

MAX
BRAND

MORE TALES OF
THE WILD WEST:

INVERNESS

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SAFETY McTEE

TWO SIXES

**MAX
BRAND**

INVERNESS

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Inverness

I

Beholden to a Peddler

Sleeper was hungry. There was plenty of game to be shot in the mountains around him, but he had neither rifle nor revolver. He had not even a fishing line or a fishhook. He might build traps to catch rabbits or the stupid mountain grouse. But that would require a day or more of work and waiting, and he was too hungry for that.

So he found a shallow stream where the sun struck through the rapid of water and turned the sands to gold. There, on a flat ledge of rock just above the edge of the stream, he stretched himself and waited. Only a thin sliver of his shadow projected into the tremor of the water, and his blue eyes grew fierce with hunger when he saw the trout nose their way upstream leisurely in spite of the swift tumbling of the little brook. They moved in their element with perfect ease, like birds in the sky. One that looked sluggish with bigness and fat disappeared in a twinkling and a flash, when Sleeper's lightning hand darted down to make the catch.

But his patience was perfect. If a bear can lie on a bank and knock salmon out of a creek, Sleeper could lie in the same manner and flick out a trout now and then. He not only supposed so but he knew it, because he had done the thing many times before in the famine days of his boyhood.

His deceptively slender body remained motionless. Nothing about him stirred except the blue glinting of his eyes. And in them was the sign of the gathered nervous tension, the piling up of electric force ready to work with the speed of a leaping spark when the moment came to make a contact.

Another speckled beauty drifted up the stream at lordly ease. The fish started to dissolve in a flash, but the darting hand of Sleeper flicked through the water, and from his fingertips the trout was sent hurtling high into the air, to land in the grass well up the bank.

At the lower verge of the trees that descended the mountainside and stopped a little distance above the creek, Pop Lowry halted his three pack mules and looked out on the scene below. He began to smooth his bald head and laugh, silently as a grinning wolf, when he saw this fishing going on. Yet he remained there, screened by the trees and brush, while Sleeper stood up from his rock and started to make a small fire. Expertly Sleeper cleaned the fish and broiled them over the handful of flame. He was still busy when he called out: "Why don't you show your ugly mug, Pop? I'm used to it. It won't hurt my feelings."

Pop Lowry, with a start, came suddenly out from among the trees, hauling at the lead rope of the first mule, to which the other pair were tethered. Two big panniers wobbled at the sides of this mule; heaping packs swelled above the backs of the others. Pop Lowry, shambling down the slope in his clumsy boots, waved a greeting to Sleeper, and, as he came up, he said: "How come, Sleeper? What you done with thirty thousand dollars in three days, boy? Or was it a whole week?"

A dreaming look came into Sleeper's blue eyes. Then he smiled. "If that red horse had won Saturday," he said, "I'd be worth a quarter of a million!"

"What horse?" asked Pop. His long, pockmarked face kept grinning at Sleeper, but his eyes narrowed and brightened as they strove to pierce into the nature of the youth.

"He's a thoroughbred, Pop," said Sleeper. "And he should have won. I put my money on him over at the rodeo and watched it go up in smoke."

"You mean that you bet all that on one horse . . . on one race?" demanded Pop.

"You know how it is," said Sleeper. "It's better to stay dirty poor than be dirt rich. I mean . . . what's thirty thousand?"

"It's fifteen hundred a year income, if you place it right," declared Pop Lowry.

"If I'm going to have money, I want real money," answered Sleeper. "He was only beaten by a head, so I don't mind."

He began to eat the broiled fish, while Pop looked on in a peculiar combination of horror and delight.

Sleeper was succeeding in that task very well while the peddler filled a pipe, lighted it, then sat down on a stump to smoke.

"Supposin' that you got that two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, Sleeper, what would you do with it?" Pop asked.

"I'd get married," said Sleeper. "But I don't know who I'd marry."

"You'd get married . . . and you don't know to what girl?" shouted Lowry. "Dog-gone me, if you ain't a crazy one!"

"I don't know which one," said Sleeper. "There's Kate Williams . . . I get pretty dizzy every time I think about her. But then there's Maisry Telford. Her eyes have a way of smiling that I can't forget."

"Maisry Telford . . . why, she ain't nothin' but a little tramp. She ain't got a penny to her name," said the peddler. "You mean that Kate Williams would take you, Sleeper?"

"Perhaps she wouldn't," said Sleeper. "But there have been times when we seemed to understand each other pretty well."

"My God, she's worth a coupla millions," said the peddler. "At least, when her father dies, she is. Marry her, kid, if you got any sense at all. Maisry Telford, what's she got?"

"A good pair of hands on reins or a rifle, and a nice way with a horse or a man. She could ride all day and dance all night. She doesn't need a big house. She's at home in the whole range of the mountains. She could find you a rabbit stew in the middle of the desert, and she could find firewood above timberline in a thirty below blizzard. That's some of the things that she could do."

"Take her, then," said the peddler. "It ain't in you to have sense and marry money. It ain't in you to keep anything. What you got on you now?"

"A comb, a toothbrush, and a razor," said Sleeper. "A bridle and saddle and a horse to wear them . . . clothes to cover me . . . and a knife so that I can carve my name right up on the forehead of this little old world, Pop."

Pop began to laugh. "If I was a magician and could give you any wish, what would

you ask for first?"

"A sack of bull and some wheat-straw papers," said Sleeper.

Pop Lowry, laughing still, opened one of the hampers of his first mule and produced the required articles. Sleeper accepted them with thanks, and soon was smoking.

"Why did you want me to meet you up here?" asked Sleeper. "I've been waiting a whole day."

"I was held up," said the peddler.

"What sort of crookedness held you up?" demanded Sleeper. "Were you planning a bank robbery, or just to stick up a stage? Or were you bribing a jury to get one of your crooks out of jail?"

"Sleeper," said the peddler, "it's a kind of a sad thing the way you ain't got no faith in me. But the thing that I want you to do now is right up your street. It's just the breakin' of a hoss to ride."

"What kind of a horse?"

"Just a nervous sort of a high-headed fool of a stallion," said the peddler. "And four of my boys have tried their hands with him and gone bust."

"Where'd you steal the horse?" Sleeper asked.

"There you go ag'in," sighed Pop Lowry, "as though I never bought and paid for nothin' in my life. But lemme tell you where the place is. You know Mount Kimbal? Well, down on the western side there's a valley, small and snug with Kimbal Creek running through it. And back in the brush there's a cabin. . . ."

"Where the Indian lived that Tim Leary killed?" Sleeper queried.

"Right. Go there, Sleeper. You'll find the hoss there. You'll find Dan Tolan there, too, and Joe Peek and Harry Paley and Slats Lewis. Know them?"

"No."

"You'll know 'em, when you see 'em. Tell 'em I sent you."

"I just break the horse, is that all?" asked Sleeper.

"Wait a minute. The thing is to break that hoss to riding, and to deliver his reins into the hands of a gent named Oscar Willie in Jagtown. That's all you have to do, and them four will help you to do it."

"Where's the catch?" asked Sleeper.

The peddler hesitated, his small bright eyes shifting on Sleeper's face. "There's some two-legged snakes that would like to have that hoss to themselves," he said at last. "You'll have to keep your eyes open."

"How does it happen that you've never given me murder to do?" asked Sleeper, looking with disgust at the pockmarked face of the peddler. "While I'm a sworn slave to you for six weeks or so longer, how does it happen that you haven't asked me to kill somebody?"

"Why ask a cat to walk on wet ground?" said the peddler. "Why give you a murder to do and let you hang afterward? In the first place, you wouldn't do the job, no matter how you've swore to be my man for the time bein'. In the second place, there's other errands

you can run to hell and back for me.”

