandy spot for a house . . . the jolliest little spring of cold water you ever saw . . . a knoll with big trees upon it.

"We'll make up a party with Virginia and Norton some day and ride out there," he said abruptly. "I . . . I'd like to have you see it, Fluff."

She was tremulously delighted. She sensed the nearest thing to an out-and-out proposal which had ever sung in her ears. She leaned forward eagerly, her hands clasped to keep them from trembling. She was sixteen, he eighteen . . . and she had his assurance of a moment ago that they were no longer just "kids." And then and there their so-long-delayed quarrel began. Just at the wrong time, after the time-honored fashion of quarrels. He was ready to twine the vine about the veranda posts of the house on the knoll where the spring and the big trees were, she was ready to plant the fig-tree. Then she had glimpsed something just too funny for anything in the idea of Elmer raising pigs . . . for he had gone on to that, sagely anticipating a high market another season . . . and she laughed at him and all unintentionally wounded his feelings. In a flash he was Black Bill again and on his mettle, ready with the quick retort stung from him; and she, parrying his thrust, was at once Fluff, the mercuric. The spat was on . . . they would call it a spat to-morrow if to-morrow were kind to them . . . and Elmer's ranch and house and cow, horse and pigs were laughed to scorn.

Florrie departed leaving her cruellest laughter to ring in his ears. This might have been a repetition of any one of a dozen episodes familiar to them both, but never, perhaps, had Elmer's ears burned so or Florrie's heart so disturbed her with its beating. For, she thought regretfully as she hurried out into the street, they had been getting along so nicely. . . .

She had no business out alone at this time of night and she knew it. So she hurried on, anxious to get home before her father, who was returning late from a visit to one of his ranches. Abreast of the Casa Blanca she slowed up, looking in curiously. Then, as again she was hastening on, she heard Jim Galloway's deep voice in a quiet "Good evening, Miss Florence."

"Good evening!" gasped Florrie aloud. And "Oh!" said Florrie under her breath. For Galloway's figure had separated itself from the shadows at the side of his open door and had come out into the street, while Galloway was saying in a matter-of-fact way: "I'll see you home."

She wanted to run and could not. She hung a moment balancing upon a high heel in indecision. Galloway stepped forward swiftly, coming to her side. "Oh, dear," the inner Florrie was saying. A glance over her shoulder showed her Black Bill standing out in front of Struve's hotel. Well, there were compensations.

She started to hurry on, and had Jim Galloway been less sure of himself, troubled with the diffidence of youth as was Elmer, he must have either given over his purpose or else fairly run to keep up with her. But being Jim Galloway, he laid a gentle but none the less restraining hand upon her arm.

"Please," he said quietly. "I want to talk with you. May I?"

Florrie's arm burned where he had touched her. She was all in a flutter, half frightened and the other half flattered. A shade more leisurely they walked on toward the cottonwoods. Here, in the shadows, Galloway stopped and Florrie, although beginning to tremble, stopped with him.

"Men have given me a black name here," he was saying as he faced her. "They've made me somewhat worse than I am. I feel that I have few friends, certainly very few of my own class. I like to think of you as a friend. May I?"

It was distinctly pleasant to have a big man like Galloway, a man whom for good or for bad the whole State knew, pleading with her. It gave a new sort of assurance to her theory that she was "grown up"; it added to her importance in her own eyes.

"Why, yes," said Florrie.

"I am going away," he continued gravely. "For just how long I don't know. A week, perhaps a month, maybe longer. It is a business matter of considerable importance, Florence. Nor is it entirely without danger. It will take me down below the border, and an American in Mexico right now takes his life entirely into his own hands. You know that, don't you?"

"Then why do you go?"

Galloway smiled down at her.

"If I held back every time a danger-signal was thrown out," he said lightly, "I wouldn't travel very far. Oh, I'll come back all right; a man may go through fire itself and return if he has the incentive which I have." His tone altered subtly. Florrie started.

"But before I go," went on Galloway, "I am going to tell you something which I think you know already. You do, don't you, Florence?"

She would not have been Florrie at all, but some very different, unromantic, and unimaginative creature, had she failed of comprehension. Jim Galloway was actually making love to her!

"What do you mean, Mr. Galloway?" she managed to stammer.

"I mean that what I am telling you is for your ears alone. I am placing a confidence in you, the greatest confidence a man can place in a girl. Or in a woman, Florence. I am trusting that what I say will remain just between you and me for the present. . . . When I come back I will be no longer just Jim Galloway of the Casa Blanca, but Galloway of one of the biggest grants in Mexico, with mile after mile of fertile lands, with a small army of servants, vaqueros, and retainers, a sort of ruler of my own State! It sounds like a fairy-tale, Florence, but it is the sober truth made possible by conditions below the border. My estates will run down to the blue water of the Gulf; I shall have my own fleet of ocean-going yachts; there is a port upon my own land. There will be a home overlooking the sea like a king's palace. Will you think of all that while I am gone? Will you think of me a little, too? Will you remember that my little kingdom is crying out for its queen? . . . No; I am not asking you to answer me now. I am just asking that you hold this as our secret until I come back. Until I come back for you! . . . I shall stand here until you reach your home," he broke off suddenly. "Good night, my dear."

"Good night," said Florence faintly, a little dazed by all that he had said to her. Then, running through the shadows to her home, she was thinking of the boy who had wished to propose to her and of the man who had done so; of Elmer's little home upon the knoll surrounded by a cow, a horse, and some pigs . . . and of a big house like a palace looking out to sea across the swaying masts of white-sailed, sea-going yachts!

CHAPTER XXI

A CRISIS

Like Norton, Virginia found life simplifying itself in a crisis. Upon three hundred and sixty days or more of the average year each individual has before him scores of avenues open to his thoughts or to his act; he may turn wheresoever he will. But in the supreme moments of his life, with brief time for hesitation granted him, he may be forced to do one of two things: he must leap back or plunge forward to escape the destiny rushing down upon him like a speeding engine threatening him who has come to stand upon the crossing. Now Virginia saw clearly that she must submit to Norton's mastery and remain silent in the King's Palace or she must seek to escape and tell what she knew or . . . Was there a remaining alternative? If so it must present itself as clearly as the others. Action was stripped down to essentials, bared to its component elements. True vision must necessarily result, since no side issues cluttered the view.

She sat upon a saddle-blanket upon the rock floor of the main chamber of the series of ancient dwelling-rooms, staring at the fire which Norton had builded against a wall where it might not be seen from without. The horses were in the meadow down by the stream; she and Norton had tethered them among the trees where they were fairly free from the chance of being seen. Norton was coming up, mounting the deep-worn steps in the cliff side. He had gone for water; he had not been out of sight nor away five minutes. And yet when she looked up to see him coming through the irregular doorway she had decided.

She saw in him both the man and the gentleman. Her anger had died down long ago, smothered in the ashes of her distress; now she summoned to the fore all that she might in extenuation of what he did. She did not blame him for the crimes which she knew he had committed because she was so confident that the chief crime of all had been the act resulting from Caleb Patten's abysmal ignorance. Nor now could she blame Norton that, embarked upon this flood of his life, he saw himself forced to make her his prisoner for a few hours. It was a man's birthright to protect himself, to guard his freedom. And her heart gave him high praise that toward her he acted with all deference, that with things as they were, while he was man enough to hold her here, he was too much the gentleman to make love to her. Would she have resisted, would she have opposed calm argument against a hot avowal? She did not know.

"Virginia," he said gravely as he slumped down upon the far side of the fire, "I feel the brute. But . . ."

Yes, she had decided, fully decided, whether it be for better or for worse. Now she surprised him with one of her quick, bright, friendly smiles while she interrupted:

"Let us make the best of a bad situation," she said swiftly. "I am not unhappy right now; I have no wish to run half-way to meet any unhappiness which may be coming our way. You are not the brute toward me; what you do, I do not so much as censure you for. I am not going to quarrel with you; were I in your boots I imagine I'd do just exactly as you are doing. I hope I'd be as nice about it, too. And now, before we drop the subject for good and all, let me say this: no matter what I do, should it even be the betraying you into the hands of your enemies, to put it quite tragically, I want you to know that I wish you well and that is why I do it. Can you understand me?"

"Yes," he said slowly. "It's sweet of you, Virginia. If you got my gun and shot my head off, I don't know who should blame you. I shouldn't!" he concluded with a forced attempt to match her smile.

