

THE  
LOST VALLEY

John Frederick

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**THE LOST  
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# I

## “BURNING MONEY”

When it happened, there were divided opinions. Some said that beginners have luck. Others declared that the devil takes care of his own. And last of all the cynics nodded their heads and admitted—old miner, old fool. But when all the talking was ended, the fact remained that the man who struck pay dirt and started the wild gold-rush was young Billy Neilan, far better and more widely known as Chuck.

Of course, there was no reason in the world why Chuck should have struck it rich. He knew infinitely more about ropes and branding irons than he did about “color” and the ways of getting at it. He knew vastly more about poker than he knew about ropes and irons. And he knew far, far more about guns than he knew about poker. In fact, work was never a thing that troubled Chuck Neilan. What sent him out prospecting was simply the fact that he had never prospected before. And the third day he made the strike.

With typically careless exuberance, he took a well-to-do miner up to the claim and offered to sell out for five thousand dollars. But a miracle happened. The miner was too rich to be dishonest—at least, dishonest to *that* extent. He merely bought a half interest, and he paid for that half interest four times the price for which Chuck had stipulated to sell his entire share in the claim.

Twelve hours later a big gang of laborers was tearing into the mountainside and opening up the treasures of The Roanoke Queen. But Chuck Neilan was not on hand to watch the proceedings. He had swung his lithe body onto a vicious pinto and spurred the tough little beast toward town, for in Chuck’s pocket was a stuffed wallet that rubbed against his ribs. And in the wallet the stuffing consisted of greenbacks of large denominations totaling twenty thousand dollars that clamored with eagerness to be spent.

All the way down the trail the thirst of Chuck, brought to a fine edge by the drought of Prohibition days, increased in sharpness. It became a consuming fire in time, and he struck the town of Sitting Bull like a whirlwind seeking action.

Sitting Bull was not a quiet, pastoral village. The epidermis of that community had been thickened by many a perilous year of existence in gold-rush times and out of them. The town had seen riots beyond number, and in the early term of its life it had regularly burned to the ground three times a year. Among the old-timers in that city were men whose names had rung and echoed up and down the length of the mountain desert, and yet the hardest of these looked askance with the expression of men who feel that a storm is about to break when the rattle of hoofs and the whooping voice tore past the window.

“What young fool is that?” they would ask.

“It ain’t no fool. It’s Chuck Neilan,” would be the answer of him who went to look. Soon as that answer was received, men looked to one another foolishly, pushed hats back on heads, and scratched speculatively, then looked to their guns.

Not that Chuck Neilan was a bully or a fight picker. By no means. If he had been, he must inevitably have left a red trail behind him during the first year or two of his vigorous

manhood and come to a quick end himself. But, as a matter of fact, Chuck was the best-natured man who ever loved a fight from the bottom of his heart. He was very, very partial to fist fighting, but where his ability was known and some burly fellow wished to close and rough it, Chuck was perfectly willing to accommodate the hardiest of them in a whirl at rough-and-tumble. He would, much against his will, meet the desires of those who wished knife work. But the special domain, the *sanctum sanctorum* of Chuck, was gun play. He looked upon it not as a means of killing enemies and defending one's life. It was not that to Chuck. It was, above all, an art.

Chuck would talk with a hushed voice and subdued manner about the grace with which one fellow handled a gun, about the neatness of another, and about the speed of a third. Those were, as may be seen, the three chief articles in his creed: speed, neatness, and grace. He would hold forth at length upon the degree of polish that various gunfighters in the mountains possessed. As a matter of fact, he stood apart and above the rest of them, and he was recognized for his skill.

As has been said before, he was not a bully. Like all men who truly love battle, the only manner of battle in which he rejoiced was fair fight with no odds except on the side opposed to him. Nothing could induce him to attack a man smaller than himself, even though pushed to the wall in self-defense, and he had been known to back out of a room and literally take water rather than lay one of his formidable hands upon some obstreperous youth not yet familiar with the uses of a razor.

Indeed, as the reputation of Chuck Neilan spread and his formidable qualities became well known, he fell into a dearth of trouble, in spite of the maxim about those who hunt for it. Hardboiled battlers avoided him like poison, and law-abiding citizens would by no means risk their necks to subdue a noise maker who, as they were perfectly well aware, had not an ounce of malice in his entire make-up. Yet, although one may be perfectly sure that the lightning will not strike, it often serves to make the cheek change color and the eye grow smaller. Such was the effect of the advent of Chuck Neilan upon even the hardy citizens of Sitting Bull.

He galloped past with a whoop and a cloud of dust, and in the course of the day he plunged into and emerged from three separate parties built around various and sundry proportions of moonshine red-eye. Behold him, therefore, in the early evening striding down the streets of Sitting Bull with the carriage of a wavering reed in the wind and steps as irregular as the first halting paces of a child. His eye, however, remained clear, his voice steady, though somewhat shrill, and, when it was not necessary for him to move about, few would have guessed that he was inebriated, except for the reddened brilliance of his glance.

Of course, a crowd gathered around him. It spread behind like the tail behind a comet. If he sang, they echoed him in a chorus. If he halted, they halted likewise. Most of them were mean spirits who hungered to pick up a few wild tales to tell about the latest coming of this celebrity to Sitting Bull. Those who were actually his friends dared not argue with him about his course of action. For Chuck Neilan was very, very averse to meeting argument from a sturdy, full-grown man. He liked to have such arguments expressed in actions rather than words, and his preferences being well known, his friends gave him a wide swath when he started on a rampage. For that matter, none of the crowd was at all disposed to cross him in the least of his whims. And, though a halting, old woman came in



his path and shook her cane at him and rated him soundly and passed quite unscathed in spite of her rashness, there was no stalwart man who would not rather have signed his own death warrant than have taken such action.

So, when he whirled suddenly and with an imperious gesture bade them scatter, they obeyed at once and fled to the four corners of the street like leaves before the wind. Chuck Neilan, staggering and laughing as he watched them flee, now turned again and pursued his uncertain way until a flare of light and a well-remembered window brought him to an abrupt halt in the middle of the block. It was the pawnbroker's window. There in the very center stood the most brilliant decoration of all, the silver-and-gold mounted saddle which, since his earliest recollections, had always shone in that window, apparently a fixture there for eternity, and far too beautiful for actual use. Many and many a dream had seen him seated in that saddle, rushing against onleaping hordes of Indians perhaps, or prancing through the center of this same street with familiar faces on either side.

He gazed on it now with his heart beating in his throat. Impossible to most perhaps, but nothing was impossible to a man who had twenty thousand dollars struggling to burn a way out of his wallet and again enjoy the air of a free circulation from hand to hand. Chuck lingered only in order to note that the gold spurs were also there beside the saddle, and then he turned and plunged through the door and into the cobwebbed silence of the shop.

That silence, the warmth, and the lack of fresh air caused the excited brain of Chuck Neilan to spin for a moment. His brain cleared as he saw through the cloud the familiar countenance of Mr. Isaac Sylvester. The first Sylvester had founded this pawnshop. The second Sylvester, who was the man who now confronted Chuck with his big hands spread palms down on the top of the glass-covered case, had carried on the same business. The first Sylvester was lean; the second Sylvester was broad. His face was a triangle. The base was the enormous breadth of his jowls. The apex was the stubborn tuft of hair that jutted out at the top of his narrowing forehead. His mouth was a shapeless slit. His nose was a pudgy mass made distinguishable only by the flaring, fishhook nostrils. His eyebrows darted out in the shape familiar to those who have seen a Mephistopheles made up for the stage. Under them were little, beady, black eyes that could glitter with complacency, shine with piercing distrust, or glow invitingly. They glowed in this manner at the newcomer, though a spot of white appeared in the exact center of each of Sylvester's cheeks. The cownpuncher-miner looked over the pawnbroker with intense distrust and dislike.

"Well, Sylvester," he said, "how come?"

"Fair . . . only fair," protestingly responded Sylvester, turning his hands palms up and shrugging shoulders that seemed capable of lifting a ton's weight. "Times ain't what they used to be when my father was running things."

"Huh," said Chuck, and made a wry face. Then he swallowed the ideas that came storming to his teeth.

"That saddle there in the window," he said. "How much?"

The glance of Sylvester flickered to the saddle and back at the face of Chuck Neilan. By the step with which Chuck approached, he now saw that the man was drunk, very drunk. But would it be wise to cheat him, nevertheless? Other men had cheated Mr. Neilan on occasion, and they had not lived long to boast of their cleverness. In reality, Sylvester

hated Chuck more than he feared him. He had long promised himself that, if he could ever lay hands on the formidable cowpuncher, one crunching grip of his massive fingers would serve to end the battle before it was well begun. But the trouble was that, while he was reaching for his man, many, many things might happen. Sylvester looked again at the saddle and moistened his dry lips. And the heart of the cheat in him was dry also as a desert calling for rain.

“That saddle,” he declared, “is all gold work and silver work and leather work made by hand, Mister Neilan.”

“When you call me Mister Neilan,” Chuck said, grinning, “I know you’re going to boost the price on me. How much, I say?”

The pawnbroker burst into perspiration. “It cost two thousand to make,” he said and glanced at it aside. It was rotted with time. It was not worth, now, more than the value of the ornaments—say three or four hundred dollars.

“Two thousand?”

“But time has brought it down some,” said Sylvester, seeing a tremendous profit in the grip of his fingers, and hardly daring to close them over the bargain. “Down to about eighteen hundred . . . or . . . seeing it’s you . . . sixteen hundred dollars, Chuck.”

In agony he had brought down the price that four hundred dollars, and now his brain reeled as he heard the tall man say: “Dirt cheap, Sylvester. Dirt cheap. That ol’ saddle’s mine. Trot it out. Trot it out!”

Weak with the conviction that the entire two thousand would have been paid without demure, the pawnbroker staggered to the window and returned, carrying the saddle. It was flashing enough and brilliant enough to make an eye-catching window display, but the leather was either warped or rotted out of all semblance to a saddle.

“I’ll throw in the blankets,” he declared generously, and he swathed the saddle at once in a great sheeting of wool. Then he breathed more easily. The hungry eyes of Chuck, the eyes of one intent on purchasing, were still wandering about unsatisfied.

“I seen a pair of gold spurs out in that window,” he said. “Maybe . . . ?”

The spurs were instantly produced and turned back and forth in the fat hands of the broker, so that the light would catch on them and gleam. A price was named and instantly taken. The crisp bank notes once again rustled on the top of the glass case. The spurs were wrapped and became the property of the miner.

“Now,” said Sylvester, “what d’you think of these?” And under the eyes of Chuck he slid a tray of diamonds.

There was no satisfactory light in the pawnshop, but from the two lamps sufficient radiance fell to make the tray come instantly awash with light, and Sylvester manipulated it slightly back and forth—just a bare fraction of an inch, so that the gems might have the better chance to scintillate. While his hand worked, his brain worked with tenfold speed, estimating how high he might boost the price on each diamond. To his dismay the other was shaking his head.

“Never took to diamonds much,” he declared. “Just as soon have a bunch of old junk glass, pretty near. I like color, son, and lots of it.”

Inspiration descended upon Sylvester. The tray of diamonds disappeared with the

speed and many of the other properties of light, and in its place a second tray was produced, burning with the colors of a sunset—rubies, emeralds, topaz, pearls, none of them in any remarkable size, but all in such numbers that the color effect instantly charmed the eye. Hundreds of Mexicans had left this wealth here in exchange for gold. And many and many a gaudy scarf pin had been despoiled to increase the tray in Sylvester's shop. He looked upon it now with a sad sort of satisfaction. It was his particular hobby, this collection. He would almost as soon keep the tray as sell anything from it—unless he received his price.

The big, brown hand of Chuck shot across the tray with precision. Sylvester quaked. All his insides became suddenly the consistency of jelly. Then he remembered that the integrity of this wild battler was known, and his fear abated. There would be no cunning sleight-of-hand work from this customer. The hand drew back, and into the palm of it fell an earring from which was suspended a long, narrow, beautiful emerald.

“I sure like green,” murmured Chuck Neilan, moving his hand so that the jewel showed a pool of light within it. “I sure like green, but I never seen green before that would match up with this. How much?”

It was worth, perhaps, two hundred; it had been purchased for fifty; Sylvester determined to take a snap chance. “Seven hundred,” he said, “is what I'll sell that emerald to you for, Chuck Neilan. I like to see a gem like that come to a gent that will know how to appreciate it. Only seven hundred to you, Chuck.” Again his head swam.

“Cheap . . . dirt cheap,” the madman was chanting. “Gimme that earring, Sylvester. Got another like it?”

## II

### “THE NEED FOR ACTION”

Not even those men who had gone through times of stress with Chuck Neilan, who had proved his integrity, his fearlessness, his indomitable faith—not even these men could call him a handsome fellow. And the next morning it seemed to big Sylvester that the tall man who came and leaned in his doorway was the ugliest of mortals. The nose was as crooked and high as the beak of an eagle. The face was lean and of a bronze that verged on redness at the high cheekbones. The jaw was square, the mouth straight and broad, and the eye was like the eagle again, steady, unwinking, inscrutable, so that men never could tell whether Chuck was on the verge of laughter, oaths, or a gun play.