Sleeper knew that Pop Lowry was telling the truth. Pop, this mysterious peddler of the open range, was a smart man, had a head on him that turned everything into gold. Six weeks ago, when he made Sleeper his slave, he could just as well have taken money. Sleeper offered it. But Pop looked far into the future. Sleeper would have given anything to keep his friend, Bones, from hanging—only Pop Lowry could help him. And the peddler had required of Sleeper three months of his service. He would take nothing else.

So for a month and a half now Sleeper had been held by oath to do whatever Pop had ordered. So far murder had not been among his assignments. But when Pop Lowry saw a chance where murder would bring in gold, Sleeper would have to do his bidding. . . .

II

Unbroken Stallion

Dan Tolan was big, not above six feet, perhaps, but built all the way from the ground, up to ponderous shoulders and a bull neck, to a jaw that was capable of breaking ox-bones to get at the marrow inside them. Above the jaw, big Dan Tolan sloped away. The executive part of his body was constructed along the most generous lines, but the legislative chamber was small. He had little or no forehead, and the structure of his skull was pyramidal from behind, also, sloping upward and inward from the great bulging fleshy wrinkles at the top of his neck.

Big Dan Tolan, standing at the door of the shack with a rifle in his hands, looked with disfavor at the slender young man who stood before him. Looking past this stranger, Dan Tolan saw the horse that had carried the other to the spot, and the heart of Dan was burning with desire. Every line of that creature spoke of speed and breeding. He was sixteen hands high if he was an inch, and muscled in a way that promised even the weight of Dan Tolan a ride.

“Who are you? Whatcha want? Who sent you?” asked Tolan.

“Sleeper. To break the stallion. Lowry,” said Sleeper.

Tolan blinked. Then he realized that his triple question had been answered part by part.

“Lowry?” he repeated. There was no comment from Sleeper. “So Pop Lowry sent you, eh?” said Tolan. Then, without turning his head, he called: “Hey, fellers, come out here.”

They came to the door. Slats Lewis was enormously tall, vastly thin, with a pair of ears like the wings of a bat, but the other two were not remarkable in any way. They would never have been noticed in any large crowd of cowpunchers.

“This here,” said Tolan, “was sent by Pop. What the hell you think of that? To break the stallion, he says!”

The face of Slats was split in two by a gaping grin. “Give him a try,” said Slats. “And . . . *where* did he get that red hoss, yonder?”

“Leave that hoss alone. I seen it first,” said Tolan. “You want to try your hand at the stallion, eh?” He began to grin and rub his left hip with a caressing hand.

Sleeper took note of a bandage around Slats’s head, and a great purple bruise that disfigured Joe Peek’s forehead. Harry Paley had all the skin off the end of his nose, and it was not the heat of the sun that had removed it.

“Sure, and why not leave him have a try at Inverness?” asked Paley.

In his eagerness, he hurried out and led the way around the side of the shack to a corral that consisted of strong saplings that had been planted in a wide circle, and strengthened with cross-pieces. It made a living corral of trees with one narrow gate.

Inside that corral was one of the finest animals that Sleeper had ever seen—a

thoroughbred bay stallion.

“Walk right in and make yourself at home,” said Paley.

Sleeper climbed one of the trees and sat out on a lower branch. Inverness, having apparently turned his back to the stranger and lost all interest in him, whirled suddenly, crossed the corral with a racing stride, and bounded high into the air. His eyes were two red streaks, and his mouth gaped like that of some carnivorous beast. But he fell just short in his effort, and his teeth snapped vainly at Sleeper’s leg.

There was a yell of applause from the other four.

“Come down and tackle him on his own ground,” yelled Dan Tolan.

But Sleeper merely crossed his legs and rolled a smoke.

“Leave him be,” said Paley. “He wants to think a while, and I guess I know what’s he got in his bean, all right.”

“We don’t need to wait for the show to start,” commented Slats. “When the circus begins, the band’ll start up, all right.”

They went back to the shack, muttering vague comments about Pop Lowry, who had sent them a half-wit, a baby-face to do a man’s work. Yet, it was very, very odd, for Pop was not the fellow to make important mistakes.

They first looked over the gold stallion that had brought the youth to them. There were plenty of features that were worth much observation. For one thing, instead of a bridle, the horse wore a light hackamore; he was guided, it appeared, without a bit at all.

“Just one of these here family pets,” said Slats.

“Look out. I never seen a stallion that was no family pet,” said Paley.

“I’ll ride him,” declared Slats.

Slats was far the best rider of them all, and they helped him put on the saddle and cinch it up. The lack of a bit troubled Slats a little, but he declared that he would have no trouble with the stallion.

In fact, the big golden beauty—which would have made almost twice the substance of racy Inverness—stood as quietly as a family pet while the saddle was being adjusted and even when Slats swung into the stirrups. After that the great stallion, Careless, did a dancing step and turn, with a whip-snap at the end of it, and Slats slid out into the air and came down in a sitting posture with a great *thump*.

Careless resumed his grazing; he showed not the slightest desire to bolt. Slowly Slats got to his feet.

“Anybody *see* that kid ridin’ this here?” asked Slats.

“No,” said Tolan.

“Then he never *did* ride him. He brought him up here on a lead. There might be one man in the world that can ride that devil, but there ain’t two.”

“Hold on, Slats,” said Tolan. “Ain’t you gonna try ag’in?”

“Me? I’ve had enough tryin’,” said Slats, and stalked back into the house.

The others stripped off the saddle again, and Careless kept his ears pricked as he

grazed.

“There’s somethin’ behind all this here,” declared Tolan. “Two hosses that can’t be rode. And Lowry behind the both of them. What might it mean, anyway?”

“Go see how the kid’s getting on with Inverness,” said one.

Paley went and came back with the report that the kid had descended from his tree and now was sitting on the ground. “*Inside* the corral!” said Paley.

There was a general exclamation of wonder. “How come?” demanded Tolan.

“I dunno how come,” answered Paley. “But he’s sure settin’ there, smokin’ cigarettes, and talkin’ none at all. Just whistling a little. Lullaby songs is what he’s whistling. Maybe he thinks Inverness is a baby in a cradle.”

They laughed a good bit at this and went back to their poker game inside the shack. As the dusk came on and they lighted a lantern, Tolan went out to the corral.

“You don’t eat none till you’ve rode that hoss!” he shouted.

Then, coming close to the corral, he peered between the trunks of the trees and saw a sight that made the hair lift on his head. A tiny spot of light caught his eye, first, and then, in the dimness beneath the trees, he was able to make out a slender form seated on the bare back of Inverness!

It was true. There sat Sleeper on the unsaddled back of Inverness, sometimes puffing a cigarette that faintly lighted his handsome face, and sometimes whistling plaintive little songs. And the stallion, moving slowly, still grazing the short grass inside the big corral, paid no heed whatever to the burden on his back.

Dan Tolan went back to the shack and stood breathless with astonishment on the threshold. “Him . . . Sleeper . . . he’s on the back of that damned hoss . . . and Inverness *likes* it,” he gasped.

There was a general springing up.

“Set that table for five,” said Tolan, “because as far as I can see, the kid is gonna eat with the men tonight.”

There was a good deal of clattering about the old stove that stood in a corner of the shack, and more jangling in setting out the tin plates and cups on the table. But through this noise, a little later, the voice of Sleeper sounded.

“All right, boys,” he said. “I guess Inverness is ready to be delivered.”

They poured out from the shack and found that Inverness, saddled and bridled, was dancing in the starlight before the cabin. Around him, prancing, rearing as though to strike, maneuvered the great, gleaming body of Careless.

“Go back . . . back!” called Sleeper.

Careless went rapidly back, snorting protest.

“Lie down, boy,” called Sleeper.

The four staring men saw the stallion sink to the ground as though he had been a well-trained hunting dog.

Then, softly, Sleeper rode Inverness back and forth, saying: “He’s been broken to the bridle. He’s been managed long ago. He just has to remember a few things, and then he’ll

be safe for a lady to ride to church.”