"Then we understand each other? As long as each does the best he can see his way to do, the other finds no fault?" And when he nodded she rose quickly and came to him, putting out her hand as he rose. "Rod Norton," she said simply, and her eyes shone steady and clear into his, "I wish you the best there is. I think we should both pray a little to God to help us to-night. . . . And now, if you will run up to your Treasure Chamber and bring down the coffee, I'll promise to be here when you get back. And to make you a good hot drink; I feel the need of it and so do you."

He went out without an answer, his face grave and troubled again. As her eyes followed him they were no longer gay but wistful, and then filled with a sadness which she had not shown to him, and then suddenly wet. But before he had gone half a dozen steps from the door she dashed a hasty hand across her eyes and went swiftly to the

smallest of the three black leather cases he had brought up here after her.

"This is the one way out, Rod Norton!" she whispered. "The one way out if God is with us."

Her quick fingers sought and found the tiny phial with its small white tablets . . . labelled *Hyoscine* . . . and secreted it in her bosom. She was laying fresh twigs upon the blaze when he came back with the coffee-pot, can of coffee, and a tin cup. She greeted him with another quick smile. He saw that her cheeks were flushed rosily, that there was subdued excitement in her eyes. And yet matters just as they were would sufficiently explain these phenomena without causing him to quest farther. He thought merely that he had never seen her so delightfully pretty.

"Virginia Page," he told her as his own eyes grew bright with the new light leaping up into them, "some day . . ."

"Sh!" she commanded, her color deepened. "Let us wait until that day comes. Now you just obey orders; lie there and smoke while I make the coffee."

He wanted to wait on her, but when she insisted he withdrew to the wall a few feet away, sat down, filled his pipe, and watched her. And while he filled his eyes with her he marvelled afresh. For it seemed to him that her mood was one of unqualified happiness. She did all of the talking, her words came in a ceaseless bright flow, she laughed readily and often, her eyes were dancing, the warm color stood high in her cheeks. That her heart was beating like mad, that the intoxication of an intent he could not read had swept into her brain, that she was vastly more in the mood to weep than to smile . . . all of this lay hidden to him behind her woman's wit. For, having decided, there would be no going back.

With the coffee boiling in the old black and spoutless pot from Norton's cache in the Treasure Chamber, she poured what was left of the ground coffee from its tin to the flat surface of a bit of stone. This tin was to serve Norton as his cup.

"It's to be our night-cap," she laughed at him as she put the improvised cup by the other. "I refuse to sit up any later; a saddle-blanket for bunk, and then to sleep. That is my room yonder, isn't it?" She nodded toward the black entrance to the second of the chambers of the King's Palace. "And you will sleep here? Well, while the coffee cools, I'm going to make my bed." She carried her blanket on past him, was gone into the yawning darkness, was back in a moment.

"My bed's ready," she told him gayly. "This kind of housekeeping just suits me! Now for the coffee. . . . Rod Norton, will you do as you are told or not? You are to sit still and let me wait on you; who's hostess here, I'd like to know?"

While out of his sight she had slipped one of the hyoscine tablets into her palm; now, as she poured the ink-black beverage, she let it drop into the tin can which she presented to Norton.

"Don't say it doesn't taste right!" she admonished him in a voice in which at last he detected the nervous note.

He stood up, holding his coffee-can in his hand, meeting her strained levity with a deep gravity.

"Virginia," he began.

"It's too late to cut in on my monologue!" she cried gayly. "Pledge me in the drink I have made for you, Mr. Norton! Just say: 'Virginia, here's looking at you!' Or: 'I wish you well in all that you undertake.' Or: 'For all that you have said to me, for whatever you may say or do in the future, I forgive you!' That's all."

"Virginia," he said gently, "I love you, my dear."

She laughed nervously.

"That's the nice way to say everything all at once!" He saw that her hand shook, that a little of her coffee spilled, and that again she grew steady. "Now our night-cap and good night!"

She drank hurriedly. Thereafter she yawned and made her little pretense of increased drowsiness.

"It's been such a long day," she said. "You'll forgive me if I tumble right straight into sleepy-land?"

Again they said good night and she left him, going down among the eerie dancing shadows to her own quarter, drawing his moody eyes after her. When she had gone, he threw down his own blanket across the main entrance of the King's Palace, filled his pipe again, and sat staring out into the night.

The fire cast up its red flare spasmodically, licked at the last of the dead branches which, rolling apart, burned out upon the rock floor. The darkness once more blotted out all detail saving the few smouldering coals, the knobs of stone in the small flickering circles of light, the quiet form of the man silhouetted against the lesser dark of the night without. Virginia, rigid and motionless at the spot to which she had stolen noiselessly, watched him breathlessly.

For only a little he sat smoking. Then, as though he experienced something of that weariness of which she had made pretense, he laid his pipe aside and stretched out upon his blanket, leaning upon an elbow. She heard him sigh, vaguely made out when he let his head slip down upon an arm, saw that he had grown still, and was lying stretched out across the main threshold.

Now she must stand motionless while every fibre of her being demanded action; now she must curb impetuosity to the call of caution. As the seconds passed, all but insupportable in their tedious slowness, she stood rigid and tense, waiting. But soon she knew that the drug had had its will with him, that he was steeped in deep sleep, that no longer must she wait, that now at length she might act.

Carrying her saddle-blanket she came to him and stood quietly looking down into his upturned face. At last she could let the tears burst into her eyes unchecked, now she could suddenly go down on her knees beside him, for an instant laying her cheek lightly against his in the first caress. Would it be the last? He stirred a little and sighed again. She drew back, still upon her knees again breathlessly rigid. But his stupor clung heavily to him, and she knew that it would hold him thus for hours.

A score of burning questions clamoring in her mind she disposed of briefly, since time was of the essence.

"If I let you have your way, Rod Norton," she whispered, "you will go on from crime to tragedy. If I hand you over to the law, I will be betraying you for no end; for your type of man finds the way to break jail and so force his own hand to further violence. There is the one way out. . . . And God help me to succeed. God forgive me if I fail!"

She stole by him and stepped upon the outer ledge. She was leaving him helpless . . . the thought presented itself that she would have another thing to answer for if one of the many men with such cause to hate him should come upon him thus. Well, that was but one of the more remote chances she must take. There was scant enough likelihood that any one should come here before she could race into Las Estrellas and back.

Then it was that she saw Patten. She did not know at first that it was Patten, but just that within a few feet of her upon the ledge which she must travel to the steps a man was standing, his body jerking back, pressed against the rocks as he saw her. She drew back swiftly, her blood in riotous tumult.

But now, above aught else, the one thought in her mind was that there was no time for loitering, that the dawn would come all too soon, that there must be no delay. She stooped quickly and drew from its holster Norton's heavy revolver. Her saddle-blanket over her left arm, the gun gripped in her right hand, she was once more upon the ledge, moving cautiously toward the figure seen a moment ago, gone now.

That it was Patten she knew only when she had gone down the steps and had overtaken him there. Retreating thus far, reassured when he had made out that it was the girl alone, he waited for her. And as she demanded nervously, "Who is it?" it was Patten's disagreeable laugh which answered her.

"So," he jeered at her, "this is the sort of thing you do when you are supposed to be out on a case all night!"

Patten here! Had God sent him . . . or the devil? His insult she passed over. She was not thinking of herself right now, of convention, of wagging tongues. She was just seeking to understand how this latest incident might simplify

or make more complex her problem.

"I've had my suspicions all along," he laughed evilly. "To-night I followed and made sure. And now, my fine little white dove, what have you to say for yourself?"

Might she use Patten? She was but now on her way to Las Estrellas for aid. She would operate herself, she would take that upon herself, with no more regard for ethics than for Patten's gossiping tongue. She believed that she could do it successfully; at the least she must make the attempt, though Norton died under her hand. The right? She had the right! The right because she loved him, because he loved her, because his whole future was at stake. But she must have assistance so that she submit him to no needless danger, so that she give him every chance under such circumstances as these. She would have brought a man from Las Estrellas, she would have let him think what pleased him, just saying that Norton had met with an accident, that an operation was necessary. And now Patten was here.

Could she use him?

"You followed us?" she said, gaining time for her thoughts.

"Yes; I followed you. I saw you come here. I watched while he unsaddled, how he came up to you. What I could not see through the rock walls I could guess! And now . . ."

"Well, now?" she repeated after him, so that Patten must have marvelled at her lack of emotion. "Now what?"

"Now," he spat at her venomously, "I think I have found the fact to shut Roderick Norton's blabbing mouth for him!"

"I don't understand . . ."

"You don't? You mean that he hasn't done any talking to you about me?"

"Oh!" And now suddenly she did understand. "You mean how you are not Caleb Patten at all but Charles? How you are no physician but liable to prosecution for illegal practising?"