Certainly not a handsome man and yet a most interesting one. Few men could pass him over with a glance. Big Sylvester, thinking of the prices he had charged the evening before, moistened his white lips and rolled his eyes. And still the tall man leaned there in the doorway with his big, bony right hand draped carelessly on his hip just a little distance above the hand-worn butt of his revolver. Sylvester stared fascinated at that hand and at the drooping fingers that, he knew, could move with the speed of a whiplash as it snaps.

“Good morning,” said Sylvester, and then, finding that his dry lips had moved without an audible sound, he managed to say huskily: “ ’Morning, Chuck.”

The terrible Chuck replied with not so much as a friendly nod. His silence was, to Sylvester, hardly less awful than the explosion of a gun and the tear of a bullet through flesh and bone.

“I done considerable buying in here last night, it seems,” said Chuck at length, with his usual directness coming straight to the point.

“Yep,” answered the miserable Sylvester, “you seemed to hanker after some of the things in the store.”

“I sure did,” agreed the other. “I hankered so bad that I didn’t look at what I bought.” He paused, running his cold eye carelessly over the burly frame of the pawnbroker.

*Who could tell*—thought Sylvester—*perhaps this devil of a man was even now selecting the spot where his bullets should strike home.* “You were considerable hurried,” said the nervous Sylvester. “Didn’t stop to do no bargaining. You just grabbed off everything at the first price and walked away with it. Well . . . that’s good business for me, but not so good for you.”

This candor surely would disarm the very devil himself. And even the cheated miner smiled, although for the life of him Sylvester could not detect an iota of real mirth in that smile.

Now Chuck Neilan lounged toward the proprietor, and there, resting his gaunt elbow on the top of the glass case, he brought his bright, steady eyes intolerably close to the face of Sylvester.

“I bought a pair of spurs,” he said.

Sylvester nodded.

“They busted before I got ’em home,” said Chuck Neilan.

Sylvester winced under this unexpected stroke. He had no reason to believe that there was anything wrong with those spurs. They had stood ten years in his window—but what was time to gold?

“I’ll fix them for you . . . for nothing,” he said.

Chuck grinned. “I bought a saddle, too.”

Perspiration poured out on the forehead of the proprietor. “Yes,” he breathed.

“The leather was all warped, and the lining was rotten. It rubbed away to dust almost when I touched it.”

“I didn’t know,” stammered Sylvester. “Matter of fact, I ain’t looked close at that saddle for a good many years. You wouldn’t wait, Chuck. You just up and walked out with things. You didn’t give me no chance to look things over and find out. . . .”

He was interrupted by the remorseless Chuck. “I bought this here, too,” he said, and held forth on his fingertips the emerald earring. On the brown skin it was the rarest of rare greens. There was a slight tremor of the fingers. Slight though it was, it filled the jewel with quivering lights. The pawnbroker stared at the stone with wide eyes. Surely he had not committed a great wrong in the sale of this little emerald. He had hardly more than doubled the price, but plainly Chuck Neilan was merely producing all the evidence and adding up the deeds that had been wrought against him. When all was done, he would strike a swift balance with a touch of the trigger and call the account quits.

Slowly, slowly Sylvester made his laboring eyes rise, until they rested on the face of Neilan. To his unutterable astonishment, that face was strangely softened, and the cold eyes for the moment were staring into pleasant distance as one who hears music. Sylvester waited, too stunned to make surmises.

“Where’s the other emerald? Where’s the mate to this?” asked Neilan.

“I dunno,” said Sylvester. “I dunno where it is. Only this one was brought in.”

“That a fact?” murmured Neilan. “That a straight fact?”

The pawnbroker nodded anxiously.

“I was looking at it this morning,” muttered Neilan. “Seemed to me, looking it over, that this here must have belonged to some young girl. Eh? Nobody but a young girl would want to wear it, I guess. A green like this would not be becoming to an older woman’s skin.”

“Maybe,” said the other, still anxious.

“Maybe?” echoed Chuck. “Why ain’t you sure? Don’t you remember what she was like . . . and what her name was?”

Sylvester blinked. For the first time he began to catch his clue to what was going on in the mind of Chuck. The latter had dreamed over this paltry, low-grade gem until he had visualized the owner and original wearer. He had built her into a fascinating creature of the mind, no doubt.

“It was a man brung it in, Chuck,” he answered.

“A man?” growled Chuck, fierce with disappointment. He brooded with sullen eyes. “How come a man brung it in?” he asked suddenly. “What business had a man with it?”

"I dunno. He just brung it in. That's all I know."

"A man," echoed Chuck, deeper and deeper in the slough of despondency. Then his brow contracted in a murderous frown. His strong, bony fingers closed over the fat arm of his interlocutor. "Did he say where he got it?"

"Why," said Sylvester, "d'you think he done murder for it? Might've been his sister's or his mother's? Or maybe he bought it, figuring on having it set for a stickpin."

"Huh," grunted Chuck Neilan, by no means satisfied with this matter-of-fact explanation. "When did he bring it in?"

"Yesterday afternoon."

"Late as that? Sylvester, I've smelled out some sort of a queer story behind this here emerald. I dunno why. I dunno how I got at the feeling."

"It's the way the morning after has hit you, son," said Sylvester kindly. "Strong drink does that, sometimes. Some folks see their snakes when they're drunk, and some sees 'em when they're just finished being drunk. You were sure lit up last night, Chuck."

Chuck nodded. "What sort of a looking gent was him that brought it in?" he asked.

"Can't tell you that, son," answered Sylvester. "You see, he was kind of partial to not having his name knowed."

"Eh?"

"He asked me not to say nothing about him."

A flush ran up the thin cheeks of Chuck Neilan. "Sylvester," he cried, "don't that prove I'm right? Don't that prove they's something queer about this earring, him not wanting to have anybody know where it come from?"

Sylvester shook his head, smiling. "No use jumpin' to conclusions, Chuck. It don't mean nothing. Maybe it's something that was give to him, and he's ashamed to let it be known that he's sold it again. Maybe . . . well, they's a thousand ways of explaining about it, Chuck."

But Chuck slowly and obstinately shook his head. "I got a feeling about it," he persisted. "Nothing rides easy in me. I'm all upset. Me having just struck it rich don't make no difference. Gold don't mean nothing. All I want is some kind of action since I took a look at that earring this morning. And I figure, Sylvester, that I'm going to get it."

"Go out and try," the other advised, deeply relieved at the prospect of getting rid of this troublesome guest. "And good luck be with you."

But Neilan lingered. "You ain't told me what his name is," he insisted.

"Eh? I told you I couldn't."

"You ain't told me his name," said Chuck Neilan, his mouth drawing to a straight line. "Listen here, you low-down, flat-headed, money-hogging swine . . . listen to me, will you? I'd ought to salt you away with lead so's you'd be an example to other gents of your kind not to cheat us simple folks in Sitting Bull. But I ain't touching a gun, Sylvester. I'm letting you give bail . . . and you're going to give bail by telling me the name of the gent that sold this to you."

Sylvester hesitated an instant—but in that instant his eyes, meeting the glance of the other, saw death, and they recoiled from what they saw. "He didn't give no name," said Sylvester, his olive skin turning a sickly, wan yellow. "He didn't give no name at all, but,

if you're dead set on it, I'll tell you what sort of a looking gent he was. Big fellow with a blond beard . . . sort of faded yaller. Big chest sticking out under his chin. Wears two guns. Looks tough. And. . . ."

But the other rocked back on his heels, withdrawing from the counter for the first time. "You don't need to tell me no more," he said. "That's enough to locate him pretty handy, if he's stayed long enough in these parts for any of the boys to watch which way he started. Yesterday afternoon you say he was here?"

"Right."

There was no chance for a further exchange of words. Tall Chuck Neilan slid through the door, and the next moment the hoofs of his pinto thudded in the dust.

### III

#### “CHALMERS IS SURPRISED”

A scant twenty minutes later the little mustang was scattering the gravel on the south trail out of Sitting Bull, for Chuck had located and named his man. The blond fellow of the deep chest and the yellow beard had spent the night in the hotel, given the name of Chalmers, and departed hardly an hour before Chuck arrived with his inquiries at the center of the town's social life. Chuck now rode the trail with a head held high, and with gleaming eyes. He was in his glory, riding a trail that no other man would have dreamed of taking, hunting a goal that no other man would have dreamed of desiring to reach, and throwing away the hours and the days of his youth with a wild abandon.

His man in this instance rode slowly enough. With an hour and a half of frantic galloping, he brought his sweating mustang over a hilltop and saw in the hollow beneath a square-shouldered man jogging steadily along on a tall horse—a heavy rider he was, and a glint of yellow hair showed under the back of the brim of his sombrero. So heavy of shoulders, indeed, was the man who turned in the saddle as Chuck thundered down the slope, hallooing, that the slowness with which his horse had traveled was readily explained. Neilan drew back the pinto to a rocking canter and presently drew rein on the tough little beast, directly confronting the stranger.

“Chalmers?” inquired Chuck heartily as he drew near.

“That’s me, kid. What’s your name?”

“I’m Billy Neilan.”

“Well, Billy, what you want with me? You seem hurried by something.”

“I’ll tell you,” said Chuck. “I seen this in the pawnbroker’s place, and I bought it. I asked him where was the mate to it, and he said that he only had the single one. Here it is.”

He showed the emerald, and from the corner of his eye he saw the big, blond stranger color to the brim of his hat.

“Sylvester wouldn’t tell me who sold him the emerald,” went on Chuck artlessly, “but I looked over the gents that was in town lately, and I couldn’t figure nobody but you would be carrying around emeralds for sale. Most gents that float through on hossback ain’t apt to be more’n a week’s pay ahead of the game, let alone a emerald like this one. Is it yours?”

“No,” answered Chalmers. “You got me figured wrong, son.” He added: “Besides, what makes you so keen to find out about it?”

“I want to find the mate to it,” said Chuck carelessly. “I’m starting in collecting emeralds.”

“Ain’t you starting kind of cheap?” said the other.

“Cheap?” said Chuck. “Not so’s you could notice it. Would you call seven hundred for a dinky bit of stone like this cheap?”



“Seven hundred!” cried the other. “Good Lord! Did you pay that much after the skunk only forked over fifty to . . . ?” He stopped, his mouth agape on the next word, realizing that he had been trapped into a confession. Chuck Neilan was quietly grinning at him.

“All right, partner,” said Chuck. “Now tell me some more about this here emerald, will you? Tell me where the mate to it is, and where’s the girl that used to wear ’em?”

But Chalmers jerked his horse around and started on down the trail, growling: “To the devil with you and your questions, both.”

Chuck spurred the pinto past his man and whirled the little beast around on its hind legs.

“You and me ain’t through talking,” he declared, as the pinto came down with a crash on its forefeet. “I’m still right here asking questions, Chalmers.”

“Ask and be hanged. Why, you skinny fool, I’ll throw you off your hoss and break your neck if you keep spoiling my view like this. Are you plumb crazy?”

“Only half,” answered the imperturbable Chuck. “Only half, friend. I say, are you ready to talk now?”

A light of understanding came into the eyes of Chalmers. He seemed to be gradually remembering. And as he remembered, his color paled rapidly.

“You’re Chuck Neilan,” he said suddenly. “You’re Chuck Neilan that I’ve heard about, I guess?”

“I’m more or less him, I guess,” admitted Chuck. “But don’t let that make any difference if you got any designs on busting my neck, partner.”

The other scowled but made no answer. Twice his hands contracted into fists, and twice his glance sought the revolver in the saddle holster on Chuck’s horse, and his fingers uncurled.

“If that’s the way of it,” said Chuck, “swing out of the saddle, and we’ll have it out on foot. I aim to hear you talk quite a pile about this here emerald, son.”

The other blinked, then grinned in savage satisfaction as he gathered that Chuck really meant what he said, and instantly he was out of the saddle and on the ground, a huge man with a brutish face now lighted with anticipation of pleasure. Chuck threw his reins and readily joined him, but he was not yet firmly on the ground—hardly more than in the act of landing and quite off balance—when the big man came charging in. He came snarling and with his lips grinned back so hard that his eyes were well nigh covered with a mass of wrinkles. He struck with a pile-driver right. It landed high on the side of Chuck’s head and shot him sprawling on his back.

Chalmers drove in to finish his man, his arms extended and his hands made into claws. Plainly he intended to go for the throat like the bulldog that he was. The horror of that distorted, bestial face and those reaching hands froze all the muscles of Chuck for an instant. But luckily the blow that threw him off balance had glanced and had not stunned him. He rose to his feet now, barely escaping that blind rush, and danced off. As Chalmers came in, he nailed the big man with a long right, bringing him up standing, and whipped a hard left fist instantly against his jaw.

The weight of the blows checked the rush of Chalmers, but they no more dazed him than if they had been delivered against a head of wood. In the very instant that he

delivered the second punch, Chuck Neilan knew that he had no chance to batter down this heavy-handed, square-jawed fighter, and, changing his tactics at once, he dove like a football player for the knees of his enemy. His shoulder crashed home. The big man came down with a roar, too surprised to gain an effective hold on the slippery body of Chuck, and the next instant the latter was on top, holding his man securely with a half nelson and wrist lock, and jogging his face heavily into the stones on which he lay.

A dull groan, and then a yell of surrender immediately followed.

“Will you talk now?” asked Chuck.

“Aye . . . cuss you!” growled Chalmers. And Neilan slipped away and swung again into his saddle, with the revolver once again ready to his hand. Chalmers picked himself up slowly and wiped away the dust from his face. He still bore an expression of astonishment, as if he could not quite make out what had happened to him.