III

Four Men's Fortunes

When Sleeper sat at the table with the others, Dan Tolan said to him: "How you come to handle hosses like that? Got some Injun in you, or something?"

"Hey, he's got blue eyes, ain't he?" interrupted Harry Paley. "How could he be an Injun?"

"Yeah, and I've seen blue-eyed Injun 'breeds," said Dan Tolan, scowling heavily at Sleeper. "Or maybe you got some greaser in you, kid?"

"Look for yourself," said Sleeper, smiling.

He showed his white teeth as he smiled. It was almost caressing but just a trifle feline and dangerous.

"What you mean . . . look for myself?" demanded Dan Tolan, pouring half a cup of steaming black coffee down his great gullet. He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and left a dirty stain clinging to the stiffness of the hairs.

"Why, a fellow ought to be able to tell what other people are by giving them a look," said Sleeper.

"Yeah, and how would I know what you done to Inverness?"

"I waited till the evening came on," said Sleeper. "Horses are like men. They get lonely at the end of the day, and, when Inverness poked his head over the fence and tried to look his way out of trouble, I talked to him a little."

"Now, listen to the crazy talk this kid is throwing," said Slats, and split his face exactly in half with a grin.

"He *talked* to Inverness, eh?" laughed Paley.

"I talked till I got his ears forward. Then I went inside the corral," said Sleeper. "The rest was easy. When he didn't smash me up in his first charge, I saw that he wasn't a mean horse. He'd only been misunderstood."

"He'd only been *what*?" roared Slats. "Listen to me. I was short and fat till he slammed me on the ground so hard that he made me what I am today. You mean that was because I misunderstood him?"

"Misunderstood," murmured Dan Tolan. Then he roared out: "You went and hypnotized him . . . or you give him some dope. Why don't you open up and try to tell the truth like a man? What did you do to the hoss, I'm asking."

"We had a little talk together, and then I hopped up on his back. He didn't mind at all. It just reminded him of the old days."

"What old days?" asked Dan Tolan. The other three straightened a little in their chairs.

"The old racing days," said Sleeper.

"I suppose the hoss told you that he used to be a racer?" asked Paley.

“That’s right,” said Sleeper. “There’s a saddle mark on Inverness.”

“That’s a lie!” exclaimed Dan Tolan. “There ain’t no mark of no kind at all on him. I been over him inch by inch.”

“With your eyes, not with your hands,” said Sleeper. “There’s a soft saddle mark behind the withers. I felt it across the bone. A Western saddle, a regular range saddle, doesn’t sit where an English saddle sits,” Sleeper explained. “Inverness is a racer and a good one. He’s a stake horse . . . or he ought to be.”

The other four stared at one another.

“He’s kidding us,” said Dan Tolan, presently. “Run your hands over, Paley. Tell us something about him, will you?”

“He’d be more at home working a faro lay-out,” said Sleeper.

“Hey! Hold on!” exclaimed Paley.

“Aw, he seen you somewhere at work,” said Dan Tolan. “What about Joe Peek? What’s the touch of Joe tell you?”

“Joe sang around barrooms and maybe at the Bird Cage Theater till his voice went back on him,” said Sleeper.

“Now . . . I’ll be damned,” muttered Peek. “He never seen *me* on the stage, anyway.”

“How’d you come to guess that?” asked Tolan, scowling in darker anger than before.

“Why, he hummed one of the songs a while ago,” said Sleeper. “One of those ‘love you till the seas run dry’ songs. He has a husky voice . . . like a singer who took to liquor, instead of singing lessons. Besides, he keeps his clothes clean, ties his bandanna with a fancy knot, looks at his boots as though he expected to see them shine . . . and real good singers don’t spoil their voices with red-eye,” Sleeper wound up.

There was a silence. Peek was glaring. Then Tolan laughed. “Go on, kid,” he said. “Try Slats. What’s he been?”

“Murder,” said Sleeper, and looked straight across the table at Slats.

The tall man stared back, his eyes pale and bright. “By God,” whispered Slats, “who are you?” He pushed back his chair, softly, keeping those hypnotic, pale eyes steadily on Sleeper’s face.

“Leave him be,” interrupted Tolan. “You done pretty well with the rest. Now what about me?”

“Before you entered the ring, or after you left it?” asked Sleeper.

Tolan started. “What . . . ?” he began. Then he paused and went on: “You could tell that by the marks on my face, maybe.”

“You could’ve got those in barroom fights,” said Paley. “No, he figgered it some other way. How, Sleeper?”

“He looks at a man’s hands, instead of at his eyes,” said Sleeper. “He steps short . . . he’s light on his feet in spite of his weight . . . and he seems set to punch, when he stands close to a man. Besides. . . .”

“That’s enough,” said Paley. “Want some more, Dan?”

“Yeah,” muttered Tolan. “Why not? What else do you think you know, kid?”

“It’s a long yarn, I guess,” said Sleeper, “and I’m tired of talking.”

“I ain’t tired,” answered the big fellow. “Go and yap your damned piece and let’s hear what’s in it?”

“Women . . . and a good deal of dirt,” said Sleeper.

“Ha!” grunted Dan Tolan, pushing back his chair in his turn.

“Wait a minute,” said Slats, grinning as he laid a restraining hand on his leader’s shoulder.

“Yeah, I’m OK,” said Tolan. “Leave him talk. I wanna hear him yap.”

“When the easy money played out, you got into some trouble that landed you in the pen,” said Sleeper. “That’s why you were never beaten in the ring. You got into the *juzgado* first.”

There was one burst of laughter that died at once. The men were watching the white hate in the face of Tolan, and it silenced them.

“And then, afterward, you didn’t give a damn,” said Sleeper. “You felt that the world owed you something, and you took it with a gun. Then you got thick with Slats, and since then you’ve been pointing out to him that the fellow was worth shooting . . . sometimes you even help with the killings. And if. . . .”

Tolan rose to his feet, slowly.

“Wait a minute,” protested Slats. “Don’t go and beat him up, chief, till you find out who told him these things.”

“How do you tell a skunk from a coyote? By the look of the face, mostly,” said Sleeper. “Slats wears his guns so that I could hardly spot them . . . he’s a professional with them. But he hasn’t a brain to campaign by himself . . . he’s just a knife in the hand of a boss, and his boss is Tolan, by the way Slats keeps turning to him. But Tolan knows even more about guns than he does about. . . .”

“Damn!” said Tolan, and charged.

The bulk of his headlong weight knocked Sleeper backward. Tolan’s driving left hand missed Sleeper’s face by sheerest chance, it seemed; but the mere wind of the blow appeared to beat him toward the floor. Over his stooping body the big man stumbled. Sleeper at the same instant was rising. His hands did something strange. Dan Tolan, lurching into the air, landed face down with a frightful crash.

Sleeper’s hands dipped into Tolan’s clothes; two guns flashed in his grasp as he threw them out the open door. And Tolan, rising, streaming curses and blood from a cut mouth, charged with both fists smashing. In an instant he had cornered Sleeper, measured him.

“Kill him!” screamed Slats.

The blow was a powerful, straight right honestly intended to tear Sleeper’s head off his shoulders. Sleeper stood there as though overcome with terror, his hands only half raised and open. Then, at the last instant, he made a frightened little gesture and whirled, as though to turn his back upon the punishment. But Tolan’s arm shot harmlessly over Sleeper’s shoulder, and Sleeper caught that pile-driver in a double grasp. A quick heave of

Sleeper's back and shoulders converted the power of Tolan's blow into a lunge that pitched the big fellow heavily against the wall.

The shock stunned him. He dropped to his hands and knees and wavered there, dripping blood onto the floor.

The others had stopped their cheerful yelling. In a deadly silence they watched as Tolan got to his feet, staggering. With both hands he was feeling for his guns. When he found that they were gone, he breathed: "Slats, he's made a fool of me. Them hands of his jar a gent silly like a mule's hoofs. Blow hell out of him, Slats!"