Could she use him or could she not? That was what she was thinking, over and over.

"Where is he?" demanded Patten a little suspiciously. "What is he doing? What are you doing out here alone?"

"He is asleep," she told him.

Patten laughed again.

"Your little parties are growing commonplace then!"

"Charles Patten," she cut in coolly, "I have stood enough of your insult. Be still a moment and let me think."

He stared at her but for a little; his own mind busy, was silent. Could she make use of this blind instrument which fate had thrust into her hand? She began to believe that she could.

"Charles Patten," she went on, a new vigor in her tone, "Mr. Norton knows enough concerning you to make you a deal of trouble. Just how long a term in the State prison he can get for you I don't know. But . . ."

"Haven't I found the way to shut his mouth!" he said sharply.

"I think not. Before your slanders could travel far we could have found Father Jose and have been married. But let me finish. You have practised here for upward of two years, haven't you? You have made money, you have a ranch of your own. That is one thing to keep in mind. The other is that more than one of your patients have died. I believe, Charles Patten, that it would be a simple matter to have the district attorney convict you of murder. That's the second thing to remember."

Patten shifted uneasily. Then she knew that it had been God who had sent him. When he sought to bluster, she cut him short.

"In the morning, as soon as there is light enough," she said, wondering at her own calmness, "I am going to perform a capital operation upon Mr. Norton. It will be without his knowledge and consent. If he lives and you will give up your practice and retire to your ranch or what business pleases you, I will guarantee that he does not prosecute you for what has passed. If he dies . . ."

"If he dies"--he snatched the words from her--"it will be murder!"

". . . you would be free from prosecution," she continued, quite as though he had made no interruption, "I rather imagine that I should die, too. And, as you say, I would be liable for murder. He is asleep now because I have drugged him. I shall chloroform him before he wakes. I should have no defense in the law-courts. Yes, it would be murder."

He drew a step back from her as though from one suddenly gone mad.

"What are you operating for?" he demanded.

"For your blunder," she said simply. "And you are going to help me."

"Am I?" he jeered. "Not by a damned sight! If you think that I am going to let myself in for that sort of thing . . ."

Until now he had not seen the gun in her hand. Her quick gesture showed it to him.

"Charles Patten," she told him emphatically, "I am risking Mr. Norton's life; I am therefore risking my own. Understand what that means. Understand just what you have got to win or lose by to-night's work. Consider that I pledge you my word not to implicate you in what you do; that if worse came to worse, you could claim and I would admit that you were forced at the point of a gun to do as I told you. Oh, I can shoot straight! And finally, I will shoot straight, as God watches me, rather than let you go now and stop what I have undertaken! Think of it well, Charles Patten!"

Patten, being as weak of mind as he was pudgy of hand, having besides that peculiar form of craft which is vouchsafed his type, furthermore more or less of a coward, saw matters quite as Virginia wished him. Together they awaited the coming of the dawn. The girl, realizing to the uttermost what lay before her, forced herself to rest, lying still under the stars, schooling herself to the steady-nerved action which was to have its supreme test.

Just before the dawn they had coffee and a bite to eat from Norton's little pack. Close to the drugged man they builded a rude low table by dragging the squared blocks of fallen stone from their place by the wall. Upon this Virginia placed the saddle-blankets, neatly folded. Already Patten was showing signs of nervousness. Looking into her face he saw that it was white and drawn but very calm. Patten was asking himself countless questions, many of them impossible of answer yet. She was closing her mind to everything but the one supreme matter.

He helped her give the chloroform when she told him that there was sufficient light and that she was ready. He brought water, placed instruments, stood by to do what she told him. His nervousness had grown into fear; he started now and then, jerking about guiltily, as though he foresaw an interruption.

Together they got Norton's inert form upon the folded blankets. Patten's hands shook a little; he asked for a sip of brandy from her flask. She granted it, and while Patten drank she cut away the hair from the unconscious man's scalp. Long ago her fingers had made their examination, were assured that her diagnosis was correct. Her hands were as untrembling as the steel of her knife. She made the first incision, drawing back the flap of skin and flesh, revealing the bone of the skull. . . .

For forty-five minutes she worked, her hands swift, sure, capable, unerring. It was done. She was right. The under-table of the skull had been fractured; there was the bone pressure upon the underlying area of brain-tissue. She had removed the pressure and with it any true pathological cause of the theft impulse.

She drew a bandage about the sleeping eyes. She made Patten bring his own saddle-blanket; it was fixed across the entrance of the anteroom of the King's Palace, darkening it. Then she went to the ledge just outside and stood there, staring with wide eyes across the little meadow with its flowers and birds and water, down the slope of the mountain, to the miles of desert. She had now but to await the awakening.

CHAPTER XXII

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

When Norton stirred and would have opened his eyes but for the bandage drawn over them, she was at his side. She had been kneeling there for a long time, waiting. Her hand was on his where it had crept softly from his wrist.

"You must lie very still," she commanded gently. "I am with you and everything is all right. There was . . . an accident. No, don't try to move the cloth; please, Roderick." She pushed his hand back down to his side. "We are in the King's Palace, just you and I, and everything is all right."

He was feverish, and she soothed him; sick, and she mothered him and nursed him; troubled, uncertain, perplexed, and she comforted him. At the first she went no further than saying that there had been an accident; that already she had sent to San Juan for all that was needed to make him comfortable; that Mr. Engle had been instructed to speed a man to the railroad for further necessities; that now for his own sake, for her sake, he must just lie very still . . . try not even to think.

He was listless, seeming without volition, quite willing to surrender himself into her keeping. What dazed thoughts were his upon this first awakening were lost, forgotten in the brief doze into which she succeeded in luring him. When again he stirred and woke she was still at his side, kneeling upon the hard rock floor beside him. . . . She had had Patten help her to lift him down from the table before she despatched Patten with the note for John Engle. Again she pleaded with him to lie still and just trust to her.

He was very still. She knew that he was trying to piece together his fragmentary thoughts and impressions, seeking to bridge over from last night to to-day. So she talked softly with him, soothing him alike with the tenderness of her voice and the pressure and gentle stroke of her hand upon his hand and arm. He had had an accident but was going to be all right from now on. But he must not be moved for a little. Therefore Engle would come soon, and perhaps Mrs. Engle with him. And a wagon bringing a real bed and fresh clean sheets and all of those articles which she had listed. It would not be very long now until Engle came.

But at last when she paused his hand shut down upon hers and he asked quietly:

"I didn't dream it all, did I, Virginia? It is hard to know just what I did and what I dreamed I did. But it seems more than a dream. . . . Was it I who robbed Kemble of the Quigley mines?"

"Yes," she told him lightly, as though it were a matter of small moment. "But you were not responsible for what you did."

"And there were other robberies? I even tried to steal from you?"

"Yes," she answered again.

"And you wanted to have me submit to an operation? And I would not?"

"Yes."

"And then . . . then you . . . you did it?"

So she explained, feeling that certainty would be less harmful to him now than a continual struggle to penetrate the curtain of semidarkness obscuring his memory.

"I took it upon myself," she told him at the end. "I took the chance that you might die; that it might be I who had killed you. Perhaps I had no right to do it. But I have succeeded; I have drawn you back from kleptomania to your own clear moral strength. You will get well, Rod Norton; you will be an honest man. But I took it upon myself to take the chances for you. Now . . . do you think that you can forgive me?"

He appeared to be pondering the matter. When his reply came it was couched in the form of a question:

"Would you have done it, Virginia . . . if you didn't love me a little as I love you?"

And her answer comforted him. He was sleeping when the Engles came.

Later came the big wagon, one of Engle's men driving, Ignacio Chavez and two other Mexicans accompanying on horseback. Virginia had forgotten nothing. Quick hands did her bidding now, altering the anteroom of the King's Palace into a big airy bedroom. There was a great rug upon the floor, a white-sheeted and counterpaned bed, fresh pajamas, table, chair, alcohol-stove, glasses and cups and water-pitchers. There were cloths for fresh bandages, wide palm-leaf fans . . . there was even ice and the promise of further ice to come. The sun was shut out by heavy curtains across the main entrance and the broken-out holes in the easterly wall.

"My dear," said Mrs. Engle, taking both of Virginia's hands into her own, "I don't know just what has happened and I don't care to know until you get good and ready to tell me about it. But I can see by looking at you that you are at the end of your tether. I'm going to take care of Roddy now while you sleep at least a couple of hours."