“First off,” said Chuck calmly, “I want to know who owned this earring, and who has the mate to it now.”

“Miss Harvey has it,” answered Chalmers. “Old man Harvey’s girl up in the Miller Hills. You know the place?”

“Think I’ve heard about it. How come she give you this earring?”

“She . . . she owed me some back pay,” said the other. “This was to square things up. And it wasn’t worth enough to square it up, at that.”

Chuck Neilan caught at a passing thought. “You lie,” he said fiercely. “She never gave it to you. Listen here, Chalmers,” he went on, as he saw the big man wince in a manner that was a sufficient admission that he had lied, “I know something about this. I know enough to tell when you’re keeping off the truth. And the truth is what I’m going to have, Chalmers, or else I’ll blow that head of yours into a sieve. Now talk out.”

Chalmers verified the threat by looking first at the fiercely set features of Chuck and then at his right hand perilously near to the butt of the gun. If he had been in his right senses, he would have known that murder was not in the province of Chuck Neilan. But Chalmers was not in his right senses. He was still bewildered by the manner in which victory in the late fight had slipped out from between his two hands in the very moment when he thought all was over. And his nerves were shaken by the mysterious way in which he had found himself prostrate on the ground held in an inescapable grip. To him the slender fellow on the horse seemed capable of anything.

“She give me the emerald,” he said, “to take to Joe Purchass. You know him?”

“I’ve heard about him, too. He’s up in the Miller Hills, I guess?”

“Yep.”

“But instead of taking it to Purchass, you . . . well, why did she want to send it to Purchass?”

“I dunno. I got tired of trying to make head or tail out of the way that things was going on that ranch of hers. It sure made me plumb sick to see a fine ranch go to pieces and nothing done to stop it. They had as pretty a herd of cows as you ever seen, a couple of years back. And now look at ‘em.”

“Rustling?” asked Chuck.

“Maybe. I dunno. Rustling? Sure it was rustling. But who done the work, I don’t

know. And who's doing it now, I don't know. But it's worked as slick as though The Wolf himself had a hand in it. I guess you know The Wolf?"

"The Wolf?" echoed Chuck Neilan. "Good Lord. Is they anybody in the range that don't know The Wolf?" And his mind darted off into the haze of part legend and part indubitable fact with which the name of The Wolf was surrounded. "But The Wolfs gone," he continued. "He ain't been working in these parts for close on to six years, I guess."

"Then maybe it's his ghost," answered Chalmers, shrugging his shoulders. "But I was working for the Henry boys eight years ago, when The Wolf starved 'em out with his rustling gang. And the way the cows fade away on the Harvey place sure reminds me a lot of the goings-on at the old Henry outfit. Nobody knowed who did it. Everybody suspected everybody else. It was sure the devil."

"And she was sending you to Purchass, you say?" went on Chuck Neilan, drawing the other back to the facts and away from the imaginary parts of the narrative.

"She was."

"You got no idea why she wanted to send this to him?"

"None in the world. Unless. . . ."

"What?"

"Purchass used to hang around a pile. Maybe. . . ."

"Maybe she's sort of fond of him, eh?"

"Maybe."

"I guess that lets you out, Chalmers. So long."

There was no answer to this salutation, and Chuck cantered the pinto slowly back up the grade, looking over his shoulder to make sure that the disgruntled cowpuncher did not take a pot shot to even up matters. But although Chalmers gazed long and steadily after his late companion, he made no effort to draw his gun, and presently he climbed into the saddle on the tall horse and vented some of his rage and shame by spurring his mount cruelly and then driving at a sharp gallop down the hollow and up the grade on the far side.

Chuck made sure that he was no longer in range for a rear attack, then he drew back the hardy pinto to a walk.

## IV

### “THE LURE OF COMBAT”

The horse had need for some rest after the sharp gallop out of Sitting Bull, and Chuck himself had need for quiet hard thinking. So far as he could make out, the matter was closed to him—as though a wall had been built between him and the silly dreams and fancies that had taken possession of him that morning when he first looked at the jewel. There was, to be sure, a girl behind the emerald, just as he had suspected. But that girl, it seemed, was sending a present to another man; and, when a girl sends presents of this description, there could be only one meaning. They were a token of amity, at least.

He recalled now, what he knew about Joe Purchass. His knowledge was spotty and full of breaks. But, at least, he was certain that he had heard of the Purchass family as one rich in land and timber and cattle. And of Joe Purchass he knew he had heard him to be a strong man, a daring and combative man, capable of creditably upholding the repute of the old Purchass family, for all of that reputation was now fallen upon his single pair of shoulders.

This data he gathered out of the mist of his memory that refused to yield any further points. But it was sufficient for the nonce. If a girl in difficulties on her ranch was sending jewels to such a man as Joe Purchass, there could be only one conclusion. And he, Chuck Neilan, had far better keep out of the trouble. He would be making a fool of himself if he interfered.

And yet one thing drew him in spite of his reason, drew him as the magnet draws iron. Everything in his soul of souls responded to the name of The Wolf. The terrible and strange man was known through the whole expanse of the mountain desert, and he was known as an invincible enemy, a stealthy and sliding ghost of a man. What he had done was hardly to be summed up by even the longest memory. In the narrow space of two or three years at most he had crowded his days full of one atrocious crime after another. From cattle rustling to murder, he had run the gamut and even, it was said, had descended to lower levels and had committed small crimes merely for the sake of the excitement. Everything about the man was terrible, less than human and more than human. He was one of those rare and devilish men who sin for the sake of sinning. Money, it was apparent from the first, was no object to him. But the excitement of getting money that was not his was a lure beyond resistance.

Thinking of the man, the picture of him returned to the mind of Chuck Neilan as he had heard the demon described a hundred times. He was, of course, always masked. Yet there were distinctive features about his face. It was rather round, and the cheeks were pink. It was a handsome face, despite the mask—eyes sufficient in themselves to disarm an enemy by making him creep. But more distinctive of all, his head was bald—prematurely bald. He was large of frame, swift of hand, deadly in fighting of all kinds. This much was certain. He was, in short, so easily distinguished that it seemed impossible that he could have returned to work mischief on the ranges again without at once being

recognized and the report spreading hundreds of miles in a few hours. This in itself seemed enough to discredit entirely the report of Chalmers, and, yet, with a thrill running in his veins, Chuck found that he could not dismiss the lingering belief that The Wolf in person had an actual part in the mischief that was now going on at the Harvey ranch.

Why should his heart leap when he considered this possibility? Why should the heart of the prize fighter, one might as well ask, leap in his throat when he heard of the return to the ring of some famous and undefeated champion who retired some time before because of lack of worthy opponents? No man in the town of Sitting Bull, no man in the environs of that village, no man for a weary journey in any direction, would lift a hand against Chuck Neilan once his name was known. Like Alexander, he had conquered the known world. There was no longer left any hero who dared to do battle against him, unless he hounded respectable, quiet citizens into a fight. And that, of course, was entirely alien to his nature. And now, into the very heart of his domain, so to speak, a great and famous champion had suddenly arisen like a ghost from the grave—a man on whom he could make a three-fold reputation.

For these reasons, then, the heart of Chuck leaped in his bosom, and he chanted a song to the unheeding ears of the pinto as he rode along. It was a small clue on which to ride far, but Chuck had ridden farther on smaller clues than this. Now he determined to seek out Joe Purchass and give him the emerald that Chalmers should have presented, but which, like a petty thief, he had sold and then ridden away.

With his mind made up to the journey, the mind of Chuck became perfectly calm, for the simple reason that he would not think a jot about what lay before him until he confronted Joe Purchass himself. Blithely he rode down into Sitting Bull, made up his pack, unsaddled the pinto, and gave him a heavy feed, let him rest for six hours, and then struck out, in the dusk of the day, across the mountains. It was a hundred and fifty miles to the Miller Hills, and, once among them, he might have another fifty to do before he reached the ranch of Joe Purchass. So he let the pinto jog on at his own pace, which was slow but tireless, and that night, not very long before the cold break of day, he camped far out from Sitting Bull.

His sleep was short and troubled by dreams at that camp, for half a dozen times he envisioned himself engaged with The Wolf. He saw clearly, as if he had once before seen the outlaw, the smooth, bald head, as though tonsured. He saw the smile for which The Wolf was famous. In the midst of murder itself, that faint smile, men said, was never quite extinguished.

He wakened before the day was well advanced and struck out at once. In the first stage he had covered fifty miles. By afternoon of the next day he was among the Miller Hills. And that evening he learned at a ranch house the location of the Purchass place. The following morning he rode into sight of it.

It needed only a glance to determine that this was a rich estate. The buildings stood on a slightly swelling rise of ground, though the entire space which they occupied was itself in the center of a great hollow with the hills ranged about the edges of the cup in protective rows. The house was far larger than common. The whitewashed outbuildings, barns, and sheds were innumerable, shambling off in all directions from the dwelling house, except to the east. On this side the prospect was kept clear of business. The slope of ground was loosely planted with trees, and the eye of Chuck rested on stretches of watered

lawn here and there among the trees and even colorful beds of flowers, with the colors blurred and smudged by the distance and the morning mist.

If this were the scale on which Joe Purchass lived and acted, well for Chuck, indeed, if he kept out of the affairs of the rich man. To be sure, he had wealth of his own coming out of the mine, great wealth it might be, but never comparable to such an established power as this. Humility entered the soul of the cowpuncher, but it did not stay there long. He cast humility over his shoulder like a worn-out coat, and with a shrill whistle he started the pinto down the last slope of his long trail.

From the distance, when he could look on the ranch headquarters spread out beneath him like a map, it had been impressive enough, but, when he dropped into the lower level and approached the knoll on which the buildings stood, his awe was vastly increased, and he only kept himself whistling carelessly by a great effort of the will.

The trees were far taller than they had seemed. The grass plots expanded into wide-sweeping lawns—the sure proof that the householder was from the East—and the colorful spots of flowers expanded in turn into little, formal gardens. When he came out in front of the building, Chuck approached it with a constant stiffening of the back. He moved by instinct toward the side entrance, dismounted, threw the reins of his horse, and then walked up to the door and knocked.

## V

### “INSTINCTIVE DISTRUST”

The first glance at the stately figure of the proprietor made Chuck wonder how persons could possibly call such a man Joe. That he was not known everywhere as Joseph and perhaps with an initial after the full first name was a great tribute to the democracy of the West. He was in every way a big man, a full six feet and two inches in height, with ample proportions of breadth and thickness to match. His head was covered with a close-curling crop of black-brown hair, that also grew in sideboards and whiskers, almost covering his face and descending to a short, pointed beard—a tonsorial arrangement that made his head seem extremely long. The manner of the rich man was as dignified as his appearance. His voice was big in volume but carefully held down to a pleasant speaking note; training had enabled him to make it perfectly smooth and equable. Only when he laughed or exclaimed, the voice burst out and roared in the astonished ears of the listeners. For the rest, his clothes were ordinary by comparison.

He was not garbed poorly, after the fashion of many Westerners who make it a point that they may surprise strangers by the contrast between their bank accounts and the sums borne about on their backs. Joe Purchass was dressed very plainly, nevertheless, and he had in addition a habit of continually attempting to bring his manner to a more plain and matter-of-fact basis. One felt that this effort was not entirely true to his inner nature, and it merely made those about him ill at ease. It was a forcible reminder that Joe Purchass had spent all of his more youthful years in the East and had come West only a scant year before, to assume the management of the entire family property that had at length come into his hands. He took on this matter-of-fact manner as he greeted the rather embarrassed Chuck Neilan.

“I’ve heard about you, Mister Neilan,” he said. “And I’m glad to meet you now. I’ve heard about you as a very honest man and a very dangerous enemy. I hope that you haven’t come up here bringing trouble with you?”

He chuckled a little as he spoke, and Chuck felt a bristling of dislike go up his backbone. There was no reason for such an impulse. It was purely blind dislike. But the instinctive things we do and feel are doubtless far more powerful than our reasoned actions. On the spot, he distrusted instantly and disliked Joe Purchass. For that reason he smiled in his most amiable fashion.

“I dunno,” said Chuck. “I guess this ain’t trouble. Leastwise, it don’t look like no trouble that I ever seen. I think this is coming to you?” As he spoke, he slipped the emerald earring from his vest pocket and extended it in the open palm of his hand to Purchass.

The effect upon Joe Purchass was startling. First he started a pace back. Then he snatched the jewel from the hand of Chuck, and he peered at it as though in the changing green lights of the jewel he expected to read a message. Next, as though recalling himself, he straightened, and, while he placed the emerald in his wallet, slipping it, Chuck noticed,

into a little pocket by itself, he examined Chuck with keen eyes.

“You’re a new man at the Harvey place?” he asked. “How are things over there? And what’s happening? Are they still talking about rustling and such nonsense?”

“I dunno,” answered Chuck. “I’m not from the Harvey place. I’m from Sitting Bull.”

And then, very quickly and simply, omitting as many of the unusual details of the story as possible, he told what had happened, and why it was that he had taken the long ride through the mountains to the Purchass Ranch. Joe Purchass listened with a growing astonishment, and, in conclusion, he stretched out his hand and caught that of Chuck in an overwhelming grip. Plainly the man did not realize the extent of his own prodigious strength. Chuck gritted his teeth and prayed that no bones were broken in his hand. He managed to maintain a half smile of carelessness.