But Slats did not move a hand. That was very surprising to those who knew him, most of all to Dan Tolan, until his clearing eyes saw that a bright, trembling flash of a knife lay in the flat of Sleeper's hand. It was held to the side, ready for instant use. After what he had seen, Slats would as soon have tried to dodge the stroke of a snake as the hurled point of that blade.

Sleeper was hardly breathing deeply, as he said: "Well, boys, why not all sit down and finish our coffee and cigarettes?"

They sat down in silence. Dan Tolan kept licking the blood from his mouth. The coffee cup trembled in his hand.

IV

Race of Thoroughbreds

The silence in which the men at the table sat was a deadly thing that moved like a sliding serpent. First they glanced at one another, and then each man looked only at his own cup of coffee or the fuming of his own cigarette, until Paley said curiously: "What's your main business, outside of taming horses and raising hell?"

He had just spoken when, outside the house, there was a faint creaking sound that made Slats jump to his feet.

"The gate to the corral!" he said.

"Inverness is leanin' against it, maybe," suggested Dan Tolan.

But the creak of the gate came again, and then a horse trotted softly, passing near the house.

Without a word, the men rushed out into the moonlight and saw a tall horse striding away with a rider flattened on his back, urging him to full speed.

A keening cry came out of all those throats: "Onslow! It's Onslow that's got him!" But no man stirred to saddle a horse and pursue. There was a good reason for that. Now that Inverness was launched beyond gunshot, like a tireless arrow, he would outstride the pursuit of any mustang.

But Careless was not a mere mustang. Sleeper cast one look at the fugitive that glimmered away into nothing through the moonlight, then snatched up saddle and hackamore and whistled as he ran out the door. Careless came, bounding like a hunting dog when it sees the gun.

"That nag looks like he might give us a chance." Dan Tolan was inspired by the beauty of the great stallion. "Tag that gent Onslow for us, and we'll come up and smash him, Sleeper! Get your hosses, boys! On the run!"

They were already sprinting for their riding gear, as Sleeper slid the saddle over the sleek back of the stallion and pulled up the cinches. It was a light saddle, made after the range pattern but without the solid mass and weight that burdens the back of a horse and is of no use except to hold the pull of the rope when a full-grown steer hits the end of the slack. The hackamore was tossed over the head of Careless; the throatlatch was not buckled until Sleeper was in the saddle, flattening himself along the neck of the horse until he had reached the strap. Then he settled himself to the work of riding a five-mile race.

For the first few miles the fugitive, no matter how he trusted to the speed of his racer, would use that speed liberally to put a vital distance between himself and all possible pursuit. After that he was likely to slacken the pace of his stallion and save his strength against the challenge of a long distance. It was probable that he had fled away on the straight line that he intended to pursue to the end of his journey, but, as Sleeper strained his eyes before him, he knew that his task would be hopeless unless he actually caught sight of the other rider.

They were in the middle of a wide plateau around which the mountains reared, slashed here and there with many cañons. Those waterways, dry except in the flood time of June, when the snow dissolved suddenly along the heights, offered a hundred roads opening in any direction. So Sleeper let Careless rush away with his huge, rolling stride, peering all the while at the trees that dotted the plain or the rolling ground before him.

At last, he saw a dim thing that did not approach him. The other tree forms poured back to him with the gallop of Careless, but this object floated at a distance, coming only slowly, slowly toward him. As they drew together, he knew that the running object was a man on horseback; he had seen the silhouette as the pair reached the top of a rise with the moonlight sky beyond them to make the outline clearer.

He looked back. Behind him there was no sight of Tolan and his three men. There was no help within reach, and it would have to be a man-to-man fight, if he managed to overtake Onslow. He wished that he had had a chance to learn more about that fellow who had followed four crooks of the capacities of Tolan's gang. He wanted to hear about the man who had managed, like himself, to tame the fierce stallion and ride him away. At least, Onslow must have been a well-known enemy or his name would not have sprung instantly to the lips of the four.

One thing was certain. Such a fellow was sure to be armed to the teeth and to know how to use his weapons. And this moonlight was so bright that it would serve almost like the sun for a good gunman. Sleeper carried no firearms. Neither rifle nor revolver had been in his hands since he had been forced into the service of Pop Lowry. The commissions of that dangerous criminal were too apt to put Sleeper in the way of taking life . . . and he did not want to have the opportunity.

What seemed to lie before him was the task of riding up to a fighting man through some narrow, echoing cañon and then attempting to close with him from behind. But could Careless catch Inverness, if the fugitive preferred to flee even from a single enemy? Sleeper recalled the slender black legs of the bay horse that looked like hammered iron and the length of the rein and the vast sweep of the line from the saddle to the hocks. He shook his head. Never before had he doubted the ability of Careless to run down any horse in the world.

He looked back and saw the huge, triangular head of Mount Kimbal against the moonlit sky; he looked forward and saw the smaller heights before him chopped and slashed by ravines. Well up toward the tops of these mountains he could see the faint glow of snow under the mist that was blowing across the peaks above timberline.

Into one of these ravines the stranger entered with his horse. Sleeper followed, and after that he was under a continual strain. He had to keep his horse on the very borderline of earshot. Sight would not help him a great deal, now, because the cañon floor twisted here and there so rapidly that the towering walls of the ravine fenced through the bright sky a narrow, winding path, a sort of cow trail through the stars. To keep the other in view, Sleeper would have had to venture within fifty yards of him, a great part of the time.

They were climbing continually now. Thin noises of running water underfoot mingled with the melancholy songs of waterfalls in the distance. They were up to such a height that now there was no sign of a tree except the tough lodgepole pines which are the vanguard of the Western forest, the hardy pioneers which lay down brief generations of humus

before the larger trees can find rootage. Even the lodgepole pines commenced to thin out, and just above his head Sleeper saw the bald, scalped pinnacles of the peaks, sometimes wrapped with mist, sometimes silvered over with snow and white moonlight.

Then those occasional noises ahead of Sleeper stopped. The horse knew this business almost as well as his master. It was not the first time that he had been used for the stalking of danger, and Careless put down his feet like a cat. Never a loose stone did he tread on. He trembled at sudden noises of wind and water on either side. He went with his ears pricked rigidly forward and his head turned just a trifle, as though to keep his eye on the trail and on his master at the same time. As he stole forward, his eyes blazing, his red-rimmed nostrils expanded and quivering, he seemed inspired by the eagerness of a hunting beast and an inquiring man.

The wind was against them. It blew them up the high ravine or the next accident never could have happened. As it was, there came a sudden snort in the dimness ahead of them, and the next instant Sleeper made out a horseman mounting just before him.

“Hullo!” called the voice of the stranger.

Sleeper, silently, with one pressure of his heels, made Careless leap like a panther to the kill. He saw the flash of a drawn gun. He made out the bearded features of a man. The gun boomed almost in his face, and then he sloughed himself out of the saddle and hurled himself at the other.

The impact, as he gripped the man, knocked them both headlong to the ground. Even in the air the lightning hands of Sleeper were not clenched, but he drove the edge of his palm like a blunt cleaver, again and again, against the nerve center under the pit of the other man’s right arm, to paralyze the man’s every nerve. Then they struck the ground, and Sleeper’s head banged against a rock. The world whirled madly about him. . . .

V

Battle of the Stallions

He was awake. The world no longer danced in crazy waves—but, as in a nightmare, he could see danger without being able to do anything about it. Not a muscle of his body would respond to his will as he watched Onslow disentangle himself and rise to his feet, staggering.

The right hand with which Onslow leaned to pick up his fallen gun could not grasp the weapon, Sleeper saw. Only his left hand still functioned, but for such a fellow as Onslow that would probably be enough. He swung about toward Sleeper, made one step toward him, and leveled the gun. This, then, was to be the last moment?