She and Engle had asked themselves the question as soon as Virginia's note came to them: "What in the world were she and Norton doing on the mountainside at that time of night?" But they had no intention of asking it of any one else. Rather John Engle hastened to answer it for others.

"*Muchachos*" he said to the men when he sent them back to San Juan, "there was an accident last night. Señor Norton had a fall from his horse, striking his head. My cousin, Miss Page, together with Señor Norton and Señor Patten, was taking a short cut this way to make a call at Pozo. Señor Patten and Miss Page succeeded in getting Señor Norton here, where they had to operate upon him immediately. He is doing well now, thanks to their prompt action; he will be well soon. You may tell his friends."

And then, seeing little that he could do here and much that he might accomplish elsewhere, John Engle rode on his spurs back to San Juan to lay down the law to Patten.

Throughout the days and nights which followed, Virginia and Mrs. Engle nursed Norton back into a semblance of strength. One of them was always at his side. When at last the bandage might be removed from the blindfolded eyes Norton's questing glance found Virginia first of all.

"Virginia," he said quietly, "thanks to you I can start in all over now."

She understood. So did Mrs. Engle. For Norton had explained to both the banker and his wife, holding nothing back from them, telling them frankly of crimes committed, of his attempted abduction of the girl who in turn had "abducted him." He had restitutions to make without the least unnecessary delay. He must square himself and he thanked God that he could square himself, that his crimes had been bloodless, that he had but to return the stolen moneys. And, to wipe his slate clean, he stood ready to pay to the full for what he had done, to offer his confession openly, to accept without a murmur whatever decree the court might award him.

Again John Engle did his bit. He went to the county-seat and saw the district attorney, an upright man, but one who saw clearly. The lawyer laid his work aside and came immediately with Engle to the King's Palace.

"Any court, having the full evidence," he said crisply, "would hold you blameless. Give me the money you have taken; I shall see that it is returned and that no questions are asked. And if you've got any idiotic compulsion about open confession . . . Well, think of somebody besides yourself for a change. Try thinking about the Wonder Girl a little, it will be good for you."

For he never called her anything but that, the Wonder Girl. When he had heard everything, he came to her after his straightforward fashion and gripped her hand until he hurt her.

"I didn't know they made girls like you," he told her before she even knew who he was.

It was he who, summoning all of his forensic eloquence, finally quieted Norton's disturbed mind. Norton in his weakened condition was all for making a clean breast before the world, for acknowledging himself unfit for his office, for resigning. But in the end when he was told curtly that he owed vastly more to the county than to his stupid conscience, that he had been chosen to get Jim Galloway, that that was his job, that he could do all the resigning he wanted to afterward, and that finally he was not to consider his own personal feelings until he had thought of Virginia's, Norton gave over his regrets and merely waxed impatient for the time when he could finish his work and go back to Las Flores rancho. For it was understood that he would not go alone.

"I'll free del Rio because I have to, not because I want to," said the lawyer at the end. "Trusting to you to bring him in again later. He is one of Galloway's crowd and I know it, despite his big bluffs. Galloway is away right now, somewhere below the border. Just what he is up to I don't know. I think del Rio does. When Galloway gets back you keep your eye on the two of them."

After the county attorney's departure Rod Norton rested more easily. He was making restitution for all that he had done, he was getting well and strong again, he had been given such proof as comes to few men of the utter devotion of a woman. Through many a bright hour he and Virginia, daring to look confidently ahead, talked of life as it might be lived upon Las Flores when the lake was made, the lower lands irrigated, the big home built.

"And," she confessed to him at the last, her face hidden against his breast, "I never want to see a surgeon's lancet again in all of my life, Rod Norton!"

When at length the sheriff could bestride a horse he wondered impatiently what it could be that kept Jim Galloway so long away. And if he was never coming back. But he knew that high up among the cliffs, hidden away in the ancient caves, Jim Galloway's rifles were still lying.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE STRONG HAND OF GALLOWAY

"Oh, you will all dance and shout together very soon," said Ignacio wisely to his six bells in the old Mission garden. "You will see! Captain and the Dancer and Lolita, the Little One, La Golondrina, and Ignacio Chavez, all of you together until far out across the desert men hear. For it is in the air that things will happen. And then, when it is all done . . . Why then, amigos, who but me is going to build a little roof over you that runs down both ways, to save you from the hot sun and the rains? . . . Oh, one knows. It is in the air. You will see!"

For Jim Galloway had returned, a new Galloway, a Galloway who carried himself up and down the street with bright, victorious eyes, and the stride of full confidence, who, at least in the eyes of Ignacio Chavez, was like a blood-lusting lion "screwing up his muscles" to spring. Galloway's return brought to Roderick Norton a fresh vigilance, to Virginia a sleepless anxiety, to Florence Engle unrest, uncertainty, very nearly pure panic. During the first few days of his absence she had allowed herself the romantic joy of floating unchecked upon the tide of a girlish fancy, dreaming dreams after the approved fashion which is youth's, dancing lightly upon foamy crests, seeing only blue water and no rocks under her. Then, with the potency of the man's character removed with the removal of his physical being, she grew to see the shoals and to draw back from them, shuddering somewhat pleasurably. Now that he was again in San Juan and that her eyes had been held by his in the first meeting upon the street, her heart fluttered, her vision clouded, she wondered what she would do.

There was to be no lost action in Galloway's campaign now. Within half a dozen hours of his arrival there was a gathering of various of his henchmen at the Casa Blanca. Just what passed was not to be known; it was significant, however, that among those who had come to his call were the Mexican, del Rio, Antone, Kid Rickard, and a handful of the other most restless spirits of the county. Norton accepted the act in all that it implied to his suspicions and sent out word to Cutter, Brocky Lane, and those of his own and Brocky's cowboys whom he counted on.

Galloway's second step, known only to himself and Florrie, was a private meeting with the banker's daughter. It occurred upon the second evening following his return, just after dark among the cottonwoods, but a hundred yards from her home. He had made the opportunity with the despatch which marked him now; he had watched for her during the day, had appeared merely to pass her by chance on the street, and had paused just long enough to ask her to meet him.

"I have done all that I planned to do," he announced triumphantly, his eyes holding hers, forcing upon her spirit the mastery of his own. "The power in Mexico is going to be Francisco Villa. I have seen him. Let me talk with you to-night, Florence. History is in the making; it may be you and I together who shape the destiny of a people."

After all, she was but a little over sixteen, her head filled with the bright stuff of romance, and he was a forceful man who for his own purposes had long studied her. She came to the tryst, albeit half in trembling, a dozen tremulous times ready for a fleeing retreat.

Again he was all deference to her. He builded cunningly upon the fact that he trusted her; that he, a strong man, put his faith in her, a woman. He flattered her as she had never been flattered, not too subtly, yet not so broadly as to arouse her suspicion of his intent. He spoke quietly at first, then his voice seeming charged with his leaping ambition set responsive chords within her thrilling. He pictured to her the state he was going to found, organize, rule, an uncertain number of fair miles stretching along a tropical coast; he made her see again a palatial dwelling with servants in livery, the blue waters of the Gulf, the white of dancing sails. He spoke of a peace which was going to be declared between warring factions below the border within thirty days, of the magnificence to be Francisco Villa's, of the position to be occupied by Jim Galloway at Villa's side. His planned development of a gold-mine he mentioned merely casually.

And then at length when Florrie was prepared for the passionate declaration he humbled himself at her feet, lifted his hands to her in supplication, told her in burning words of his love. Whether the man did love her with all of the strength of his nature or whether he but meant to strike through her at John Engle, the richest man of this section of the State, it was for Jim Galloway alone to know. Certainly not for Florrie, who listened wide-eyed. . . . Once she

thought that he was about to sweep her up into his arms; they had lifted suddenly from his sides. She had drawn back, crying sharply: "No, no!" But he had waited, had again grown deeply deferential, swerving immediately to further vividly colored pictures of life as it might be, of power and pomp, of a secure position from which a man and a woman might direct policies of state, shaping the lives of other men and women.

And in the end of that ardent interview Jim Galloway's caution was still with him, his knowledge of the girl's nature clear in his mind. He did not ask her answer; he merely sought a third opportunity to speak with her, suggesting that upon the next night she slip out and meet him. He would have a horse for her, one for himself; they could ride for a half-hour. He had so much to tell her.

Perhaps a much more important factor than she realized in her action was Florrie's new riding-habit. It had been acquired but three days before and she knew very well just how she looked in it. There would be a moon, almost at the full. The full moon and the new riding-habit were the allies given by fate to Jim Galloway.