“You’ve done a mighty fine thing,” said Joe Purchass. “All the finer because you did it on the spur of the moment. You don’t know the Harveys. You don’t know Kate Harvey, at least, and she’s the important one. Certainly, you’ve never seen me before. Altogether, Mister Neilan, you’ve done a thing that I won’t forget in a hurry. As a matter of fact, I want to show you my gratitude in a more substantial way immediately. I know you hard-riding, hard-drinking fellows. Money rolls away from you about as fast as it rolls to you. Now, Neilan, just step into the library with me and let me give you a check that. . . .”

Chuck raised his hand with no little natural dignity of his own.

“Purchass,” he said, “a few days ago I hit it rich in the mines. No credit to me. Just luck. But the point is that I hit it rich, and I’ll probably get more cash out of that mine than I can ever spend on myself. Well, sir, it was right after that I decided to ride up here and give you the emerald. Money ain’t what I’m after.”

Joe Purchass frowned. Strange to say, this profession of indifference to money did not seem to please him at all. “At least,” he said, with a touch of coldness in both manner and voice, “you’ll let me repay you the price of the emerald.”

Chuck considered, and then shook his head.

“You don’t owe me money,” he said. “If anybody owes it to me, it’s the girl.”

“She couldn’t pay you,” answered Purchass. “She couldn’t pay you, my quixotic friend. Her ranch is almost ready to fall to pieces under the load of mortgages her idiot of a father piled on it. No matter how cheaply you bought the emerald, it would be a great hardship for her to attempt to redeem the earring.”

“I’m not going to ask her to,” said Chuck with equal firmness, and frowning a little in his turn.

Joe Purchass blinked, for plainly he could not understand. “Just what are you after?” he asked bluntly, and his smooth voice roughened and increased marvelously in volume. “Just what are you after, my friend?”

“Action,” said Chuck curtly. “I’m looking for excitement, not money. And action is what I figure on getting.”

“I don’t quite follow you,” replied Purchass.

“No? Well, Chalmers, the hound, told me he figured that The Wolf had something to do with this business at the Harvey ranch.”

“Good Lord! The Wolf!” breathed Purchass.



“Yep. That’s what Chalmers said, and he talked as though he meant it. Said there was the same smooth sort of work.”

Purchass seemed to have recovered from the first shock. He broke suddenly into ringing laughter, so loud that Chuck was pressed back a step or two by the noise.

“The Wolf?” he repeated, chuckling when he could speak. “That’s nonsense, Neilan. Chalmers was drunk or dreaming. Rustling, in my estimation, has little to do with the ruin of the Harvey ranch. The insane extravagances of old Harvey, and the fact that the girl is trying to do a man’s work and run the big place by herself now . . . those are the things which, combined, have run down the place and loaded it with debts where it used to be a paying proposition. Of course, there has been some rustling. Up in those wild hills there are twenty good hiding places in every square mile, and rustlers could work pretty safely up there. No wonder if a few of them have collected and run off some cows now and then. No wonder at all. But, sir, that is not what has ruined Harvey, because he has ruined himself.”

“Hmm,” growled Chuck, forced to admit the self-evident truth of all this. “Just the same. . . .”

“My dear fellow,” the rich man broke in, laughing again, “Chalmers was drunk. Don’t you know that the day of cattle rustling is past? Too many already have been hung for that work.”

“It was only six years ago,” broke in Chuck, “that The Wolf was working around these parts.”

“The devil!” cried the rancher. “Are you going to hark back to that myth of a man all the time? By heaven, I don’t believe the villain ever existed. Be reasonable, Mister Neilan. Consider, also, that no one would be capable of robbing a girl like Kate Harvey.”

“No one but The Wolf,” vociferated Chuck. “Every word you say makes me surer and surer that devil of a man is really at work up yonder in the hills around the Harvey ranch.”

Joe Purchass grew very red with anger, but immediately he controlled himself and stepped back. “Very well, sir,” he said, “if you think that, the best thing for you to do is to go out and find your man . . . and good luck go with you. But if what they say about The Wolf is half true, you’ll have a considerable task on your hands.”

The sneer with which this was said made Chuck Neilan even more red than the rancher had been the moment before.

“Matter of fact,” he admitted, “I haven’t set up to be a better man than The Wolf. I know he’s a devil. I’ve heard enough about his murderings and how straight he could shoot and how fast he was at getting a gun out of the leather. I know all that, and that’s why I wanted to talk to you. I thought that maybe we could go hunting together and that way. . . .”

“Hunting a ghost? Hunting a man who if he ever existed . . . which I doubt . . . has certainly been dead these six years?”

“Well,” muttered Chuck, a little abashed by the conviction of the other, “I see that you’re going to keep out of it, but that doesn’t mean that I’m through. I’m going to stick on this trail till it comes to some sort of an end. So long, Mister Purchass!”

The rancher grumbled an answer and turned away, but almost immediately his good nature returned, and he ran after and overtook Chuck before the latter could leave the

house.

“Look here,” he cried, laying that tremendously heavy hand on the shoulder of Chuck and spinning him around very much as though he were a top, “you can’t leave like this. You’ve done me a fine turn, Neilan, and I mean that you shall profit by it. Stay here and teach me some way I can serve you. You won’t take money. I apologize for offering it to you. At least, stay on and spend the night after your long ride. I’m starting off at once, but I’ll see that you’re taken care of . . . and there’s some real old stuff here, my boy . . . not moonshine, but the real article.”

The last bit of information struck Chuck at his weakest point. For an instant he wavered. Then he shook his head.

“I’ll stick by this trail. It’s bad luck to leave off a trail before you’ve seen both ends of it. Good bye, Mister Purchass.”

His last impression of the big man was that he had started to speak in protest but almost immediately changed his mind and, with a shrug of his massive shoulders, turned his back on his departing guest and went into the next room.

Outside, Chuck swung into the saddle on the pinto and rode down to the nearest barn. He found a spindling youngster stuffing straw into sacks.

“What’s the way to the Harvey Ranch, son?” asked Chuck.

The youth turned as though struck, and blinked at Chuck. “You’re another, eh?” he grunted. “You’re another for the Harvey Ranch?”

“Sure.”

“Funny they didn’t tell you how to get there, then. But hit north, straight north, and you’ll sure come to it or folks that can tell you *pronto* where it is. What’s your job going to be up yonder?”

“To keep a quiet tongue in my head and not talk like King Solomon before I’m old enough to wear long pants,” said Chuck reprovingly.

And he swung the pinto to the left and struck north.

## VI

### “AT THE HARVEY RANCH”

Sometimes our brains work strangely, refusing to take heed of what our eyes see and our ears hear, until a considerable time has passed. So it was with Chuck Neilan on this day. He had put many a mile behind him by means of the industrious hoof of the pinto before his brain harked back to what the stable boy at the Purchass Ranch had said to him. When he thought about it the second time, it seemed to Chuck to be of more than passing interest. How was it that the boy knew so much, or guessed so much, and seemed to think with such mingled scorn and disgust about the Harvey Ranch? Once, indeed, he grew so excited at the prospect that he stopped the pinto in the middle of the trail and was on the verge of turning back, when he realized after an instant of reflection that if he returned and opened the same subject again, the boy's suspicions would be aroused, and he would become silent. So, growling at himself for a fool because he had not pumped the boy for information when the occasion was before him, he sent the pinto on again.

It was only fifteen miles as a bird flies, but as the trail wound it was nearer to thirty, uphill and down. The sun was setting when he came to the Harvey Ranch. No such imposing group of buildings as the Purchass place lay before him now. On a hillside, bald of trees, stood the unpainted buildings of headquarters for the Harvey Ranch. The woods which rolled green through the hollow on either side made the bareness of that slope stand out in striking contrast, and it seemed to Chuck that even from the distance he could feel the atmosphere of poverty which beset the place. The journey down the last slope occupied enough time to bridge the gap between the colorful heart of the sunset to the early portion of the dusk. All the world was gray when he rapped at the front door of the house.

The knock echoed through the interior, and then a tapping sound approached the door, a tapping sound of a cane accompanied by a shuffling noise of footfalls. Presently the door opened, and a cripple looked out at Chuck.

He was a man apparently not more than sixty at the most, but in certain features he appeared much older. His thin, long hair, for instance, was the purest white and so scant that it fell down beside his face, stirring in the air like a morning mist. His brows were gathered in a frown that was rather whimsical than wrathful or pettish. In his right hand was the knob-head of a thick cane that, by infinite usage and much brushing against things in the house, was polished throughout its length. He rested much of his weight upon this staff while he peered out rather anxiously at Chuck.

“Don't appear to recollect you, son,” he said, “but step right in and make yourself to home. You're a mite late for supper, but we'll get something together for you. Step right in.”

Chuck accepted the invitation and then followed the invalid down the hall into the interior of the dwelling. As he studied the painful laboring of that bent back, it occurred to him that he had come here for no purpose that could be easily explained to anyone. Men

did not ride two hundred miles for the sake of getting into a fight, particularly when the fight was to be with a personage who probably was non-existent—The Wolf. His embarrassment reached a climax when his guide kicked open a door and ushered Chuck into the kitchen. It was littered with the dirty pans and dishes of the supper, and at the sink, making a great clattering at her work, was a young girl who turned to face them.

By something in her eyes as she greeted the old man, Chuck knew that this was Kate, the daughter of Harvey, who was attempting to run the ranch, and who was making such a failure of it. No wonder, if in addition to her managerial capacity, she had to act as cook and dishwasher, which seemed to be also in her sphere of service.

She showed not the slightest embarrassment, however, in meeting the stranger.

“Here’s a gent come in to spend the night with us. Name is . . . he told me while we were coming down the hall. I didn’t catch it.”

“Bill Neilan is my name,” said the cowpuncher.

“And this is my daughter, Kate. Can you fix him up a snack, honey?”

She nodded, indicated a chair where he might sit at the table, whisked from in front of him a litter of dishes, and turned to the stove—all while her father was getting through the door and out of the room. Chuck regarded her with side glances. He had had his affairs of the heart before, but never had he found a girl who fitted into his mind with the exactness of Kate Harvey. In the space of ten seconds he was in the midst of a pleasant dream that he spun out. He was wakened by the glance of the girl falling on him as decisively as the hand of a man might have fallen upon his shoulder.

“You can wash over there. You’ll find the basin hanging on a nail . . . that granite basin upside down. There’s some soap in the soap rack to your left. If you want hot water, there’s some in this kettle. Help yourself!”

Chuck followed these explicit and curt directions. He was extremely downhearted by this time. Would to heaven, he thought, that he could pay for his meal in cash. But he could not offer to pay for food in this house. And he was heaping extra work on her at the end of a day during which who could tell what household and range-riding duties she had performed. He was frowning over this thought, as he dried his hands on the circular runner that served as towel, when the girl spoke.

“I’ve been thinking about your name. Are you ever called Chuck Neilan?”

He nodded, and then noted with indescribable mortification that her face hardened and her lip curled a little. No doubt she had heard some of the worst tales that circulated through the mountains, with him for the main hero. The exploits of a fighter are sadly altered in the telling, and, though the distance to Sitting Bull was not so very great, it was enough to twist things into a queer mess. Chuck wondered what she could have heard as he studied her disdainful face—a labor he continued through side glances as she turned some cold, fried potatoes in thick bacon gravy into the frying pan to be warmed.

She must have heard something very bad, indeed, to judge by her coldness. On the whole, there was a great deal that was disagreeable about her. She was by no means the clinging-vine type. Her voice was as level as the voice of a man. And so were her eyes. And though her profile was turned with haunting delicacy about nose and mouth, there was an accompanying pride as stern and cold as the pride of a man. The hand that, a few moments later, deftly slipped the plates and saucers and cups before him, and the steaming

food and coffee with them—that hand was amazingly slight. But the voice with which she asked if he wanted anything else was utterly without emotion. Chuck made a desperate attempt to break the ice and start up conversation.

“When you heard my name,” he said, “I guess it wasn’t with anything in my favor.”

“I’ve almost forgotten the story.”

She answered with a half glance over her shoulder, not at him but partly toward him, as though he were not worth a full turn of the head. The dishes rattled again, and the steam from the dishwasher rose. Chuck Neilan fortified himself with a gulp of hot coffee.

“Well,” he said at length, “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry that I’ve forgotten the story?”

“Sorry that the story you heard was so darned bad.”

“I haven’t said it was,” answered the girl, as cold as ever.

“You’ve looked more’n words could say,” responded Chuck. “A pile more.”

At this, she whirled squarely toward him, parted her lips to speak, and then, at sight of his anxious face, changed her mind and turned back again.

“You see,” went on Chuck Neilan, “it takes about two tellings of the same story to get it all twisted. I’m wondering how many ways the facts that got to you was twisted.”

She made no pretense of turning now. “You’ve never done anything really bad, I guess,” she said, with an intonation that contradicted the words.

“Sure I have,” answered Chuck. “Plumb bad, lady. But I’ve never done nothing mean . . . and by the way you look I figure that you must have heard some pretty mean talk about me.”

“What,” she asked, “is the exact difference between badness and meanness?”

Chuck poised his fork meditatively. “Badness,” he said, “is beating up a man-sized man . . . meanness is beating up a hoss that can’t fight back.”

At this, she turned again and remained turned, heedless of the water, yellowed with the stain of soap, that trickled from the dishcloth in a steady stream to the floor. There was a twinkle of appreciation in her eyes. She seemed to be seeing him for the first time. And he, certainly, was seeing Kate Harvey for the first time.