But the strangest of interruptions came. Careless, making the charge like a true warhorse, had smashed his shoulder into the beautiful bay horse and knocked him reeling. Now, recovering himself after lurching past, Careless whirled about and galloped, trumpeting with rage, straight at Inverness.

The bewilderment of Sleeper did not endure. He should have known in the first place that, if two stallions caught the scent of one another, they would be instantly fierce for battle. And, like a pair of mountain lions, the two now flung together.

The bay was fast as a flash. So was Careless. In this mutual charge they swerved past one another, rearing and striking out with their sharp forehoofs. One stroke of those weapons would be sufficient to smash the heavy skull like paper.

Onslow, wildly shouting out, had whirled back toward the fighting horses. He fired, and Sleeper thought for a terrible moment that it was the bullet that knocked Careless to his knees. It was not the bullet, however, but a glancing blow from the hoof of Inverness that dropped the golden stallion. And the dark blood poured down Careless's head.

Inverness rushed in to finish his victory, but Careless still was full of brain power and battle wiles. He lurched to his feet and drove his head like a striking snake at Inverness's throat. His teeth glanced from the sleek of the other throat, only when the blood came. In a whirling tangle the two great animals swerved about.

Sleeper, more by power of prayer than through physical strength, struggled back to his feet. Onslow was rushing this way and that, trying to get in a shot that would do away with Careless without imperiling the life of Inverness. Twice he fired, but the revolver wobbled in his hand—apparently he was no two-handed gunman—and Careless went uninjured.

Drawing back a little, Careless charged Inverness, checked his attack, swerved to the side, and reared. Inverness, missing these feints, thrust in to close. But one terrible blow from a forehoof struck his side with hide-ripping force, and Sleeper distinctly heard the breaking of bones. That stroke, even though it fell upon the body, brought a human groan from the throat of the bay horse. He tried to flee, but, as he turned, a second hammer stroke clipped him across the head and laid him prone.

If Inverness were not dead, he would perish the next moment, and, then, Careless would go down under Onslow's bullets. But at this moment Sleeper found breath to cry out. It was like calling to a wild storm, but the magic of his control over the horse was so perfect that the single cry stopped Careless and sent him wincing backward.

Onslow had turned toward the sudden voice behind him, gun in hand. A stroke from the cleaver-edge of Sleeper's palm made Onslow's left hand nerveless—the big Colt dropped to the ground. Even then, with his right arm quite useless and his left hand incapable, Onslow drove bravely in toward Sleeper. But he might as well have lunged at a will-o'-the-wisp. Sleeper dodged that attack and smashed Onslow once beneath the ear.

He did not even pause to watch the inert body drop to the ground. Onslow was still collapsing as Sleeper scooped the revolver from the place where it had fallen and sprang to see if life remained in Inverness.

The stallion was recovering, struggling to his knees feebly. Inverness stood at last with hanging head, blood dripping from his torn throat. He was badly hurt, to be sure, and made no movement to escape, even though great Careless stood on the alert, braced and ready to spring again to the battle.

Sleeper touched Inverness's torn throat. It was a mere surface wound, fortunately, and the huge swelling on the side of the horse's head was not serious. Sleeper knew that there were cracked ribs under the lump that had risen on the side of the bay. But they would heal, if the horse had rest and care.

Sleeper turned back to Onslow, as the prostrate man began to struggle on the ground, returning to consciousness. Swiftly Sleeper's knowing hands wandered over the fellow, but he found no trace of another weapon except a single pocketknife of very ordinary dimensions. When he was sure of this, he stooped and helped Onslow to his feet.

Bewildered and agape, Onslow stared about him, saw Sleeper with a wild eye, and then ran toward his horse. He seemed able to see better with his hands than with his eyes, and those hands were embracing the big stallion with a trembling love.

"There's nothing to do," said Sleeper. "Those cuts are only surface slashes. They're not bleeding much now. The broken ribs are the worst part of it. Come here, Careless."

The golden stallion came to him at once, while Onslow turned slowly. He looked from Sleeper's face to the revolver in his hand, then shook his head. "You're with Tolan?" he asked.

"No," said Sleeper. "I'm simply taking Inverness."

He scooped from the ground a bit of soft moss and laid it over the cut on his stallion's head—but the bleeding was easing. His own head rang as though hammers were at work on anvils inside it.

"And you're the thief that Tolan expected, eh?" said Sleeper. "You're the one that he knew would be on the horse's trail? You're Onslow?"

"That's my name," said the bearded man. "But I never heard of a man called a thief before because he come and took his own horse back from them that had grabbed it."

"Your horse?" exclaimed Sleeper.

"Sure," answered Onslow.

“I should have known,” said Sleeper bitterly, “that Tolan would never be mixed up in anything but dirty work! But how do you come to own a horse like that . . . a thoroughbred?”

“He’s no thoroughbred,” said Onslow.

“He’s got to be,” said Sleeper, frowning as he looked over the flawless lines of the stallion.

“Mustang,” answered Onslow.

“That horse!” Sleeper exclaimed. Now he heard, far away, the clangor of many hoofs in a lower ravine, a noise that blew up for a moment on a gust of wind, and was gone. “There’s Tolan now,” said Sleeper.

“Yeah,” answered Onslow, and said no more, but waited.

“Onslow,” said Sleeper. “It’s a queer thing that you’ve told me, but somehow I believe you. If Tolan gets up here. . . .” He shrugged his shoulders.

The mist had cleared up a little, although vast piles of clouds reared on either side of the brightness, toward the moon.

“They may have heard the noise of your gun,” Sleeper said. “Anyway, they’re coming. Onslow, suppose we try to get Inverness out of their way, broken ribs or not?”

“D’you mean that?” demanded Onslow.

“I mean it,” said Sleeper. “Take his head and walk ahead of me. There . . . through that gap and down that ravine.”

It was a narrow opening in a tall wall of the cliff at the left, and through this Onslow led his stallion, looking anxiously back to see how the tall bay followed. Inverness, still with his head down, went on gingerly, stepping very short, pausing now and then as though the pain in his side were too much for him to endure.

Behind him came Sleeper and Careless—and far away the noise of hoofbeats grew constantly clearer.

VI

The Stallion's Story

In that narrow valley they had not gone far when they saw, at their right, a ragged cleft in the wall of the ravine that looked hardly the thickness of a man's body, but, when Sleeper tried it, he found that both horse and man could pass into a cramped little gully that, fifty feet ahead, opened out into a sort of grass-floored amphitheater a hundred yards across, with great boulders strewn over it. The sides of this amphitheater were so steep that hardly a fly could have climbed to the top edge.

Into that retreat they passed. As the older man pointed out, they had run into a bottle. The enemy need only discover them in it, and, from the heights around, Tolan and his crew would have them entirely at their mercy. But there was nothing else to do. They sat down in the throat of the narrow entrance, after the horses had been tethered inside the gully. Onslow, his revolver resting on his knee, peered into the larger valley outside, and they waited for trouble.

Now and then they could hear, from the distance, the clattering of hoofs, fading out or approaching. Again a horse neighed, far off, a sound made mysterious by the flying echoes.

"What's this horse, Inverness, all about?" asked Sleeper.

Onslow said: "What are *you* about, partner? I don't make you out. You throw in with Tolan . . . and then you throw ag'in' him."

"I'm only a fellow who wastes his time," answered Sleeper. "Tell me about Inverness."

"Well," said Onslow, "my father was a Scotchman who come over early and took up some mighty bare land that reminded him of the look of things around Inverness . . . so he called his ranch by that name. The old man made the place go, and he kept expandin' until he had a whole pile of land. It was so wild that one day a band of wild mustangs break in and run off our whole dog-gone cavvy. We chased those runaways, and we seen in the distance the leader, a big bay stallion, with black stockings on all four legs and a white star on his forehead. We run those hosses with relays until we got back our own, and then we legged it after that stallion, but we never could catch White Star. He could run from morning to night and laugh at us the whole time.