Besides all of this, she had not seen Elmer Page for a month. Further, she knew that Elmer had gone riding upon at least one occasion with a girl of Las Palmas, Superintendent Kemble's daughter. And finally, there lies much rich adventure in just doing that which we know we should leave alone. So Florrie, while her mother and father thought that she had gone early to bed, was on her way to meet Galloway.

They rode out of the cottonwood fringed arroyo just before moonrise, circling the town, Florrie scarcely marking whether they rode north or south. But Galloway knew what he was doing and they turned slowly toward the southwest. As they rode, his horse drawn in close to hers, he talked as he had never talked before; his voice rang from the first word with triumphant assurance.

"When he calls she will follow!" Virginia had thought fearfully of them. To-night he was calling eloquently, she was following, frightened and yet obedient to his mastery.

Galloway's influence over the girl, that of a strong will over a weak and fluttering one, was quite naturally the stronger when they were alone together. She had always been willing, sometimes a bit eager, to make a hero of him; he had long thoroughly understood her. To-night was the brief battle of wills, with him summoning all of his strength, flushed with victory. Abruptly now he urged that she marry him; a moment later his insistent pleading was subtly tinged with command. He was the arbiter of the hour; he told her of a priest waiting for them at a little village a dozen miles away. They would be married to-night; they were eloping even at this palpitant instant!

When Florence would have stopped, of two balancing minds, he urged the horses on. When she would have procrastinated, he beat down her opposition with the rush of his words. Even while she struggled she was yielding; Galloway was quick to see how her resistance was growing fainter. And all the time, while he spoke vehemently and she for the most part listened in a fascinated silence, they were riding on through the moonlit night. . . . It seemed to her that surely he must love her as few men had loved before. . . .

The village he had promised her was in reality but two poor houses at a crossroads, inhabited by two Mexican men and dowdy women. On the way they encountered but one horseman; Galloway turned his own and Florence's animals out so that, though seen, they might escape recognition. At the nearest of the two hovels he dismounted, raising his arms to her. When she cried out and shrank back trembling, he laughed softly, caught her in his arms, and lifted her free of the saddle; when he would have kissed her she put her face into her two hands.

"I . . . I want to go back!" she whispered. "I am afraid! Please, Mr. Galloway, please let me go home."

Dogs were barking, a man and woman came out. The man laughed. Then he gathered up the bridle-reins and led the horses to the barn. Florrie, shrinking out of Galloway's embrace, looked particularly little and helpless in her pretty riding-habit.

She went with Galloway into the lamplighted room. The woman looked at her curiously, then to Galloway, something of wonder and upstanding admiration in her beady eyes.

"Has the priest come?" demanded Galloway.

"No, señor. Not yet."

She added by way of explanation that word had been sent; that the priest was delayed; a man was dying and he must stay a little at the bedside. She muttered the tale like a child repeating a lesson. Galloway, watching Florence, who sat rigid in her chair by the table, waited for her to finish.

At the end he gave the woman a sharp, significant look. She said something about a cup of coffee for the señorita and went hastily into the kitchen. Florrie sprang to her feet, her hands clasped.

"You must let me go," she cried wildly. "The priest isn't here. I am going home."

"No," said Galloway steadily. "You are not going home, Florence. You must listen to me. I love you more than anything else in the world, my dear. I want you, want you all for mine."

She saw a sudden light flare up in his eyes and it seemed to her that her heart would beat through the walls of her breast. "I am not a boy, but a man. A strong man, a man who, when he wants a thing, wants it with his whole heart and body and soul, a man who takes what he wants. Wait; just listen to me! You love me now; you will love me more and more when I give you all that I have promised you. To-night, in an hour, I will have made the beginning; I will have gathered about me fifty men who will do exactly what I tell them to do! Then they will go with us down into Mexico; they will be the beginning of a little army whose one thought will be loyalty . . . loyalty to you and to me."

"No," said Florence, her voice shaking. "I am going. . . ."

"You will marry me when the priest comes," he cut in sternly. "Otherwise, if you make me, I will take you with me anyway, unmarried. And I will make you marry me when we have crossed the border. And now . . . now you will kiss me. I have waited long, Florence."

He came toward her; she slipped behind the table, crying out to him to stop. But he came on, caught her, drew her into his arms. And Florrie, some new passionate, terrified Florrie, beat at him with her fists, tore at him with her nails, hid her face from him, and with the agility born of her terror slipped away from him again, again put the table between them. Galloway, a thin line of blood across his cheek, thrust the table aside. As he did so the man came back into the room and stood watching, a twisted smile upon his lips. Galloway lifted his thick shoulders in a shrug and stood staring at the girl cowering in her corner.

"Married or unmarried, you go with me," he told her. "Your kisses you may save for me. Think it over. You had better ask for the priest when I come back." He turned toward the Mexican. "All ready, Feliz?"

The man nodded.

"Tell Castro, then. It's time to be in the saddle."

With no other word to Florrie he went out. But his last look was for her, the look of a victor.

CHAPTER XXIV

IN THE OPEN

Roderick Norton, every fibre of his body alive and eager, his blood riotous with the certain knowledge that the long-delayed hour had come, rode a foam-flecked horse into San Juan shortly after moonrise. Galloway was striking at last; at last might Norton lift his own hand to strike back. As he flung himself down from the saddle he was thinking almost equally of Jim Galloway, striking the supreme blow of his career, and of Billy Norton, whose death had come to him at Galloway's command. Galloway was gathering his forces, had delivered an initial blow, was staking everything upon the one throw of the dice. And he must believe them loaded.

At the clank of spur-chain and rowel Struve came hastily into the hallway from his office. He saw the look in the sheriff's, eyes and demanded quickly:

"What is it? What's happened?"

There were grim lines about Norton's mouth, his quiet voice had an ominous ring to it.

"Hell's to pay, Julius," he retorted. "And there's little telling where it'll end unless we're on the jump to meet it. Galloway's come out into the open. Kid Rickard and ten men with him, all Mexicans or breeds, crossed over into the next county yesterday, raided the county jail late this afternoon, shot poor Roberts, freed Moraga, and got away in a couple of big new touring-cars. Every man of them carried a rifle and side-arms."

"Killed Roberts, huh?" Struve's frown gathered.

"He's badly hurt, if not dead. The Kid did the shooting."

"Sure it's Galloway's work and not just the Kid's?"

"Yes. Only a couple of hours ago a lot of Galloway's crowd was gathering up in the mountains. They've gone to his cache for the rifles. I have sent word for Brocky Lane and his and my cowboys. It begins to look as though he were up to something bigger than we've been looking for. And he's sure of himself, Struve, or he wouldn't have started things by daylight."

Virginia had heard and came into the hallway from her room, her face white, her eyes filled with trouble. Struve turned back into his room abruptly, going for his rifle.

"You heard?" asked Norton quietly. "It's the big fight at last, Virginia. But we've known it was coming all along."

"Yes, Rod." she said half listlessly. "I'll be glad when it's all over."

He sketched for her briefly what little more he knew and suspected. Throughout the county where there was telephone communication the wires were buzzing. Over them the word had come to him of Kid Rickard's attack on Roberts and the freeing of Moraga. But in many places the lines were reported "out of order" and towns were isolated by cut wires. Already men were riding sweating horses, carrying word from him. He knew that del Rio had gathered a crowd of men at Las Vegas; he was certain that del Rio was working hand in glove with Galloway; further that the Mexican had been with Galloway on his recent trip below the border and among the revolutionists.

"They're solid down there," concluded Norton. "What they are up to is something big here, then a dash for safety, carrying their booty with them. But we're going to be on time to put a stop to it all. I am going down to see Engle now; will you come with me?"

But before they left the hotel he swore Struve in as a deputy and sent him hastening to carry the word to other men to be counted on. As they passed the Casa Blanca Norton paused a moment, looking in at the wide-open door; it was very quiet within, the place seeming deserted.

"No use looking for Galloway here," he said as they went on. "Nor for any of his gang. But, when they come back . . . unless we head them off . . ."

Her hand tightened on his arm. She looked up into his thoughtful face with shining eyes.

"You think that they would attempt further robbery and outlawry here?"

"I am going to advise Engle to take the bulk of his money out of the bank, dig a hole, and hide it," he answered. "Just to be sure in case we don't stop them."

He knew that he had no time to waste tonight, and so as he and Virginia entered the Engles' living-room he began immediately telling the banker what had happened and what he feared was set to happen. Engle listened gravely.