“You feel a bit better about me?” he asked.

At this, she laughed frankly, tossed the dish rag into the wash pan with a great sloshing of the water, and came opposite him at the table. She dropped her hands, red and shining from the suds, on the top of the unpainted kitchen chair, facing him.

“What are you doing up here, Chuck?” she asked.

He was unprepared for this sudden lowering of the bars. He seemed to be admitted to a footing of semi-intimacy by the very intonation of that voice. It filtered down into his heart of hearts, a thrilling experience to Chuck. But he must not think that he had succeeded too far.

“I don’t know exactly why I’ve come,” he said.

To his surprise she nodded, not at all put out by this shuffling away of reasons and causes.

“Near as I can make out,” she said, “that’s why most of you boys start out. You get

tired of working in one place . . . then you light out and ride till a river stops you.”

“A river don’t,” said Chuck, grinning. “My hoss swims like a fish.”

She nodded again. Plainly she liked him much better than ever before. But what should he say to her? It occurred to Chuck that she was far from a romantic type of girl. And this being the case, would it not be wise to refrain from telling her the true story of how he came to be at that moment in her kitchen?

“I’ll tell you why I’m here,” he ventured at length. “I’ve heard that they’s some rustling going on up here.”

She nodded. “You’ve heard right, Chuck Neilan.”

“And I’ve heard that The Wolf was doing the work.”

She started. “The Wolf! That devil?”

She slipped back from him until her shoulders rested against the wall of the room, and there she leaned, almost out of breath, and staring at Chuck as though he were literally the man whom he had named.

“The Wolf? What put that name into your head?”

Chuck had risen from his chair, but now she advanced again with an effort at laughter.

“Don’t mind me,” she explained. “Once . . . oh, it must have been six years ago . . . The Wolf came here . . . The Wolf himself. He sneaked into the house. He was after a safe Dad kept in the attic. But when he got into my room, he made a noise, and it wakened me. I saw him . . . bald head . . . round face . . . mask . . . and all, and I screamed and fainted. Why he didn’t murder me for disturbing him and rousing the house, I never could tell. At any rate, he was gone when I woke up. My father was beside me. I told him what I had seen, and he went out and got the boys out of the bunkhouse. They searched all around the ranch house, but they found no sign, and at length they decided that I had simply had a bad dream. But it wasn’t a dream. I still can see him . . . that giant . . . standing there with the moonlight pouring around him and shining on his bald head. Oh!”

She pressed both hands over her face, but, when she dropped her hands, her expression was almost as calm as ever. She was about to speak again when a knocking came at the side door, and she went to open it.

## VII

### “CHUCK RIDES ALONE”

A messenger was there with a sweating horse behind him. He jerked up the brim of his hat when he saw her and presented a note.

“From Joe Purchass,” he said. “How are ye, Miss Harvey?”

“Fine. Come in, Charlie.”

“Can’t do it. Got strict orders. Minute I get this into your hands, I’m to turn around and come back to Purchass *pronto*. Can’t even stop for a drink of water or”—here he craned his neck and sniffed enviously—“coffee. So long and good luck, Miss Harvey.”

He was into the saddle in a flash, and the broncho wheeled in true cow-horse style and darted out of view. The girl ripped open the envelope anxiously. She read with a frown at first and then with an exclamation of wonder. She tossed the letter aside and faced Chuck with heightened color.

“I wonder that you’re still sitting there,” she cried, “after the way I’ve treated you . . . and after what you’ve done for me. I’ve a letter from Joe Purchass there. He tells me everything . . . in short . . . that you’ve done. Well . . . what you’ve done is fine . . . mighty fine.”

She went straight to him and shook his hand with almost the strength of a man. And all the time her eyes were shining with such a light that Chuck found it hard to meet them squarely. All in a moment, then, she released his hand, made him sit down again, and took the opposite chair.

“I’ve been ready to think that everybody except Joe Purchass is a crook. But now I see I was wrong . . . and, oh, I’m glad of it. But he barely hinted at what you’ve done. I want you to tell me everything . . . everything.”

Chuck shook his head. “Can’t do it,” he said. “I just sort of followed my nose, and here I am. You see?”

The girl laughed, delighted again.

“Sometimes I think that men and women are a good deal alike, after all. But just when I’m almost convinced of it, along comes someone like you, Chuck Neilan, and shows me that I’m a thousand times wrong. Well, don’t tell me, then, if you don’t want to . . . but let’s go back to what you said about The . . . The Wolf.” She hesitated before she could enunciate that nightmare name. “Did you mean what you said about him?”

“It’s what I got out of Chalmers,” confessed Chuck. “And he . . . well, when Chalmers was talking, he wasn’t in no mood to tell no more truth than he could help. Maybe he just threw in that about The Wolf by guess work. He said that he simply thought it might be The Wolf, because The Wolf worked so plumb smooth, and this gent that’s bothering you ain’t any bungler himself.”

“Was that the only reason?” said the girl, sighing with relief.

“It was enough to start me going,” said Chuck Neilan gravely. “It was enough reason

to seem sound to me. And here I am ready for work, Miss Harvey, if you'll put me to work."

"If I'll put you to work? Oh, if I'd only had one man like you before. But none of the cowards would stay. They ran away, as Chalmers did, when they found there was danger up here. Why, I've almost rounded up two or three of the rustlers myself, Chuck, and each time they've slipped away from me, simply because I haven't had helpers with me and . . . I do a good many rough things, you know, but I can't shoot to kill."

"And were they just as polite as you?"

"They were." She nodded, very grave and puzzled. "I've often wondered at it. While I rode after them, shooting into the air, not once did they turn and try a pot shot at me . . . and yet, once I was almost on top of a rascal on a gray horse. . . ." She stopped and shook her head. "But there's no cause for worry after this. No cause at all. Do you know what's going to happen?"

"You're going to let me have a try at 'em," suggested Chuck, his lips drawing back thin on his teeth, so that he looked for the moment the picture of a savage terrier that sees the promise of a fight just ahead.

"I know you'd give them trouble enough," the girl said, her eyes shining out at him again in that singular way they had, "but a great fighter and a strong man with a lot of good fighters and strong men behind him is coming down to the ranch. And they'll clean out the rustlers. Oh, they'll find them and run them down and jail them. I . . . I . . . The cowards! The low-down cowards! They've ruined the ranch . . . they've broken father's heart . . . they've nearly killed me with worry . . . and now they'll be paid back."

Her voice broke with her emotion. Chuck, excited and sympathetic, leaned toward her.

"Who's coming to take over the job, then?"

"Guess, guess."

"I don't know the folks around these parts."

"It's Joe Purchass that's coming," cried the girl. "Think of how. . . ."

She paused. The face of Chuck Neilan was dark as a thundercloud.

"Purchass?" was all he said. "Him?"

"Why, who on earth could be better for the work than big Joe and all his men? And Joe alone is a host. He's like lightning with a gun, and he doesn't fear a hundred." Her face lighted as she described her warrior.

"Well," said Chuck Neilan dryly, "I guess I'd ought to wish you happiness, you having Purchass coming along. And it's sure easy to see that there ain't going to be no call for me to do any work rounding up rustlers on your ranch. That being the case, and me being through the supper, I guess I'll slope. S'long, Miss Harvey."

"Good bye," said the girl stiffly.

He stalked to the door. Before he quite reached it, there was a rush of footfalls behind him, and then the girl darted in before him and set her shoulders against the door. Her eyes glimmered up at him angrily.

"Aren't you ashamed, Chuck Neilan?" she cried. "Aren't you ashamed?"

He fell back. His dignity broke into small bits and tumbled from his shoulders. He looked about him. There was no refuge from those remorseless eyes.



“Aren’t you ashamed?” she repeated. “D’you mean to say you’d run off and sulk, simply because another man is coming in to fight for me?”

“He has the right . . . ,” began Chuck, but he was interrupted by her burst of merry laughter. “Well,” he said, “I guess I’ve been a fool, right enough. I’ll stay on, if you think I’ll be any good here.”

“Of course, you’ll stay!” cried the girl, still laughing. “Go back to that table and sit down. And if you want to work, why, you can start in tonight or tomorrow morning. Matter of fact, those fiends probably will get word that Joe Purchass is coming, and they may try to make a big scoop just before he arrives. You understand?”

“Try to clean you out of house and home before the fighter comes, eh?”

“Ah, they’re cruel enough to try anything. Do you know, I think that they’ve purposely stolen the cattle by small degrees instead of driving off every living thing on my range . . . and simply because they wanted to torment my father first and then me.” Tears sprang from her eyes as she thought of it.

“Don’t seem like there could be skunks like that west of the Rockies,” muttered Chuck. “But, suppose you sit right down yonder and tell me where they hang out mostly. I might do a bit of herd riding tonight myself.”

She shook her head. “You couldn’t do anything by yourself.”

“Gimme a try at ’em.”

“But they’d outnumber you. . . .”

“Nothing like luck,” said Chuck, “in a pinch. And I’m sure lucky, Miss Harvey.”

“I believe it. Well, have it your own way, because if I don’t give you permission, you’ll go, anyway.”

“Right,” said Chuck.

The council of war began at once. On the top of the kitchen table, scrubbed to whiteness and softness, she drew with pencil a rude sketch of the ranch and pointed out to him the places of strategic importance, so far as the rustlers were concerned. There were a thousand such places, it seemed to Chuck, as she enumerated hill and dale and wood and meadow and twisting creekbeds, where hunted men could scurry through the highlands by shortcuts. After a time his powers of listening were blurred. Already, in thought, he was out in the open under the stars and under the moon hunting for action. And though he knew that the girl was planning ways and means, he could not to save himself follow her schemes. At length she ended.

“You have my idea?” she said.

“Exactly,” Chuck said with a smile, and fortunately she believed him.

There was one trouble. The poor pinto was much too tired to be used for this night shift. But the trouble was remedied readily enough. Chuck went with the girl out to the corrals, and there he selected, following her advice, a fine-appearing brown mare, on whose back he cinched his own saddle. Kate Harvey followed him to the gate of the corral, pleading to the last that he give up this breakneck scheme, but he merely shook his head, and in a moment he was waving back to her and cantering lightly across the fields.

In the gathering darkness, for it was not yet quite full night, she dwindled and finally went out behind him, and then Chuck wakened to the necessities of the work that lay

before him. It was a sobering thought. While he was in the company of the girl, it had seemed a slight enough thing to attack and route a whole army of desperadoes. Now he realized that he was playing a dangerous game in a country strange to him and, no doubt, against great odds, so far as numbers went. He jogged the first mile across the lowland at an easy pace. As he mounted to the first ridge, the moon pushed a yellow edge above the top of an eastern hill and showed him the district in which he must do the hunting of that night.

## VIII

### “THE MAN ON THE GRAY”

It was an extent of hills as deeply chopped and hollowed out as the face of the ocean on a windy day. There were no commanding elevations, nothing approaching to a mountain, but, as far as his eye commanded, he saw ridge on ridge of hills, with sharp-sided dales in between. One could hardly see a distance of a hundred yards in any direction, and, to confuse one further, there was a dense sprinkling of trees here and there. Even if he sighted a stranger in this brightening moon shine, it might be difficult, or well nigh impossible, for him to run down the man. Here and there he saw cattle browsing, indistinct figures moving toward the trees in the hollow just before him. At least that proved the rustlers had made no move for that night.

Chuck Neilan glanced over the ground ahead. He wanted a proof of the speed of his mount, and here was going good enough for a test. The first touch of the spur sent the brown away like a whirlwind. Down the gully they darted and came in a single instant, it seemed to the delighted Chuck, up to the top of the opposite ridge. Yes, the brown had plenty of speed, and it would be a well-mounted rover, indeed, who should escape him, once sighted, so long as sight could be kept.

With this comforting thought, and with the moon steadily rising so that the angle of the shadows cast by hill and tree grew less and less, Chuck wandered on through his domain, keeping a sharp lookout for mounted men. Not, indeed, that he really expected to find a marauder at work or even in passing. But the narrative of the girl had enraged him to the point where he was hungry for action, and now he was determined to shoot first and ask his questions afterward.

He never departed from a trot or a walk, saving the strength and speed of the brown. There was one fault in his mount that early made him shake his head and swear under his breath. His horse was by no means sure-footed, and several times the leggy mare stumbled on roots or stones. Her speed, however, would make up for any other deficiency.

In the meantime, the white moon shine cut with increasing clearness through the trees among which he was riding, and it was by virtue of that clear light that he saw his man at last—a glimmer in the distance among the trees. It might be the sway of a leafy bough. It might be the passing of a cow. But in order to investigate even a shadow of a possibility, Chuck turned his mare and drove her at a round gallop straight in the direction of the thing that had caught his attention. He had not covered a hundred yards when he heard a stifled exclamation of a man's voice, and in another instant a gray horse burst from the edge of a covert and darted away across a clearing, with the rider lying flat along its back.

Honest men did not ride in such a fashion at the first sight of a stranger. Chuck Neilan, as he gathered the mare under him with a touch of the spurs, whipped out his revolver and tried a snap shot at the disappearing figure. A shout of defiance answered him, and he knew that he had missed. He had no chance for further thinking. The tall brown was shooting beneath the trees, across the clearing, and then into more trees. Up a hillside

beyond the brown whirled him and, then, as they shot out of the veiling trees, he caught a second fleeting glimpse of the stranger, this time framed vividly against the sky above him. It was only the glance of an instant, with the discovery pointed by the explosion of a revolver in the hand of the stranger.