"We asked around, and tried to find out if any thoroughbreds had been lost in that neck of the woods." Onslow shook his head. "But there wasn't none missing. It was pretty plain that piece of silk and iron was a mustang, although nobody never seen a mustang with the look of him, before. Well, he got in my blood. I couldn't sleep. He got between me and my chuck. I thinned out a lot, and all the time I was on the go, tryin' to locate him." Onslow leaned forward, one hand on his knee. He was frowning slightly as he went on with his story, plainly showing that it was the sole ambition in his life.

"If we couldn't catch him with hosses and a rope, I thought, maybe, that I could

manage it by creasing him. I knew that a lot of hosses had been killed that way, because, if the rifle bullet comes close enough to the vertebrae to stun the hoss, it's likely to kill him, too. But I was a pretty good hand with a gun, and I used to practice at snuffin' the flame of a candle about as far as I could see it good. And pretty soon I felt that I could peel an apple and core it with my Thirty-Thirty. So I hit the trail, and about a month later I got a good sight of White Star. He was about half a mile away, but I wriggled and snaked along until I got close enough for a fair shot."

Onslow stopped talking for a moment. In his eyes Sleeper could see him lining the sights again for that most beautiful of all horses. Then the man went on: "My heart was so big that my ribs were busting, but, when I pulled the trigger, all the mares that were with White Star scattered, running, and the stallion dropped flat. I got up and run to him. I run as fast as I could hump it, a rope ready to tie him before he come to, but, when I reached the spot, there wasn't no need of any rope to tie him. He was dead. I'd busted his neck.

"Well, I took and stayed there, sleekin' him with my hand and looking at the brightness of his dead eyes, until he begun to turn cold. Then I went home. But I stayed sick . . . and the feel of his silk hide was never out of the tips of my fingers. There wasn't nothin' but rememberin' the finest hoss I'd ever seen . . . and he was dead."

Onslow's head drooped as he felt again the dejection of that day so long ago. His fingers spread in a gesture of emptiness.

"There was Judge Winthrop, livin' not far away, that knowed nigh everything, and I talked to him one day, and he told me about mustangs that now and then turned up like freaks in the herd. You know how a mustang mostly looks . . . always with four good legs, but roach-backed and lumpish around the head, and ewe-necked, like as not. But the judge said that all of those mustangs come over . . . their ancestors, I mean . . . with the Spaniards. And those Spanish hosses was the Arab blood or the Barb from North Africa . . . the same blood that mixed with English mares to make the English thoroughbred. Hard livin' on the prairies and in the mountains made the mustangs a tough lot, all right . . . and it disfigured 'em a good deal. It took the shine out of them and put the devil inside in its place. But now and then one of the common mustang mares would drop a foal that was a regular throwback to those high-headed hosses that the Spaniards brought over.

"Now, when I heard the judge talk like that, I had an idea. I'd lost White Star. I'd killed him. The only way I could bring him back to life was to make him over again. And that's what I started to do. I hunted around through the mountains till I spotted what remained of his band, and I worked until I got some of his blood that had white blazes on the forehead, although God knows none of the hosses and none of the mares looked like a patch on White Star.

"That was when I was seventeen. I'm fifty-four now. It takes about four years to bring around a generation of hoss flesh. I've been workin' at that job all the time since. There's ten generations altogether, that I kept tryin', and dog-gone me, if ever I had a sign of luck till five years ago, when I bred a skinny sawbones of a stallion to a runt of a mare, and the foal she dropped had four legs under it that looked like the legs of a deer. And he had black silk stockings on all four legs, and a white blaze, right enough, on his forehead. And when I seen him, I got my hope of what he might be.

"Well, there he is back in there. He's Inverness. I gave him that name because, at

about the time he was foaled, I lost Pa's ranch. I'd spent my time breedin' hosses and dreamin' dreams, instead of working the herd. I didn't have wife nor child . . . but I had Inverness."

The pride showed in Onslow's face as he went rapidly on. The dejection seemed to have passed from his eyes. Even Sleeper began to be excited—for he was a true judge of horses, a lover of rare beauty in the animals. Anyone could see that Inverness was unusual.

"When he was six months old, he could outrun the herd to water," Onslow continued proudly. "When he was a yearlin', he was faster'n a streak of lightnin'. And when he was a two-year-old, I tried him under the saddle, and he went along like a dream. When I felt the wind of his gallop in my face, that was a day for me, partner! It seemed to me like fifty years of livin' meant something at last.

"Well, he was all that I had. There wasn't nothin' else. I couldn't make much money out of him here in the West, I thought, but I figgered that I could make a fortune, if only I could get him into a race on an Eastern track. So I got all the money together that I could, and I rode him East. Yes, sir, I rode him every step of the way, because I sure never could've got the price of transportation for him along the road. So I landed him at a racetrack near to New York. Well, when I showed him to a couple of gents that knew hoss flesh, they seemed kind of surprised. They put a jockey on his back . . . and in two seconds that jockey was ridin' air, not Inverness.

"That was where I beat myself. I'd never let a human bein' lay a strap on that colt. He loved me, but he sure hated the rest of the world. I couldn't make nothin' out of him by pettin' him and introducin' him proper to the jockeys. There was one kid that spent nigh a month gettin' familiar with Inverness. No, there was nobody to ride him, and I was a hundred and eighty pounds . . . and no hoss that ever lived could pack that much weight and win a race. There was only one man could sit the saddle on him. And that happened in a funny way, because there was a stable boy that used to get pretty drunk, and, while he was plastered one day, he took and climbed up on the bare back of Inverness, and sort of lay out on him, laughin', and waitin' to be bucked off. But Inverness, he never turned a hair! Later on, that feller put a saddle on him . . . and still Inverness took to him real kind.

"The boy begun to train him and give him regular gallops, and him and Inverness got real thick. One day there was a regular stake horse havin' a trial spin around the track, early in the morning, when Cliff . . . the stable boy . . . was ridin' Inverness, and they just hooked up and had it out with one another, and after two furlongs Inverness was about five lengths ahead, and the other jockey pulled up and said that his hoss was lame. But he wasn't lame . . . he was just sick, Inverness had gone away from him so fast.

"After that, Cliff, he came and told me about himself. When he was a kid, he'd been a fine jockey, but he hadn't gone straight, and he'd been ruled off the track for life for the pullin' of a hoss. He was pretty heavy now, weighin' close to a hundred and fifty. But he says it was twelve years before that he'd been ruled off, and, if he changed his name and got thinned down, he'd sure never be recognized. So I agreed with him, and he went to work. I never seen a fellow starve himself so faithful. If Cliff ever gave trouble to the world, he sure made up for it by the trouble he made for himself then. Yes, sir. He stripped the flesh off his body by ten pounds at a time and got himself down to less than a

hundred and twenty.

“It was the fag end of the season when we moved off to a Florida track, and Cliff registered himself under his new name. We put Inverness in a little no-account race, and the money I’d made, workin’ in the stables, we took and bet on Inverness at ten to one. Well, sir, it was just over a mile, that race, and after half a mile was gone, Cliff had to pull his arms out to keep Inverness back. Inverness, he run the last three furlongs with his chin right on his chest and won by half a dozen lengths.”

The fire was in Onslow’s eyes as he visualized again that first real race. He was well warmed to his subject now, and he could hardly tell his story rapidly enough. Sleeper listened patiently—not breaking in at all, as if any sign or sound from him would somehow spoil the story or cause Inverness to lose out eventually.

“It made some talk, that race, and, when we entered Inverness in the Lexington Stakes, some of the papers begun to write about him,” Onslow continued. “There was folks said that maybe he was one of the finest hosses that had ever been kept under cover, and why had a four-year-old like that never been run before, and maybe he was not able to stand trainin’. Him with legs of steel! But they all said that no matter how good he was, he would never be able to beat the great champion, Black Velvet, or his runner-up, Galleon.