"Galloway is making his getaway to-night," Norton said by way of conclusion. "For every rifle he has a man. He has no reason to like you and he knows that you carry more money in gold and bank-notes than any other man in the country. The fact that Kid Rickard pulled the game the way he did this afternoon, shooting down Roberts when there was no need of bloodshed, ought to be enough to show us that they are not going to draw the line anywhere this side of old Mexico."

"What are you planning?" asked Engle.

"I've sent for Brocky and all the men he can bring. They'll all come heeled and ready for trouble, every one sworn in as a sheriff's deputy. I'll get every dependable man in San Juan into the saddle with a rifle inside half an hour. Before that we'll have further word; or, if not, we ride toward Mt. Temple. I'm taking the gamble so far that that's their rendezvous; that the Kid and his crowd will show up there."

It was unnecessary for him to continue. Engle nodded and went for his rifle. Norton, turning toward Mrs. Engle and Virginia, was shocked by the look he saw in the eyes of the banker's wife.

"Florrie!" gasped Mrs. Engle, her hands gripped in front of her, her face paling. "I thought she was in her room; when I missed her five minutes ago I thought that she had slipped out and run up to the hotel to see Virginia. Virginia hasn't seen her."

Norton smiled and patted the two clasped hands.

"Oh, Florrie'll be all right, Mrs. Engle," he comforted her. "We mustn't get nervous and begin to imagine things, must we?"

But no lessening of that look of fear came into the mother's eyes. Galloway was striking, Florrie was not to be accounted for. Though she turned quickly and went again through the house, the patio, and the rear gardens, she was apprehensively certain that she would not find Florence. Virginia came hurriedly to Norton, whispering:

"I'm afraid for her, Rod. I'm afraid! I have seen her and Jim Galloway together, I have known all along that he had an influence over her which he might exert if he wanted to. And, just before Jim Galloway went to Mexico, Elmer saw them walk down the street together, stop and talk together under the trees. . . . Oh, I'm afraid for her, Rod!"

Engle's face was as white as chalk when a little later he came back into the room with his wife; his two hands were like rock upon his rifle.

"Florence isn't in the house," he announced in a voice which, while calm, seemed not John Engle's voice. "If she is in San Juan it won't take the half-hour to know it. I'm rather inclined to think that I'm just a fool, Rod Norton. My wife has told me that Galloway was looking at Florence in a way which meant no good. I wouldn't believe. And now, if . . ."

Norton had no reply to make. Florence's disappearance at a time like this might mean either a very great deal or nothing whatever. But, as Engle had intimated, it would require but little time to learn if she were in San Juan and

safe, and, as Norton had said, there was no time now to be wasted. Engle would institute inquiries immediately; Norton, his own work looming large before him, would prepare to meet Galloway's latest play.

The sheriff decided promptly that it would be unwise to leave the town absolutely drained of men in whom he could put faith. It was always possible that either the entire crowd of Galloway's men or a smaller detachment might find their way here. Julius Struve, four armed men aiding him, was to be responsible for the welfare of women and children. If Galloway's stroke should turn out to be bolder and harder than was now known, then Struve and his men had horses saddled and were to get their wards out of danger by hard riding. Norton was to post two men a few miles out as he rode north and they were to report back to Struve in case of necessity.

These latter plans were made only at the moment before the sheriff's departure. A man sent by Brocky Lane had raced into San Juan's street, bringing fresh word. It began to appear that Galloway was working in conjunction with aid from below the border. Del Rio with a score of men, Mexicans for the most part who had dribbled into the county during the last few months, was reported to have swept down upon John Engle's ranches, and to be gathering herds of cattle and horses, starting them southward on the run. Three of Engle's cowboys had been shot down; a similar attack had been delivered upon other ranches. The little town of Las Vegas had been looted, post-office, store, and saloon safes dynamited, stock driven off to augment del Rio's other herds. Further, the cowboy sent by Lane reported that a signal-fire had been lighted in the mountains an hour ago and that there had been another fire like an answer leaping up from the desert in the south. Word had also come to Lane that telephone messages hinted that Kid Rickard and his unit were working further outlawry along the county line, headed toward Mt. Temple.

There were seventeen armed horsemen in the street waiting for the word from Norton.

"I'll come back to you," he said quietly to Virginia. "Because after what you have done for me, I belong to you . . . if you want me."

"I want you, Rod," she answered steadily. "And I know that you will come back to me. And now . . . kiss me good night."

She clung to him a moment, then pushed him from her and watched him swing up into the saddle and ride out among the men who were pledged and sworn to do his bidding. As he did so Engle came to him. "Going with us, John?" asked Norton.

"No," said Engle. "We haven't found her yet, Rod. I'll try to pick up a trace of her here. And . . . you'll send a man to me if you find her?"

"Yes," Norton promised.

"And if Galloway has got her . . ."

"I'll know what to do, John," said Norton gently.

Then, without again looking back, he turned his horse toward the north. The seventeen men, riding two and three abreast, silent and grave for the most part, followed him. The moon shone upon their rifle-barrels and made black, grotesque shadows underfoot.

Against the northern sky Mt. Temple was lifted sharply outlined; from its crest a leaping flame was stabbing at the stars, a new signal-fire to be seen across many miles.

CHAPTER XXV

THE BATTLE IN THE ARROYO

Straight toward that wavering plume of flame in the north they rode swiftly, each man with his own thoughts and with few words. But whether a man thought of Florrie Engle gone or of the shooting of Sheriff Roberts or of the looting of Las Vegas or of a ranch raided, he was like his fellows in that he knew that at last Jim Galloway had come out into the open and that to-night must be Galloway's triumph or Galloway's death. And perhaps he wondered if his own saddle would run empty under the stars before another dawn.

Three or four miles from San Juan Norton made out an approaching rider, one who bent over his horse's mane, racing furiously. The figure, growing rapidly distinct as it drew on from the north, grew erect as the horseman saw Norton's posse. The rider jerked in his horse, pausing a moment as though in doubt whether he were meeting friend or foe. Then, when again he came on at the same headlong gallop, Norton recognized him. It was Elmer Page.

"They're fighting back yonder!" cried the boy wildly, his eyes shining with his excitement. "Brocky Lane sent me. . . I haven't a rifle, who will give me a rifle? I'll give a man a hundred dollars for a rifle!"

"Easy, Elmer," said Norton sharply. "Tell us what Brocky sent you to say. Where are they?"

"Along the arroyo just off to the east of Mt. Temple. About a mile from the mountain . . . you know where the biggest boulders are all strung out along the arroyo? It's there. Brocky and a lot of cowboys are making a stand there, heading off the Kid and del Rio. So they can't get with the others, you know. . . . Why didn't somebody tell me about this?" he broke off, his voice shrill. "I haven't a rifle, just a cursed revolver. Who will ..."

Again Norton interrupted sternly.

"Let's have it straight, Elmer," he commanded. "Brocky and his men are along the arroyo, you say? And they're trying to keep between del Rio and the Kid's crowd and the other crowd? Some of the others are still on the mountain, then?"

"The mountain is full of them. They're pouring down and shooting as they come; Brocky's in between. . . ."

"How many men are with him?"

"About twenty. But . . . my God! Rickard's men and del Rio's are shooting from the east and the others are shooting from the west . . . poor old Tommy Rudge got shot in the stomach and Denny Blain is down and . . ."

"Del Rio and Rickard didn't come in machines did they?"

"No. Brocky said tell you they'd left their cars, sent them on filled with loot toward the south, where a lot of other Greasers are waiting for them; then the Kid and del Rio and about fifty men altogether started a big herd of horses and cattle this way. Brocky tried to stampede the herds, but the others are more than two to one, so he got his men in the arroyo and they're giving 'em hell from there."

"Galloway's on the other side?"

"No. Brocky said tell you Galloway hadn't shown up yet. We think he didn't expect things to get started so soon. One of Brocky's men riding in a little while ago from the other side of San Juan thought that he had seen Galloway and some one that looked like a girl riding with him toward the old crossroads where the Denbar place used to be. Brocky thinks maybe you can come in and head Galloway off and bust up the whole play that way."

So Galloway and "some one who looked like a girl" had ridden toward the old Denbar cross-roads. And Galloway had not yet joined his forces.

"Elmer," said Norton quickly, "ride on to San Juan. Tell John Engle what you have told me about Galloway."

Tell him . . ."

"I won't!" cried Elmer, on the verge of hysteria. "I won't do it. Do it yourself; send some one else. I want to go with you; I want a rifle, I tell you! Didn't I see Tommy Rudge go down with a bullet in his belly? Didn't I see Denny when the Kid shot him?"

Norton laid a hand on Elmer's arm, speaking quietly.