The bullet missed, but it hummed terrifyingly near to Chuck's head and proved that his antagonist must be quite or nearly as good a marksman as himself. If so, it spiced the pleasure of the night ride for Chuck Neilan. Then he plunged over the ridge of that hill and bolted down into a fairly wide and shallow dale. And with a shout of delight Chuck saw that the speed of his mount was bringing him up with his quarry, hand over hand. Twice the man on the gray whirled in the saddle and fired; twice he missed by a narrow margin, while the brown decreased the interval with its prodigious leaps. Then, as he neared his man, Chuck poised his gun for his own second shot. But he could not shoot down a man at pointblank range with his back turned. He called a warning, his man turned in the saddle with a yell of alarm—and at that moment the brown floundered, pitched to its knees, and sent Chuck hurtling through the air.

He landed with stunning force on his back, but, luckily enough, the force of a fall that might well have broken his neck landed chiefly on that padding of thick muscles just above the shoulder blades. As it was, he was badly shaken, and with his wits barely returned to him, he dragged himself slowly to his knees. His mind was quickly cleared now. There were two explosions of a revolver in rapid succession, and with the second a pain shot across his forehead as though a razor edge, white hot, had seared him there. Immediately there was a warm flow down his face. That sting of a bullet saved him. He looked up to see the marauder, cursing his bad luck, steadying his hand for a finishing shot after his two misses.

Before the gun exploded, Chuck Neilan whipped his own weapon out of the holster and fired from the hip. It was more luck, he knew, than virtue, that enabled him to strike his target with that chance shot. The man on the gray horse pitched forward, then rolled to one side, and fell on the ground with an audible thump. The gray horse danced away a few paces, but lingered, poor beast, to whinny a soft inquiry as to the fate of its master.

But Chuck had no time to pity the horse. He was filled with a wild anger at the rider whom he could have shot through the back a dozen times during the pursuit, and who, in return for this chivalrous treatment, had attempted to shoot him down like a dog when he was helpless from his fall. In an instant he was at the prostrate victim, jerked him over on his back, and shoved the muzzle of his Colt into the hollow of the rascal's throat.

All this he accomplished before his man stirred, groaned, and opened his eyes. Now Chuck saw what had happened. The bullet had been a chance hit, indeed. It had chipped a short groove in the very apex of the man's skull. From this wound a slight trickle was running, but it would be stopped in a moment or two by coagulation. In truth, it was the veriest scratch of a hit, but the force of the blow had stunned the rider. In fact, he hardly saw his victim open his eyes before the mind of the latter cleared from his swoon, and he strove to tug a knife at his belt out of its sheath.

A harsh command from Chuck, and the chill and convincing pressure of the muzzle against his throat brought him to his senses in time. As Chuck rose, his captive obediently rolled upon his face, cursing savagely and steadily while Chuck tied his hands. Leaving him secure, Chuck now caught the horses, mounted his victim on the gray, tied his feet

under his mount, fastened the bridle of the gray to the horn of his own saddle, swung up on the brown, and was ready to return triumphant. But he paused first to make some examination of his man.

Never in his life had he seen so low a specimen of humanity. Low brows beetled over little black eyes that were now snapping with malignity. His head was thrust forward on a chunky neck at a sharp angle from the erect. His face was almost a perfect square, and in profile the heavy brows projected well nigh as much as the nose itself. Chuck Neilan regarded the brute details of this countenance with a shiver. Well for him that he had not fallen into the power of the man. He would have been murdered remorselessly. Just as this thought came to him, he remembered what the girl had said about her pursuit of a man on a gray horse, and how he had refrained from shooting back at her. This was strange. It was more than strange. It was nearly a miracle.

“Friend,” said Chuck, “are you the gent that Miss Harvey took after one day out here in the hills?”

The other regarded him with a grunt and an imprecation that made the hot blood of the cowpuncher spin in his brain.

“I’m talking for your good, not mine, son,” he said. “You can come in with me and be turned over to the law, or else you can talk out free and give us some dope that’ll be useful. That’s all. I hold it in your favor that you’re the gent the girl chased, because you didn’t turn around and shoot back. At least you. . . .”

“Orders stopped me,” gruffly informed the captive. “I’d’ve fixed her right and proper . . . that snip! . . . but orders stopped me. I couldn’t drive a slug into her. Hadn’t been for that, she wouldn’t have drove me through the hills like she did. Not her nor no other woman!”

Chuck Neilan regarded the bestial face with a shudder of disgust and shame—shame that such a creature should be called a man. In his revolt and disgust he cast about in his mind for some means of inflicting torment on his man. But Joe Purchass would tend to that, and, from what he had seen of the big rancher, it would go hard, indeed, with his present companion when Purchass took charge of the prisoner.

“Maybe,” said Chuck fiercely, “you ain’t going to enjoy this nice little ride to the ranch house with me and the moon and all that. I’ll give you a bit of news that’ll make you cheer up, son. Joe Purchass himself is coming down to the ranch. And he’ll be the one to take charge of you.”

There was a gasp from the rider of the gray horse.

“Purchass? You lie!”

“I’m telling you the truth. Purchass is coming. You’ll sweat for your work, son.”

But there was more courage in his prisoner than Chuck had expected. He tossed back his heavy head on his wide shoulders and chuckled. “Leave me and my troubles be,” he growled when he was done with his contemptuous laughter. “You can’t bluff me. I’m going to stay in the house tonight for a good sleep in a good bed. But I ain’t going to stay long. I got business other places. You or Purchass . . . or a dozen like you . . . you don’t worry me none. Get along to the house. I’m tired. I need rest.”

## IX

### “PURCHASS TAKES A HAND”

The calm insolence of the ruffian irritated Chuck almost to the point of striking a helpless man. He restrained himself with gritted teeth, and they made on steadily toward the old ranch house. A tumult of noise about the Harvey place—the barking of dogs and the trampling of many horses in the barn—announced the coming of Joe Purchass and his picked men for the clean-up on the Harvey ranch.

“There you are,” said Chuck, pointing. “There’s the men that are going to see you in a couple of minutes, you skunk. If they’s any fear inside of you, get ready to shake.”

But the man on the gray horse merely shrugged.

“What’s your name?” asked Chuck fiercely.

“Bud Tucker.”

“Bud, by my way of thinking, you got about half an hour to live. I’m damned near sorry for you, friend. They’ll tear you to pieces, those boys will, when they see the gent that’s been hounding a helpless girl here in the Miller Hills. And when they start for you, take care of yourself, because I ain’t going to step in between. Now, get on!”

This last threat seemed to have some effect upon the bulky rustler. He rode with his head turning rapidly from side to side, as though even at this moment he was still in hope of rescue. In a moment more they were in front of the first barn, and half a dozen men poured out of it from their work of unsaddling and feeding their horses to cluster around Chuck and the man who sat, bound hand and foot, on the gray, blinking at them with his little brute eyes.

“I caught this hound,” explained Chuck to the quiet-eyed little semicircle. “I caught him over yonder in the hills. When he seen me, he took off and didn’t wait for no questions to be asked. Ain’t no doubt that he’s one of the gents that’ve been bothering Miss Harvey. Look him over, boys. Ain’t he a man-sized skunk for you?”

They voted slowly, one by one, but unanimously, that he was that and worse. At first there was no flare of rage among them such as Chuck had expected. He wondered at it while he untied the rope and allowed the man to slip down from the horse. But as he landed on his feet and stood blinking rapidly about him, a hoarse-throated murmur rose from the group. They closed more thickly about him.

“Well,” said one, “what you got to say for yourself?”

He who had called himself Bud Tucker shrank back until his shoulders struck against the side of the gray.

“You-all wait till I’m examined regular and proper,” he growled. “How come you talk so big to me? What d’you know about me?”

“I know you’re a hound,” quoth the first interrogator. “You might make tolerable good fertilizer, son, and we ain’t got much other use for your kind around these parts. Understand?”

The broad-shouldered captive merely shrugged his shoulders.

“You do the talking now,” he averred. “I’ll do it later.”

“Why,” muttered one of the cowpunchers, “he ain’t a bit flustered. Get Joe Purchass out, and see if that don’t throw a scare into him. Joe’s a devil when he gets started on anything. Eh?”

They nodded and smiled fiercely.

“Go get your Joe Purchass,” said the rustler, quite indifferent to their chosen threat. “That don’t bother me none. He’ll see justice done, maybe.” And he sneered at them, one by one.

He had carried his carelessness a step too far, however, and now a lean, tall man, hard as steel and as flexible, stepped close to him.

“Do I know you?” he said. “Ain’t you Bud Thomas of Winterville?”

“Me? No. Name’s Tucker.”

“Tucker nothing!” shouted the cowpuncher. “I recollect you plumb perfect now. It was you that worked the crooked dice in a crap game that cleaned me up a couple of years back. I been waiting to pay you for that, son, and here’s the first installment!”

As he spoke, without warning his brown fist whipped up and back and then shot into the face of Tucker-Thomas of Winterville, and the shorter, bulkier man dropped flat on his back as though he had been shot. There was a growl of savage agreement from the other cowpunchers. They closed in. A man who will cheat in a crap game is bad enough; a man who hounds a helpless girl is, of course, still worse; and a man who could do both of these things was lower than contempt. The faces of the cowboys were hard and set as they jerked the victim to his feet again, and even Chuck Neilan, that inveterate lover of fair play, looked on with a nod. If they beat the breath out of this scoundrel, he would be getting no more than was his due. Yet he would take no part in the maltreatment.

Standing back, he saw them close in like hungry greyhounds around a coyote. He heard their voices raised. They were pouring forth an increasingly hot indictment upon the head of Tucker-Thomas. Hands raised—fell—and a snarl, animal-like in quality, answered the blows.

“I seen a barrel of tar,” said one inspired voice. “I seen it in the wagon shed. Let’s give him a roll in it.”

“And then roll him again in a pile of feathers,” said a second.

A yell of approbation followed, and then the voice of Thomas rose.

“Purchass!” he screamed. “Joe Purchass! Help!”

“Shut up, you dog,” cautioned one of the cowpunchers. “Shut up. It’ll be all the worse for you if Purchass sees you and hears what you been doing. He’s sweet on the girl, you fool, and he’ll break you in pieces, inch by inch, when he comes.”

But the wretched man persisted in screaming for Joe Purchass, and presently the kitchen door of the house banged open, and a tall form appeared, running toward them through the night.

“What’s going on out here?” roared the great voice of Purchass, rolling out in a volume that Chuck Neilan had guessed was possible when he first had talked with the big rancher that day.

“They’re aiming to kill me!” screamed Thomas. “They’re talking about tar and feathers and . . . !”

“What the devil’s all this?” queried Purchass. Striding through the group, he caught Thomas by the nape of the neck and jerked him to his feet.

“Keep ’em off!” groaned Thomas, clinging to the big man. “D’you see ’em? They’re planning on killing me!”

“Keep away, you swine,” commanded the rancher, kicking the smaller man breathlessly away from him.

Thomas stood now at arm’s length and repaid the kick of his protector with a writhing back of his upper lip that exposed a row of dog-like fangs. Purchass looked down at the fellow as though there were pollution in merely laying eyes on him.

“Who got . . . this?” he asked.

A chorus of voices declared Chuck Neilan to be the man, and Chuck felt that there was something more than ordinary surprise in the start with which the big fellow turned to him.

“Hello, Neilan. I been hearing a lot about you. You’ve dropped down in the Miller Hills like young Lochinvar, and now I see that you’ve made a hero of yourself. Glad to see you again!”

He turned back to the others.

“I’ll take care of this gent, boys. I know you’d like to do for him, with trimmings, but murder doesn’t help anybody along these days. We’d have to answer for it to someone, even if it was only Thomas that we cleaned up. I’ll take charge of him.”

They growled protest, but they could not interfere. Joe Purchass was turning away when he remembered Chuck and turned to him again.

“Come along. Kate has been talking about you. Come along to the house. I think there’s room enough for you in there. We’ll make out some way.”

Nevertheless, though he made his voice hearty, Chuck could not avoid an impression that the words were exactly the reverse of the real meaning of Purchass. There had been, Chuck thought, a strange malevolence in the glance with which Purchass had first singled him out. However, he was too glad of the results of that night’s work, and too eager to see Kate Harvey again, to spend much time and thought on small details such as this. If there was any doubt about the criminality of Thomas, it was removed the moment he was brought inside the house and Kate’s eyes fell on him. She shrank a little and then blazed into wrath. It was, indeed, the man she had seen riding the gray horse.

She had difficulty in finishing this speech, because of the howling of a dog in the upper part of the house—a strange, unearthly, and weird sound.

“Have you brought the kennels into the house, Kate?” asked Purchass with some irritability.

“It’s that greyhound I brought over from Graham City,” said the girl apologetically, but flushing at the sharpness in the voice of Purchass, Chuck thought. “He’s homesick. He nearly goes frantic outdoors. So I put him in a room in the old wing of the house. I take him out for a run twice a day, and I go up to see him once in a while besides. He’s growing accustomed to things by degrees. He’s nowhere near as noisy now as he used to



be.”