“So we put down our money. And when the Lexington Stakes was run, it was a mile and a half, and the eight hosses that went out for it, they had pedigrees longer’n your arm, but not a dog-gone one of them had pedigrees that went back to Cortés, I reckon. Anyway, Galleon done the leading till they was in the home stretch, and then the champion, Black Velvet, he come with a great run, and everybody yelled for him and the crowd it went crazy, because nobody noticed that outsider, Inverness, what came right up with Black Velvet into the lead.

“A furlong from the finish, I seen Cliff let Inverness go. He come in three lengths ahead of Black Velvet, and there wasn’t no sound heard, except the hoofs of the hosses and some groanin’ noises.

“Well, sir, we collected our money and felt pretty rich, but then Cliff . . . he couldn’t hold himself no longer. He got drunk and started talkin’. Pretty soon he was called up by the president of the club, and they said that Cliff had been ruled off the track before and he sure was ruled off double now . . . and I was ruled off because I’d let Cliff ride . . . and Inverness was ruled off because he’d let himself be ridden.

“But there come a gent by the name of Mister Oscar Willis, and he asked me what was I gonna do with Inverness. I said that I would take him out West and start breedin’ ag’in, and try to establish the line of Inverness as clear as a trout stream. And he said that he had a place in Kentucky, and he would be mighty pleased to own Inverness. He offered five thousand, and ten thousand, and fifteen to get Inverness for his breedin’ farm, but I wouldn’t let him go.

“So I come on West with my hoss, and I headed across country with Inverness to go back and see could I buy a chunk of the old ranch to start the breedin’ farm ag’in. The first night out, I stopped at a deserted shack, leavin’ Inverness hobbled outside. And when I woke up the next mornin’, Inverness, he was sure gone! I never laid eyes on him ag’in until tonight.”

When he had finished his long story, Onslow packed a pipe and lighted it.

“They must’ve stolen the horse to send it along to this fellow Oscar Willis in Jagtown,” said Sleeper. “If he offered you fifteen thousand, he must have offered Tolan and the men behind Tolan as much as twenty-five thousand. Tolan would do ten murders for half that much coin. You and I are nowhere near out of the woods now, Onslow.”

“Anyway,” said Onslow, “the dawn’s comin’ up now, and we’re gonna have a chance to see a few steps of our way a mite clearer, before long.”

The short summer night was, in fact, already ending. When Sleeper looked up, he could see a faint glow in the sky, with the tops of the cliffs ink-black against it. Then Onslow touched his arm.

“They’re comin’, partner! Look . . . look at the whole four of them.”

Sleeper, turning his head with a start, saw four riders moving slowly up the floor of the outer ravine in single file.

VII

Bottled with Death

All the horses drooped with weariness—the riders, however, rode erect and alert. It was plain that Dan Tolan had well-picked men with him. At the head of the procession, Dan seemed about to lead the line of riders straight on past the entrance to the amphitheater, but, when he was almost by it, he turned suddenly in the saddle and looked fixedly toward the crevice in the wall of the ravine, where Onslow and Sleeper lay stretched out flat, barely venturing to peer out at this approaching danger. Then Tolan turned his horse and rode straight for the entrance to the gap!

He was within fifty feet of the crevice before he halted as suddenly as he had started, and surveyed the entrance to the chasm from head to foot, as though making sure that it could not extend to any depth into the rock. After that, with a twitch of the reins, he pulled around the head of his horse and went up the ravine.

As the other three riders followed him as before, Onslow turned to Sleeper with relief. “That’s finished,” he said.

“Maybe not,” said Sleeper. “We ought to get out of here. Tolan traced us this far, and he’s not apt to give up now.”

“How will he find us?” asked Onslow. “He sure missed us just now. He ain’t a bird with wings, to hop over the mountains and look into this here bowl of ours. Partner, we found the right place . . . and I’m gonna stay here till I’ve got Inverness healed and right again.”

After all, there was more of an instinctive than a reasonable objection working in Sleeper’s blood. Therefore, he was willing to be persuaded.

The sun had come up, actually thickening the shadows that sloped from the eastern side of the hollow, although all the heights began to blaze with light and above them the piled clouds were burning. Then the sun was darkened. Thunder boomed from the central sky, and a tremendous downpour began. The duskiness of twilight took the place of the morning brightness. Hail rattled like a continual musketry, and then the rain settled in for five tumultuous minutes. It beat up clouds of water mist from the rocks. It closed the eyes with its volleys.

The thunder shower ended as quickly as it had begun. The sun once more parted the clouds. The hollow began to flash with a great brilliance, for the sunlight was reflected across the wet walls of the amphitheater.

Onslow and Sleeper, drenched by the water that had been bucketed over them, went into the hollow to find the horses. Careless, undepressed by the torrents, whinnied softly to his master, but poor Inverness seemed broken in spirit. His wounds were telling on him.

They got wisps of grass, twisted them hard, and used these to brush Inverness dry. He winced when the pressure came anywhere near the swollen place on his ribs. It had grown larger, this swelling, and it was hot to the touch.

They were still discussing the stallion, when a gun spoke from the crevice that led into the hollow. The sound seemed to fly around and around Sleeper's brain. He heard the whizzing of no bullet and yet the shock was as great as though the lead had been driven straight into his flesh. Another rifle rang out on the height above them, and Sleeper looked up in time to see the marksman drop down behind a rock. He made out Paley's checkered shirt.

Onslow said: "They've got us, partner! They've uncorked the bottle, and they've cracked it. We're gonna leak out and go to waste!"

It was obviously true. Sleeper, looking wildly about him, saw that the clouds were heaping higher and higher, rolled by the wind. It seemed to him that they represented the danger that was about to overwhelm him. He had been in many perils before this time. But never had he been so completely helpless. The mouth of the crevice was stopped against their retreat. On the heights above them was at least one rifleman, who needed only to take his time, moving around and around the edge of the upper bowl in complete security until he had a chance to pick off the two men, one by one, who might scuttle for a time to the refuge of one boulder and then another.

Dan Tolan's bawling voice boomed through the valley: "Sleeper! Hey! Sleeper!" he was calling.

"Ready, Dan!" Sleeper sang out.

At this, there was a chorus of laughter from three throats. They had manned the crevice in full force and detailed only one marksman to take the heights and command the situation from the inside.

"Well, kid," said Dan Tolan, "looks like you been playin' both ends ag'in' the middle. You wanted to get Inverness for yourself, eh?"

"I seem to be here with him," said Sleeper.

"He's gonna be here without you or Onslow, before long," bawled Dan Tolan.

"Tolan," said Sleeper, "you want two horses. They'll be dead before you get the men that are with them." He added, loudly: "Onslow, put a bullet through the head of Careless to show them that we mean what we say."

He had not needed to wink at Onslow as he spoke. The latter had not stirred to draw his Colt.

But Tolan's yell broke in: "Wait a minute. Maybe we can make some kind of terms with you *hombres*."

"What sort of terms?" asked Sleeper.

"Talk it out. Talk it out," pleaded Onslow softly. "There's gonna be another cloud burst in a minute, and then maybe we can do something."

"We could manage to maybe let one of you gents go free," called Tolan, "if we got the two hosses."

"Which one would you let go free?" asked Sleeper.

"We'd let you loose, kid," said Tolan instantly.

"Because poor Onslow might trail his horse and locate it as stolen goods?" asked

Sleeper.

“Hold on,” growled Onslow. “I ain’t gonna be a spike in your coffin, Sleeper . . . if that’s what they call you. Take your chance when it comes to you. Maybe it ain’t gonna come twice!”

Sleeper, turning suddenly, looked straight into the older man’s blue eyes. “Two men can always die better than one,” he said. But he added, more loudly: “How could I trust you, Tolan?”