"Listen, Elmer," he said. "We will do what we can where Brocky is. But that isn't all of the devilment to-night. Galloway got Florrie away somehow; she was the one riding with him toward the crossroads. It's up to you to ride on and ride like the devil and tell John Engle. . . . Come on, boys!"

Elmer sagged in his saddle as though he had been struck a heavy physical blow.

"Galloway got Fluff!" he muttered dully.

His gaze trailed along after the departing posse. Norton on his big roan was setting the pace, the steady swinging gallop to eat up the miles swiftly and yet not kill the horses before the journey's end. The others followed him, stringing out single file to take advantage of the trail. The moon picked them out with clear relief, a grim line of retribution. And yet the boy, while his eyes wandered after them, saw only little Fluff struggling in Jim Galloway's arms. . . .

Then suddenly he, too, was riding, but at a pace which took no heed of a horse's endurance, riding a gallant brute that stretched out its neck, nostrils flaring, hammering hoofs beating out the very staccato of urgent speed upon the flying sands. Already his revolver was tight clinched in a lifted hand. Already he had swerved a little from the distant lights of San Juan. He was taking the shortest line which led to Denbar's crossroads.

"Galloway's got Fluff," he said over and over, choking on the words.

An hour later Norton heard the first spitting of rifles. Another fifteen minutes of shod hoofs pounding through the broken hills and he saw the first spurts of flame cutting through the shadows where the trees clung to the arroyo. As he drew in his horse the men behind him closed up about him. He threw out his arm, pointing.

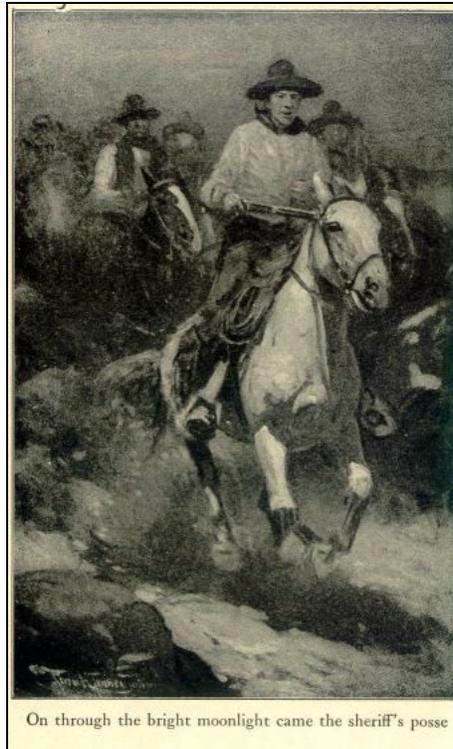
"Brocky's boys must be right down there," he said sharply. "The Kid and del Rio will be yonder; those are their horses. Young Page says there are about fifty of them."

A fusillade of rifle-shots interrupted him. Along a fifty or sixty yard front the Kid's and del Rio's men had crept in closer to Brocky's arroyo, worming their way upon their stomachs, and now fired together. There came a rattling reply from the creek, the shouting of cowboys.

"We'll take those fellows first," ordered Norton quickly. "They will see us when we climb that little rise. Spread out; go easy until we get to the top. Then, boys, let's see who can give them hell first and fastest."

They looked to their rifles for the last time and rode slowly up the short slope of the low-lying ridge. Then, as the first man topped it, there came a shout from the shadows in front, another shout, and the whizzing of rifle-balls. Norton used his spurs then; his big roan leaped forward and was racing down the farther slope; his men in a long line rode with him. And as he rode he lifted his own gun and poured his lead into the thickest of the shadows.

A wild shout of cheering broke from the arroyo; rifle-barrels grew hot in hot hands. On through the bright moonlight came the sheriff's posse, some of them firing as they rode, others saving their lead. To be seen from afar now, they drew many a shot toward themselves. And yet the target of a man riding swiftly over uneven ground and in the moonlight is not to be found overreadily by questing lead. When Norton called to his men to stop and dismount, taking advantage of a row of scattered boulders, not a saddle was empty.



[Illustration: On through the bright moonlight came the sheriff's posse.]

Every man as he dismounted threw his horse's reins to the ground; the animals might bolt or they might not, some of them might not stop for many a mile, others would be found a hundred yards away. But they must all think less of that now than of what lay in front of them.

"That you, Norton?" came a cheery voice booming suddenly through the silence which had shut down as the newcomers disappeared among the boulders.

"Here, Brocky!" shouted Norton. "All right down there?"

"Pretty well," called Brocky. "They've winged three or four of us . . . they're damned rotten shots, Roddy. We've popped over a dozen of them."

There were other shouts then, tenor Mexican voices for the most part with the Kid's unmistakable snarl running through them. Men were calling in Spanish to their fellows across the arroyo. Whatever it was that Brocky was trying to say was lost in the din. And then again came a volley of rifle-shots.

Norton rose slowly to his feet, studying the situation with frowning eyes. A bullet hissed high overhead, another cut by his side, another went shrieking off into the night. But while they whined in his ears he laid his rude plans.

The arroyo wound and twisted this way and that through the broken uplands. Where Brocky Lane had placed his men so as to defy the union of the two bands of outlaws it described a wide rude arc curving about the spur from Mt. Temple. Here the cowboys, with some twenty or thirty feet separating each man from his nearest fellow, were extended along a line which must be about two hundred yards long. The Mexicans to the eastward, where del Rio and Kid Rickard and Moraga were, were bunched in the protecting shadows of a field of boulders such as those where the sheriff's men lay.

"We could stick here all night and get nothing done," said Norton to the men close to him. "Rickard's gang could have charged down on Brocky long ago if they'd had the stomach for that sort of thing. They've got the numbers on us; they more than had the count on Brocky's outfit; with those jaspers on the mountainside they could

have turned the trick. But that sort hasn't the desire for a scrap unless they can pull it from behind a rock. And, by the same token, they won't last five minutes in the face of a charge. Get me?"

"But the ginks on the mountain will pick us off pretty lively as we hit the trail down the slope here," said a thoughtful voice.

Then Norton explained further. He meant to eliminate the other crowd; it could be done. When he gave the word every man was to jump to his feet and make the first half of his charge the bloodless one down into the arroyo toward Brocky Lane. Then, Norton's men and Brocky's united, they could surge up the creek's banks and make their flying attack, coming in between the two other factions so that the men on the mountain must hold their fire or kill as many of their own crowd as of the others.

The suggestion was accepted without discussion. When Norton said "Ready," they were ready; when he jumped to his feet and ran down toward the arroyo, they ran with him. A shout of laughter went up from each side of the dry water-course as jeering voices announced triumphantly that the Gringoes were afraid. And with the shouts came rifle-shots.

But to the last man of them they reached the arroyo safely, and ducking low, trotted on to join the cowboys. In a moment more Norton had found Brocky Lane, had explained his plan, had had Brocky's silent nod for an answer. In quiet voices the men passed the word along the line. Those from the farther end drew in closer so that their whole body of something better than thirty men occupied but a brief section of the arroyo.

"Get your wind first, boys," Norton admonished them. "Better fill your clips, too, while you've got the chance. And count on using a six gun before you're through. All right? Let's show 'em the sort of a scrap a Gringo *can* put up."

Then again they were running, the unwavering line of thirty men, but with a difference which the outlaws might not mistake. And as they ran they held their fire for a little, knowing how useless and suicidal it would be to pause half-way. But presently they were answering shot with shot, pausing, going down upon one knee, taking a moment's advantage of a friendly rock, pouring lead into the agitated groups among the boulders, springing up, running on again, every man fighting the fight his own way, the thirty of them making the air tingle with their shouts as they bore onward.

Then it was man to man and often enough one man to two or three, dark forms struggling, men striking with clubbed guns, men snatching at their side-arms, going down, rising or half rising, firing as long as a charge was in a gun or strength in a body. And as they fired and struck and called out after the fashion of the cowboy in a scrimmage the body of men before them wavered and broke and began to fall back.

Norton swung his clubbed empty rifle up in both hands and beat down a man firing at him with a revolver. All about him were struggling forms and he was sore beset now and then to know who was who. A fierce-mustachioed, black-browed man thrust a rifle toward his breast and pulled the trigger and screamed out his curses as Norton put a revolver bullet through him. A slender, boyish form sprang up upon a rock recklessly, training his rifle upon Brocky Lane. It was the Kid. But the Kid had met a man quicker, surer, than himself, and Brocky fired first. Kid Rickard spun and fell. Norton saw him drop but lost sight of him before the body struck the earth. He had found del Rio; del Rio had found him.