“A dog in a house,” broke out Purchass, and then swallowed the rest of his words before they got past his teeth. He had already spoken too much, however, and Chuck saw a flash of anger pass between them. Doubtless Purchass wanted to marry this girl. The sending of the emerald had been a message and a symbol, beyond question. But if ever they were united, Chuck shrewdly foresaw many a clash of opposing wills.

The big rancher rapidly diverted the talk to another topic, the first that came to his mind, and this happened to be the courage of Chuck Neilan, who had just brought home this captive. As for Thomas, he would rope the man like a dog, he said, and throw him in an upstairs room until tomorrow, when a buckboard could take the scoundrel to Graham City to wait for his trial. So saying, he strode out of the room and left the girl facing Chuck.

“You caught him all by yourself?” she said. “Why, even Joe Purchass hasn’t been able to do as much as that.”

“Plain luck,” said Chuck modestly. “And even if it weren’t, you’d better not tell Mister Purchass.”

She started to protest, changed her mind, flushed, and immediately changed the subject. During the rest of the time that they spoke together that evening, her manner was constrained. Continually Chuck found her looking up and searching him with side glances. Plainly she was afraid that he had looked a little too deeply into the mind of her husband to be, and there were things in that mind of which the girl was frankly ashamed.

**“A GIRL’S FEAR”**

All of this made matter for serious reflection, and not altogether unpleasant reflection, for Chuck Neilan. It employed him on the way to the room to which he was assigned. It grew large in his sleepy imagination as he slipped between the sheets of his bed, and it passed into his dreams as the fatigue of that heavy day of labor swept over him and blotted out the world.

He was wakened in the earliest gray of the dawn by a clamor in the house, and then by the shrill wailing of the captive greyhound. Chuck rushed downstairs half dressed and learned from a raging Joe Purchass, who stormed up and down the living room like a maniac, what had happened. By some mysterious resource of deviltry, Thomas had managed to get a knife and cut his bonds during the night. Then he had sneaked out to the barn, picked out and saddled the matchless bay gelding Purchass rode, and slipped away like a ghost on this horse. And so great was the speed of the bay that no attempt was made at pursuit. There was nothing to be done except to send to Graham City as soon as possible and make the wires hot, informing every sheriff within a wide radius of what had happened.

At the conclusion of this narrative, Purchass dropped into a chair and buried his face in his hands in despair, from which even the pretty coaxing of Kate Harvey could not rouse him. Chuck himself, much as he had come to dislike and to envy the rancher, could not help pitying him now. The vicious little pinto itself had found a place deep in the heart of Chuck, and he pitied with all of his soul a man who had lost such a charger as the bay. But there was nothing more to be accomplished. Chuck went back to his bed and fell at once into a sounder sleep than ever.

When he wakened, it was with a guilty start, for the sun of the late morning was pouring into his room. Not in half a dozen years had he slept so late as this. When he hurried down the stairs, Kate Harvey met him with laughter, and her old father cackled behind her. All the men had ridden off long before. They had gone out with Purchass to scour the Miller Hills and hunt for the lost cattle of the Harvey ranch. When Chuck asked indignantly why he had not been called to join the hunt, he was told that they knew he had ridden a desperately long distance the day before. But if he wanted hunting, he could have his share on the succeeding days, for Purchass had announced his determination to run through every nook of the Miller Hills with a fine-tooth comb until he found the missing stock, even if he required a thousand men for the task.

This last item was confided to Chuck with pride by Mr. Harvey, who took an immense satisfaction in the wealth of his son-in-law to be. He was a talkative old fellow on all topics, as a matter of fact. While Kate hurried a breakfast onto the table for Chuck, Mr. Harvey overrode all of her hints and her suggestions and insisted on telling the whole story.

“Because,” said Harvey, “there’s nothing to be ashamed of in it. What happened was

sure to happen. And it served you right. Can't deny that, Kate. It served you right for being as stubborn as a mule."

He went on with his narrative. It seemed that, when Joe Purchass came West to take charge of the family estate something over a year before, he had at once met and fallen desperately in love with Kate Harvey. But Kate was too occupied with business affairs to pay much heed to wooers. She had been running the ranch for a year, and, under her direction, while it could not be said that the place was prosperous, at least she had arrested the rapid decline into which it was falling under the management of her crippled father. In vain, Purchass besieged her. At length she confessed to him that business meant more to her than men just now, and that, when it was otherwise, she would send to him for help so soon as the business at the ranch became too much for her to handle, as he had repeatedly warned her it would become. Out of the impulse of a romantic moment she had agreed on a symbol, which was to be one of a pair of emerald earrings that an old Mexican woman had sold to Mr. Harvey.

For some time things had gone very well, but after a while the cattle began to disappear with astonishing frequency, and it was plain that rustlers were at work. She had made frantic efforts to locate the thieves but always without avail, until at length she had given up—the ranch being on the point of bankruptcy—and had sent the emerald by Chalmers to Joe Purchass, who received it after it had traveled along the dubious route already described.

As for Chuck Neilan, he heard the tale with a singular leap of the heart. Business chains were not the sort of chains that could bind Kate Harvey. Little as he knew of her, he knew this. In that Joe Purchass had not perceived so much as this gave him a great sense of superiority over the rich man. Moreover, there were immediate consolations for having missed the roundup of the rustlers that was underway today. Kate was about to take a gallop to exercise the greyhound, Emperor, and out went Chuck Neilan at her side. They kept a hot pace over the hills for half an hour or more—slow going was simply no exercise at all for Emperor, the girl averred—and then they swung in a slower circuit back toward the house, with Emperor straining at the leash and cutting off toward Graham City. He tugged until the arm of Chuck ached from the pull, and the girl told how twice the hound had broken away from her on similar occasions and raced over the mountains all the half dozen miles to Graham City.

By the time that ride was finished and the dog restored to his room in the old, unoccupied wing of the house, the lower floor of which was used for storing supplies, Kate and Chuck had grown fairly intimate. She had told into his sympathetic ear, for instance, the full story of her struggle to make the ranch a paying proposition. And he, in return, had regaled her with a few tales extracted at random out of his own adventures. Last of all he told of the gold mine which he had fairly blundered upon.

"And why on earth," cried the girl, "didn't you stay to work it and watch it and develop it?"

Chuck rubbed his ear in embarrassment. "I'll tell you how it is," he confessed at length. "I have a hunch working in me that you never can get a thing that you don't work for. Well, I didn't work for that gold. I just bull lucked it and found the stuff. I didn't take no chances nor no risks. I'll simply make a fool of myself someday when I go back and spend what they're digging out of them rocks for me. But the money ain't got me yet, and

I ain't got the money . . . all of it."

She listened to this unique exposition with a smile, but they had no chance to continue the talk, for they had reached the house, and the horses and dog had to be put away.

There followed a lazy time around the house. No one returned from Joe Purchass at noontime. The afternoon wore away, and still there was no messenger from the leader of the hunters. Chuck Neilan, toward dusk, began to grow wild with excitement.

"He's struck something in the line of big game," he declared, "because, otherwise, he wouldn't be riding his hosses this long. Wouldn't be surprised if they's some powder burning somewheres up yonder in them Miller Hills, Miss Harvey."

As he spoke, he fell into an agony of suspense at the very thought. The evening wore on. The sun set, the color faded from the west, and the streak of yellow-orange that banded the horizon went out by dim degrees. Looking up to the sky, in which these changes had been taking place, one saw that it still seemed comparatively bright, but, looking down to the earth, one became aware that deep night was about to descend upon the hills.

It was through this dusk that they came, a myriad of voices, a myriad of tossing heads and horns, and Kate and Chuck ran out to see and to cheer. For it was Joe Purchass returning, and before him and his men rolled a dense herd of cattle. In five minutes the triumphant hunter was sitting at the table with the dust not yet shaken from his shoulders, eating ravenously. Down the table sat four of his henchmen, silent, dour fellows. The men who had first come over from the Purchass ranch had been sent in to Graham City to spend the night, thence to ride back to the home ranch on the following day. These new hands had come down and joined during the day. As for the explanation of the finding of the cattle, it was extremely simple.

Joe Purchass, his heavy voice rolling and rumbling, told the tale of how the cattle had drifted off the ranch and down into the lower ravines, where they found better grass and more water, and where they were not discovered simply because she, a woman, had not known how to hire efficient cowhands, and because the lazy fellows she did hire had only made a pretense of searching for the stock. No doubt this herd he had found did not represent half of her losses. Beyond a question the numbers of wandering cows had drawn thieves. But the rustling would cease from this point. She could rest assured of that. The hound who had stolen the bay gelding would spread among his fellows the word that Joe Purchass had come down to run the ranch, and this, Purchass felt, would put an end to the lawlessness.

He announced this, Chuck felt, with unpardonable swagger, while the four dark-faced henchmen at the lower end of the table grunted in acquiescence. The manner of Purchass, indeed, was growing intolerably possessive. He lolled back in his chair when he had finished his dinner and looked about him with dull, careless eyes, basking in the admiration old Harvey poured out on him, the admiration of withered age for youth and strength and victory above all.

But in the meantime, Chuck saw that Kate, sitting beside him at the table, was growing paler and paler and more and more silent. Whenever he stole a glance at her, he saw that she was rewarding the talkative Purchass with smiles, but he saw also that those smiles were purely automatic. Several times he invited her with significant looks to share her

discontent with him, but she seemed to misunderstand or not to see his glances. It was not until the meal was come to dessert that she dropped her napkin, and Chuck, leaning to retrieve it for her, found that she was leaning also. He instantly knocked the napkin far under his chair and had to lean farther down to fumble for it. That delay gave her a chance to murmur in his ear. And what she said froze his blood.

“Chuck Neilan, there’s something wrong. There’s something wrong with the face of Joe Purchass. There’s something devilish about it that I can’t quite remember. What is he? Who is he? And why . . . why am I so filled with fear?”

## XI

### “THE WOLF EXPOSED”

The significance of that soul-chilling whisper made its way slowly into the brain of Chuck Neilan. Gradually he began to understand that what he himself had guessed at had not been entirely wrong. It had seemed to him that the rancher was, indeed, changed, that he had discarded something like a mask from his face. His eyes, as Chuck straightened and handed the napkin to the girl with a smile, were flaming straight at Neilan with such a glance as Chuck would never forget. And after that, no matter how the talk ran, no matter how Purchass chattered away to please the greedy ear of Mr. Harvey, he reserved time and attention, now and again, to dart a heart-withering glance at Chuck.

Just what was the meaning of those glances, Chuck could not be sure, but at least he was confident that the rancher was intensely hostile. And more than hostile, he was venomously suspicious of every word and glance Chuck directed at Kate Harvey. So much the cowpuncher could tell. In the meantime, Purchass became momentarily more and more the new self that had alarmed Kate. Confident, it seemed, that the sending of the emerald, and then his work in reclaiming so many of the lost cattle, represented facts that indicated the complete surrender of Kate, Purchass was letting down the bars. And the real self that was now discovered was complacent, careless, confident to a degree that had startled Kate herself, and that had drawn her on to further observations. Chief of these, perhaps, were the same eyes that had startled Chuck—the bright, steady gray eyes that gleamed out beneath the straight, closely penciled brows of the big man.

What did the girl mean by saying that the rancher reminded her of someone? Why should she not have seen the resemblance before today? But even now, Chuck could see she was struggling patiently with her memory, and twice she bowed her head and rested her forehead in her hand, a mute symbol of the effort of her concentration. From the face of Purchass, then, she looked earnestly down the table toward the four dark faces of the followers of Purchass. In fact, there was something strange about these men. They were as ill-omened a quartet as Chuck had ever observed in all the days of his wild experience in the mountain desert.

A peculiar alarm grew in him, unquestionably the result of the strange whisper of the girl. He remembered now, with a qualm, that he had left his cartridge belt and gun hanging on a peg against the wall in the wash shed. For who would go into a perfectly friendly house and sit down with the encumbrance of a six-shooter burdening one's thigh? Only after he was seated did he notice that each of the gloomy and silent four retained their guns, and the big rancher likewise. It had not troubled him before, but now it returned as an insidious source of worry.

Kate Harvey had risen slowly from her chair and crossed around the table until she came to the left of the chair of Purchass.

“Joe,” she said solemnly, “I have a question to ask you before all these people as witnesses. Will you answer me on your word of honor?”

“Word of honor?” grumbled Joe Purchass. “My dear, has your friend across the table been pumping fool ideas in your head?”

“This is an idea of my own. Will you answer me, Joe?”

“Of course . . . of course. What is it, Kate?”

“Where were you six years ago tonight?”

The result was perfectly startling. First Chuck Neilan saw the four cowpunchers at the end of the table straighten out with a jerk, and their uneasy eyes worked from side to side as if to hunt for a loophole of escape. After that, he saw nothing save the face of Purchass himself. He had read about men changing color and the sweat pouring out on their foreheads—all as the result of a phrase or two. But he had never seen it until this moment when it was exemplified in the countenance of Purchass.

Now that portion of his face that was not obscured with a forest of beard and whiskers and sideburns turned from deep tan to a grisly gray, and this in turn gave place to a tinge of purple. At the same time the forehead became white and glistened with a thick dew of sweat. All of this, moreover, took place on the instant that he heard the question. He turned, strangely enough, not toward the girl, but toward Chuck Neilan, and his eyes glowed like the eyes of a demon. There was no question about it now. He was, as the saying went, bad medicine, and he was particularly bad for Chuck.

The effect of this change in the face of Purchass was indescribably great in Chuck. It was still greater in the girl, for she sank against the table, staring in fear at the half-averted face of the rancher.