“Come up here to the gulch,” answered Tolan. “One of us will come out and meet you. You can have his gun for a kind of passport through us. And once you’re away . . . to hell with you! We’ll have something to tell Pop Lowry about his number one boy!”

“Talk it out,” urged Onslow. “There’s a lot of rain hangin’ up there, ready to let go all holts!”

A vast thunderhead was leaning over the hollow at the moment, increasing the height of its towers, darkening its great masses.

“Tolan, it’s a hard thing for me to walk out on a poor fellow like Onslow. What have you got against him?” asked Sleeper.

“He’s tied up to more money than he knows about,” said Tolan. “The buzzards have gotta eat him now, Sleeper. You oughta be able to see that for yourself, if you got any real sense.”

One of the other men said something that Sleeper could not catch. Then Tolan called out: “We ain’t gonna wait here and chatter all day. Say yes or no, Sleeper.”

Sleeper looked despairingly up at the clouds that were piling in the middle sky. Then a wild impulse made him sing out: “To hell with you! I’ll take my chances with Onslow.”

“Are you clean crazy?” howled Tolan.

A booming of thunder broke in between them, and then Sleeper heard Slats Lewis say distinctly: “Sure, all of them extra smart guys has got a screw loose somewhere.”

That instant a hornet song sounded near Sleeper’s head, and a lead slug splattered against the face of the boulder before him. He looked vaguely at the white spot that had appeared on the weathered rock. But, at that moment, the rain fell with a great crash that resounded through the valley like the sound of giant hands struck together.

VIII

Another Debt Paid

Through the noise of that downpour, heavy as it was, the clang of the rifle sounded once. Then the rifleman on the height was as helpless as though he were shooting down into deep water. Even Onslow had become a dim, sketchy figure before Sleeper's eyes.

But Onslow was calling: "Now, Sleeper! Let's rush 'em! Give 'em the charge, old son! Right straight for the mouth of the crevice!"

He was untethering Inverness as he spoke, and the poor, wet, beaten stallion crowded close to him like a huge child. Careless, also, was loosed in a moment. He, too, would keep at the heels of his master.

It was obvious that this was a chance, however slender. Sleeper reached out and gripped Onslow's wet hand. Then he turned and ran lightly for the entrance to the gap.

It was like running through a dream. He could not see the walls of the amphitheater or the ground three steps before him, and he almost struck the sheer wall at the end of the hollow, instead of the passageway for which he had aimed. In two quick sidesteps he flung into the open where he stood staring through the storm. He saw nothing but the dull shimmering of the descending torrents of the rain. Then a yellow streak flashed twice before his eyes. There was no humming of bullets, only the booming of the reports. He dived at the figure that he made out, half risen from behind a rock.

"They're here!" yelled Joe Peek.

Sleeper's weight struck him. With his arm curved over his head like the ridge of a helmet, with a hard, sharp elbow Sleeper struck his man full in the soft pit of his stomach and seemed to feel the bone of his arm jar against Peek's spinal column. The fellow went down without a sound, folding up like a jackknife over Sleeper, cushioning his headlong fall.

As he disentangled himself, Sleeper heard a gun barking from behind him. He had a glimpse of a dim figure that ran in, firing at every step. It was the gallant Onslow, coming to the attack.

Before the old fellow reached him, Onslow suddenly staggered to the side and went down. Other guns had been answering him. Through the wet came the pungent, stinging smell of the gunpowder, and the drifting smoke made the gloom even darker. In the tight space Sleeper could just make out big Dan Tolan and the tall, meager Slats Lewis.

Only one thing was possible, and that was to strike immediately. But to rush into the blaze of those two deadly guns was like jumping into the open mouth of death. Sleeper, leaping for a jutting point of rock above his head, felt the head of a grazing bullet sear his ribs. An inch closer to his heart would have taken his life. But he swung from the rock like an acrobat from a bar—and hurled his lithe body right at the heads of the two outlaws.

Both guns blasted at his face as he shot through the air—and both bullets missed the mark. His flight from the rock had been too great a surprise for Tolan and Lewis. Straight

and true Sleeper's flinging body hit the mark. He tried to strike Slats's throat with his cleaver-edged palm, hard as a pine plank, but the fighter's long jaw, solid as stone, turned back the crashing blow and numbed Sleeper's hand.

Sleeper managed to catch Slats about the shoulders and drag him down on the ground. His hands were busy as he fell. In a combat of death, the hand must be as swift as the brain that manages it, and Sleeper's brain was a little quicker than the wink of lightning. So, even in falling, he struck twice, hard, against the side of Slats's neck. Those were finishing strokes. Slats lay inert on the rocks, and Sleeper whirled to grapple with Tolan.

He was too late by the fraction of a second. Tolan, heaving himself half erect after he had been knocked sprawling, hurled himself at Sleeper and caught him with one vast, mighty arm that pinioned both of Sleeper's arms to his side. Beaten down on his face, pinned by the great bulk of Tolan, Sleeper turned his head and had a glimpse of the convulsed murder grin above him. He saw Tolan's hand raised with a rock clutched in the fingers. He saw the bucketing rain running on the big man's face. Then he received, not the brain-shattering crash of that falling stone, but a soft, inert, lifeless weight. And the report of a gun boomed heavily in his ears.

Hands grasped and raised him.

"How is it, Sleeper? Did I hurt you?" shouted Onslow.

Sleeper, staggering, but erect, laughed happily. "He's finished, Onslow. You've turned the trick!"

"Me?" said Onslow. "I was only a second chance. You're the wildcat that counted for 'em."

Blood was running down Onslow's face from a scalp wound, but he was not seriously hurt by the bullet that had floored him. He turned the heavy body of Dan Tolan on its back, but Tolan was dead. A .45 caliber slug had drilled straight through his body. Slats Lewis lay still as a stone. Peek was beginning to groan feebly, as Sleeper and Onslow hurried out to the ravine beyond. With the horses behind them, they started down the ravine.

Mr. Oscar Willis, seated on the verandah of the hotel in Jagtown, leaped suddenly to his feet and ran down to the street. A great, golden stallion was walking toward the hotel, ridden by a man who led a more slenderly made bay with the fine lines of a hawk in the air.

The stranger said, as he saw Willis: "You're Oscar Willis?"

"That's my name, and that horse . . . ?" began Willis.

"My job is to give you the reins of Inverness," said Sleeper, "and here they are."

Willis grasped the leather with a strong hand. He was a big, fat, rosy-faced man, and now laughter began to bubble in his throat. "The money . . . ," he started to say, when a bearded fellow stepped up to him and said: "Hello, Mister Willis. You don't need to hold my hoss for me. Unless maybe you think that you're receivin' stolen goods?"

Willis, staring at Onslow's face, dropped the reins with a groan, and then, from some unannounced impulse, hoisted his fat hands in the air as though a gun had been held under

his nose. The fellow on the golden stallion grinned very broadly. "It's all right, Willis," he said. "The murders you caused won't be pinned on you. But you better take a train for points East. This part of the world won't like you very long."

Sleeper was far away from the riotous village of Jagtown when he saw, again, the tall, shambling peddler, Pop Lowry, coming down a trail. They met at an elbow turn, and Pop Lowry turned gray with rage.

"I thought you was to work for me for three months!" he exclaimed. "And here you been and give away the hoss I sent you for."

"What's the matter?" asked Sleeper. "I got the horse you sent me for, and I put his reins into Mister Willis's hands. That's what you asked me to do."

Pop Lowry, stifled, helpless with rage, glowered for an instant at his lieutenant. Then he strode on down the trail, wordless, dragging his lead mule behind him. Long after he was out of sight the light, mocking music of the bridle bells came chiming back to Sleeper's ears.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Inverness (aka Sleeper Turns Horse-Thief)* by Frederick Schiller Faust (as Max Brand)]