Two smoking revolvers were jerked up, two guns spoke through the clamor as one gun. The men were not ten feet apart as their guns spoke. Norton felt a bullet rip along his outer arm, the sensation that of a whip-lash cutting deep. He saw del Rio stagger back under the impact of a forty-five-caliber bullet which must have merely grazed him, since it did not knock him off his feet. Del Rio, his lips streaming his curses and hatred, fired again. But his wound had been sorer than Norton's, his aim was less steady, and now as he gave back it was to fall heavily and lie still.

It had lasted less than five minutes. "It's Jim Galloway's fight and Galloway don't come!" some one had shouted. They broke again, gave back and back . . . and then were running, every man of them scenting defeat and much worse than defeat unless he came to a horse before another five minutes. And after them, firing now as they ran, came Brocky's cowboys and Norton's men.

"They've got all of their horses over there together," yelled Brocky into Norton's ear. "The horses for those Ginneys who have been hiding out in the mountains, too. That's why I cut in between them that way. Now if we can only scatter their cayuses . . . why, Roddy, we'll have every damned one of 'em afoot to be rounded up when we get ready!"

And Brocky, limping as he went, had raced along after the others.

But Norton did not follow. His eyes had gone to the horses which he and the San Juan men had left beyond the little line of boulders. And, travelling that way, he had seen a lone horseman far off to the south, a horseman riding frantically, seeking to come to the lower slopes of Mt. Temple.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE BELLS RING

"Galloway!"

It seemed almost as though some great voice had shouted it to him through the din. Yonder, riding on his spurs, come at this late moment, was Jim Galloway. The man responsible for all of to-night's bloodshed, for the disappearance of Florric, for the death of Billy Norton. "Coming, Jim Galloway!"

Did he say it? Or again was it a voice shouting to him, urging him on? He looked off to the east. Flying forms everywhere with other racing forms pursuing, firing as they ran. Horses jerking back, rearing, breaking away from the few men guarding them. Full defeat for Jim Galloway there. But to the west? Galloway coming on at top speed, shouting as he came, and, upon the mountain's lower slope the others of Galloway's men, armed and bloodthirsty. If Galloway came to them, whipped them with his tongue, stirring them with his magnetism . . . why, then, the fight was all to be fought over.

Now again Norton, too, was running, bearing down upon the stragglers. He caught up the first dragging reins to lay his hand to, swung up into the saddle, measured swiftly the distance between Galloway and the men on the mountain . . . and used his spurs.

On came Jim Galloway, his wide, heavy shoulders not to be mistaken in the rich moonlight, his hat gone, his head up, a rifle across the saddle in front of him. Norton lost sight of him as he swept down into the bed of the arroyo, caught sight of him again from the farther side. Already Galloway was appreciably nearer his men, driving his horse mercilessly.

"If he comes to his crowd before I can stop him," was Norton's thought, "he'll put his game across on us yet. I've got to head him off and take the chances."

Nor were the odds to be overlooked. Galloway was still too far away to be stopped by a rifle-ball, and Norton, heading him off, would expose himself not only to Galloway's fire but to that of the men who were moving to a lower slope to meet their leader. And yet, with fate in the balance, here was no time for hesitation.

Now Galloway had seen him, had recognized him, perhaps, the thought coming naturally to him that it would be Roderick Norton who rode to cut him off. He shifted his rifle so that his right hand was on the grip, the barrel caught in his left; he had dropped his horse's reins. Norton was slipping a fresh clip into his gun, his own reins now upon his horse's neck. And now both men knew that unless a bullet stopped him Norton would cut across Galloway's path before he could come to his men.

"At him, Roddy, old boy! We're coming!"

Norton glanced over his shoulder and pressed on. Brocky had missed him, had seen, had called back a half dozen of his men and was following. Well, if he dropped, maybe Brocky and the others could get Jim Galloway. It really began to look as though Galloway had played out his string.

They were firing from the mountainside now, the bullets thus far flying wild of their rushing target. Norton shook his head and urged his horse to fresh endeavor. In a moment he would be fairly between Galloway and Galloway's last chance. His eye picked out the spot where he would dismount at that moment, a tumble of big boulders. He would swing down so that they would be between him and the mountain, so that nothing but moonlit open space lay between him and Jim Galloway.

While rifles cracked and spat fire and sprayed lead over him and about him he rode the last fifty yards. He reached the boulders, set his horse up, threw himself from the saddle, and with his back to the rock, his face toward Galloway, he lifted his rifle. Galloway, almost at the same instant, jerked in his own horse. He was so close that Norton caught his cry of rage.

"Hands up, Galloway!" cried the sheriff. "Hands up or I'll drop you."

But at last Galloway had come out into the open; at last there was no subterfuge to stand forth at his need; at last, gambler that he was, he accepted the even break of man to man. As Norton's voice rang out Galloway fired.

He shot twice before Norton pulled the trigger. Norton shot but the once. Galloway dropped his rifle, sat rigid a moment, toppled from the saddle. And his men, seeing him go down, cried out to one another and drew back into the mountain cañons.

"Funny thing," said Brocky Lane afterward. "Had the picture of a kid of a girl in his pocket! Must have carted it around for a year. Old Roddy's bullet tore right square through it."

It was a picture of Florrie Engle, taken years before. As Brocky said: "Just a kid of a girl." Where he got it nobody knew. But then there were other things about Jim Galloway which no one knew. Perhaps . . . Quien sabe!

During the late hours of the night and the following forenoon the thing was ended. Sheriff Roberts's deputies with a posse in automobiles had raced southward, intercepting those other cars despatched toward the border by the Kid and del Rio. Brocky Lane with a score of men had swept down upon the stolen herds, scattered them, fired fifty shots, emptied some three or four saddles, and sent the escaping rustlers flying toward the Mexican line. Singly and in small groups other men, farmers, cowboys, miners, and the dwellers of small settlements, joined with Norton's men, giving battle to those of Galloway's crowd who had drawn back into the fastnesses of Mt. Temple. In the afternoon Norton, with the aid of a handful of cowboys from Brocky's outfit and from Las Flores, escorted fifteen anxious-faced prisoners to the county-seat, where jail capacity was to be taxed. And night had come again, serene and peaceful with the glory of the moon and stars, when he rode once more into San Juan, sore and saddle-weary.

At the hotel he learned that Virginia had gone to the Engles. He left his jaded horse with Ignacio and walked down the street. In front of the Casa Blanca he stopped a moment, staring musingly at the solid adobe walls gleaming white in the moonlight. The place was quiet, deserted. No single light winked at him through door or window. It seemed to him to be brooding over the passing of Jim Galloway.

He found Florrie and Elmer strolling under the cottonwoods. They had scant interest in him, little time to bestow upon a mere mortal. Florrie could only cry ecstatically that Black Bill was a hero! He, all alone, had terrorized the Mexican woman guarding her, had saved her, had brought her back. And Elmer could only look pleased and stammer and whisper to Fluff to be still.

Virginia had heard his voice, the voice she had been listening for throughout so many long hours, and met him before he had come to the door.

"Oh, thank God, thank God!" she cried softly. "But . . . you are hurt?"

He forgot his wound as both arms closed about her. From somewhere at the rear of the house he heard Mrs. Engle's voice crying eagerly; "It's Roddy!" She was hurrying to greet him. What he had to say must be said briefly.

"My work is done," he said quickly. "I have put in my resignation this afternoon. They can get a new sheriff. I am going to be a rancher, my dear. And, Virginia . . ."

He was whispering to her, his lips close to her hair. And Virginia, though her face was suddenly hot with the flush mounting to her brow, gave him steadily for answer:

"Whenever you wish, Rod Norton!"

So it was only twenty-four hours later that Ignacio Chavez stood in the old Mission garden and made his bells

talk, just the three upon the western arch, the Little One, La Golondrina, and Ignacio Chavez, the golden-throated trio that tinkled to the touch of his cunning hand and seemed to laugh and sing and proclaim the gladdest of glad tidings. Then Ignacio drew his enrapt gaze earthward from the full moon and made out a man and a girl riding out into the night, riding toward the Ranch of the Flowers. And he made the bells laugh again.

"And to-morrow," vowed Ignacio solemnly, "not later than to-morrow or the day thereafter, you shall have your reward, *amigos*. You have told the world of heavy doings; you have rung for Jim Galloway dead; you have made the music for the wedding of *el* Señor Nortone. And it shall be I who will make a little roof like a house over you. You will see!"

[The end of The Bells of San Juan by Gregory, Jackson]