“Six years ago?” said Purchass, but the careless words were uttered in a husky, almost choked voice. “Let me see. I’m trying to remember.”

Then, as though he saw that the emotion in his voice was betraying him, he started around in his chair and glared at her.

“Why do you ask, Kate? Has Neilan put you up to this nonsense, my dear?”

Her reply was very strange. It did not consist in words, but, making a quick gesture, she buried her fingers in the dark brown, richly curling hair of Purchass and tore it from his head. Such literally was what she did. The whole mass of hair covering the top of the man’s head came away and exposed the pale skin beneath. The startled brain of Chuck Neilan, working in stumbling fashion, had hardly grasped the fact that the girl had torn a wig from the head of the big man, when her own scream went ringing into his ears and thrilling and quivering along his nerves: “The Wolf! Good Lord! The Wolf!”

And she cowered away against the wall, burying her face in her hands.

Chuck Neilan waited, agape. Had the big rancher decided to act in the first instant, he could have blown Chuck to a thousand pieces. But for one moment, perhaps, he hesitated, uncertain as to whether he might not laugh the accusation to scorn. In that moment of indecision, some assurance returned to Chuck. His blood began to flow more freely, and when Purchass, finally realizing that the game he had played so long was up, pushed back his chair with set teeth and scowling brows, Chuck drew back his own and prepared to bolt for the door.

“You first,” said Purchass. “You put this into her head. You’ve been my bad luck ever since you came across my trail. Now, Neilan. . . .”

But Chuck had dived for the door—literally dived to upset the aim of the other, if the rancher should fire. He swung one shoulder sidewise and smashed into the door, knocking it wide and catapulting through at the same time that the gun roared from the hand of The Wolf—who had been—Joe Purchass.

Once outside that door, Chuck rolled to his feet and, with a roar of footfalls and voices behind him, plunged down the hall. He made for the side door, but, when he crashed into it, he found that it was locked, and, as he reached for the key, a gun boomed loud as a cannon in the narrow hall behind him. There was no chance to wait even the split part of a second. The heavy .45-caliber slug crashed into the door beside his head. Chuck turned to his left and bounded up the stairs, as a second shot nipped him stingingly in the shoulder. But it was only a scratch that served as a spur to make him bolt up the steps in longer leaps. At the head of those stairs he turned to his right and rushed for the end room. He might gain the outside in this manner and so reach the horses.

His first glance out the window showed him one of Purchass's men standing outside with Colt poised in his hand, with the lamplight streaming over him from a window in the dining room. Back again Chuck Neilan bolted and thundered into the hallway in time to be greeted by the roar of three revolvers directly behind him. Purchass and two of his followers were coming for the assault.

There was only one thing to do, unless he preferred to rush into the flaming muzzles of those guns that had missed him so far only because of the dimness of the lights. Chuck took the other alternative, and, wheeling to the left, he bolted for the unoccupied old wing of the house where only the greyhound now lived. Down the hallway he plunged as he had never raced before, with a shout of savage triumph from the throat of Purchass behind him.

The end of the hall was the door to the room where the big dog was quartered. He wrenched it open, slammed it behind him, and turned the lock. The next instant a heavy weight crashed against it, and it sagged in with a great creaking. It was a barrier to the pursuit, but it was a barrier that would endure for only an instant.

He leaped across the room, with the dog whining with excitement at his feet, and smashed the window there. He looked down. The night was dark, but he could see the ground distinctly. It was instant death to drop that distance. Groaning with impotence, he turned away, while the hound reared, planted its forepaws on the window sill, and then whined with eagerness and fear as even it recoiled from the drop to the solid earth below.

With his brain whirling in the search for expedients, Chuck looked around him. It was plain enough, this catastrophe that had happened. The Wolf, a man of good family gone bad, had disappeared some six years ago, and then, trusting to a wig and a growth of hair to disguise a face never plainly seen by even his closest followers, he had come back to claim his heritage and incidentally to attempt to marry Kate Harvey. So much for this devil who merited, Chuck could see, all that had been said about him.

As for the plan of The Wolf now, it was equally simple. By killing Chuck, he removed the one strong witness against him. He could then take Harvey and the girl, through the agency of his four followers, up into the hills until she consented to marry him. This accomplished, he could return and take his place in the world, giving any number of good reasons for having killed Chuck Neilan.



There were things unexplained in this brief summary, but Chuck saw all of this in one flash. The next instant he groaned as the door sagged under the weight of a new assailant. If he were to find escape now, he must act with the speed of the wind. The dog, standing on his hind legs at the window, looked around over its shoulder and seemed to beg for speed with its whine.

That whine gave Chuck his idea. He tore off the coat and vest and ripped a section from the front of his shirt. That would do for something to write on. But ink?

He used the readiest alternative for ink. He jerked out a penknife, pricked the end of his right forefinger, jabbing it until the flow was free and then, spreading the cloth against the wall with his left hand, guessing at his letters in the dark, he wrote:

**Murder. Harvey's ranch. The Wolf.**

That message should convey his meaning, short though the words might be. He ran to the greyhound, tore one end of the cloth in two, and tied it in the collar. Then he lifted the heavy, sprawling brute to the window. There was a snarl, a frightened whine, and teeth clashed an inch from his face as the terrified dog discovered his purpose. But the next instant Emperor had been pushed out head foremost into empty air.

The door crashed down behind him, and a roar of voices filled the room. But Chuck Neilan crammed his shoulders into the narrow window and peered downward, regardless of what had happened elsewhere. He saw Emperor land with a thud, lie a moment inert, then rise, stagger, trot, and suddenly skim away into the night with great bounds.

The next moment he was torn away from the window and went crashing to the floor with the weight of two men bearing down upon him.

## XII

### “KATE’S ANSWER”

They brought him downstairs, Joe Purchass, alias The Wolf, carrying him with as much ease as though he had been a child. In the dining room they found old Harvey close to collapse, cowering in his chair in the corner. Kate Harvey stood beside the window, pale, but otherwise calm enough. The calm was broken for an instant as she saw Chuck Neilan brought, living, before her. What had passed made them close to each other. There was an impulsive gesture of both hands thrown out.

“Chuck!” she cried, and there was a world of meaning in the single word—so much that Purchass turned sharply on her.

He made no response, however, and beckoned to the guard, who had remained to watch these two, to lower his revolver and stand back. He was obeyed in silence. The fourth of the men now appeared and closed the outer door to the kitchen. He also took his place in silence, with an unperturbed expression. But the eyes of each of the four, like the eyes of so many dogs, followed every movement of the leader.

Purchass took up an easy position in the center of the room where he could keep everything in view.

“We’re about to start on a little trip, Kate,” he said. “We’re going to leave a note or two to inform neighbors, perhaps. Then we’re going for a jaunt up into the hills. No fear.” His face blackened as he saw that her eyes were riveted upon Chuck Neilan. “No fear, Chuck is going with us. We can’t leave dead men behind.”

A faint cry came from the girl. But The Wolf raised his hand to silence her. “Stop that! Do you think we’ll kill him and then take him? Nor your father, either, my dear. You good people are going on a little excursion with me, and with these four faithful fellows of mine to take care of us. Up there, I hope, you’ll make up your mind to marry me, and I’ll see that a book and a man are brought for the purpose, together with a license and all things necessary. That marriage, I think, will shut your mouth and the mouth of your father. As for Neilan, he’s a very honest man, eh? Well, I’ll extract a very solemn promise from Neilan. That will have to be our program.”

As he spoke, he sent a dour glance at Chuck. No question about the nature of the promise he would extract. It would be a request pointed with the muzzle of a gun and signed in burning powder.

“I’m telling you this, Kate,” said the leader, as the girl made no reply, “because I want you to understand immediately exactly where we are, and what we are doing. If you won’t consent, I shall not carry you a step.”

The girl exclaimed faintly, incredulously, and at the unbelieving hope in her face Purchass grew pale.

“Not a step would I carry you,” he repeated. “And neither would I carry these two. I’d leave them behind in such shape that they’d never talk . . . never.”

Chuck Neilan looked at the big man, wholly incredulous. It did not seem possible that there was a man living capable of such unscrupulous villainy. Again he glanced at the girl. She was utterly colorless, her glance roving swiftly in agony from his own face to the face of her father. That poor old man, broken by age and by his weakness of body, crumpled farther into the corner and watched what was happening with great, dumb eyes of fear.

“First,” said Purchass, sitting on the table and swinging one leg with a carelessness of manner that Chuck knew did not represent his true mind, “Kate, I want you to know some of the things which should be put on the right side of the page and added up in my favor. Along with it, I’ll tell you the bad things. Go back to a night six years ago, a night when you woke up and saw The Wolf standing in the shaft of moon shine that streamed in through your window. That night, Kate, I saw your face for the first time. You were only a girl, but there was so much beauty and purity in you, my dear, that, when I got clear of the house, I began to think things over.

“You see, I had taken to deviltry . . . the life of The Wolf, who, by the way, was never as bad as the fools say . . . not because I was driven out of polite society, but simply because I wanted a few thrills. Well, I got ’em! I went from bad to worse. I was going downhill fast, until I saw you, Kate. That changed me. I saw that I’d have to put on the brakes. And I did. I left the country. I spent nearly five years getting used to a wig and growing a beard. When I came back, my own family in the East did not recognize me. And certainly nobody in the West knew me to be The Wolf. I’ve lived here a full year, and nobody would ever have learned it if it hadn’t been for the working of your instinct tonight . . . and the working of a woman’s instinct is a thing against which men have no defense. It can’t be guarded against. Even now no one knows except a few members of the old gang.

“I had to use them to break down your defense, Kate. They were the cattle rustlers who stole your cattle. They were the fellows who broke you down to such a point that you had to send that blessed emerald to me. And these men won’t speak to inform against me. As to the others, your father will do a good deal for the sake of a comfortable berth the rest of his life . . . he won’t talk. And that leaves you and Neilan. As my wife, you’ll be quiet, I suppose, and as for Neilan . . . well, I shall extract a promise, eh? Then I am free, Kate, to go back to the Purchass Ranch and continue my life exactly where I left off when I saddled and came over here yesterday, except that I’ll have my wife with me. Kate, do you understand? Do you consent?”

She quivered as though she had been struck with a whip. But as she raised her head to answer, he checked her.

“Not yet,” he said. “Take half an hour or so to think things over from every angle. At first, of course, you would detest me. But after a time I am sure that you would feel far otherwise about matters. I am going outside for a stroll. When I come back, you can say what you have to say.”

With this he left the room, the outside door banged after him, and his footfalls departed.

There began what was for Chuck Neilan and the girl the longest period of waiting in their lives. Every moment was a year of life. While she struggled through that grim problem, Chuck found her eyes reaching to him across the room time and again, as though asking him mutely for advice that she knew he could not give.

At last he burst out: "For heaven's sake, do the thing that will keep you straight with yourself. Your father's an old man. And I'm a pretty hard one. If either of us keeps on living because you've gone into a living death, d'you think . . . ?"

A snarl from one of the guards cut his generous speech short, but his meaning had been made clear enough, and he was rewarded with a glint of moist eyes and a sad shake of the head from the girl. Then she dropped her face in her hands and waited, with strong shudders shaking her now and again. From without a whistled note drew two of the guards away. After five minutes more there was a sound of approaching horses and the faint squeaking of stirrups jouncing in the stirrup leathers. The Wolf was making ready to start his journey, and in a moment or so he would be among them ready to ask for the answer. How long it had been since he left the room, no one in it could have undertaken to guess, though surely it had been at least the half hour he had promised to give them.

A little later the door opened softly, and the big rancher stood before them with the wig once more in place on his head. That act of self-deception made Chuck Neilan nearly smile.

There was no doubt in Chuck's mind about what answer the girl would give. She answered the final question steadily enough: "I'll go with you, and I'll marry you . . . and heaven forgive you if men ever find out what you are. But these two are safe?"

She pointed to Chuck and her father.

"Absolutely," said The Wolf, nodding. "And. . . ."

A hiss from one of his followers made him start. Instantly the man who had been left outside called: "Chief! Quick!"

In a bound The Wolf was through the door, and then the cause of their alarm was audible to those within the room—the mutter of rapidly approaching hoofbeats—many and many of them—drumming up a blur of sound.

"Harry . . . Lou!" thundered a voice outside—the voice of The Wolf. "Come for your lives! The mountains have been turned into horsemen. But kill Neilan first . . . kill him before you come!"

But Chuck Neilan, at the first order, caught the chair beside him and hurled it across the room. It crashed against the lamp and flooded the place with darkness. Twice a revolver exploded, fired with malevolent abandon, and then the two stumbled through the doorway out to the wildly cursing Wolf.

They started off with a sudden outburst of hoofbeats that faded as the roar of the approaching party increased, swept nearer, and broke around the ranch house. Those frantic riders who had nearly killed their horses in the rush across the six miles of hills in response to the message written in blood—those ready fighters, guns in hand, saw no signs of the fugitives as the latter dipped down the hillside. The next moment they were in the darkened room with only the stifled, hysterical sobbing of a girl to guide them.

Someone flashed an electric torch. The round flare of light wavered a moment and then picked out the age-dulled eyes of the father, and then Kate Harvey, weeping in the arms of a tall, brown-faced stranger whose right forefinger was gashed at the tip.

## 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 *The Lost Valley* by Frederick Schiller Faust (as John Frederick)]