

THE MYSTERY AT DARK STAR RANCH



HUGH LLOYD

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THE MYSTERY AT DARK STAR RANCH



HAL STIFLED A CRY OF PAIN AND
INSTINCTIVELY STEPPED BACK FARTHER INTO
THE SHADOWS.

THE MYSTERY
AT DARK STAR RANCH

BY
HUGH LLOYD

Author of
The Copperhead Trail Mystery,
The Hermit of Gordon's Creek,
Kidnapped in the Jungle, Etc.

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BERT SALG

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CONTENTS

- I [Local Color](#)
- II [Gossip](#)
- III [The Dark Star](#)
- IV [Sen](#)
- V [Reconnoitering](#)
- VI [Richard Merrivale](#)
- VII [Cows](#)
- VIII [Lost?](#)
- IX [Lights](#)
- X [Clark Merrivale](#)
- XI [A Warning](#)
- XII [Restless](#)
- XIII [A Girl](#)
- XIV [Suspicion?](#)
- XV [A Fool?](#)
- XVI [“And with the Dark”](#)
- XVII [Two Friends](#)
- XVIII [Accusation](#)
- XIX [Breakfast Talk](#)
- XX [Gone?](#)
- XXI [The Trail Back](#)
- XXII [Dusk](#)
- XXIII [Meg, and—](#)
- XXIV [Cornered](#)
- XXV [A Plan](#)
- XXVI [A Sudden Departure](#)
- XXVII [A Good Start](#)

CONTENTS

XXVIII	<u>Trapped</u>
XXIX	<u>Safety.</u>
XXX	<u>A Gun—Why?</u>
XXXI	<u>Gold!</u>
XXXII	<u>Sen Finishes It</u>

THE MYSTERY AT DARK STAR RANCH

CHAPTER I

LOCAL COLOR

“I want to go to Merrivale’s Dark Star Ranch.”

“Yes sirree, stranger!” The driver nodded his bald, sun-burned head and deftly removed from his spattered windshield a sign proclaiming the astonishing fact that the ramshackle Ford was the Gordon Creek Taxi—Ready For Hire! That accomplished, the small, energetic man piled Hal’s baggage into the rear seat.

Hal climbed in after it, managing to find space enough for his own lanky person. While he was settling himself he happened to notice a look of interest on the browned face of the stalwart cowboy standing just opposite the depot.

“Reckon you’ll find it a plumb long ride, stranger,” said the driver, his body half bent at the hood of his car. He was trying to crank it and succeeded after three valiant attempts. Then he rushed around to his wheel, adjusted the spark and nodded apologetically to his passenger. “She’s long-winded in startin’, but she ain’t bad after she gits a-goin’.”

Hal chuckled. “She’s good for the long run, huh? Well, that’s what we want.”

After a deafening roar, the Ford bumped away from the depot and rattled off into the dusty road. Hal saw the flash of a lovely white horse just as they made the turn and looked around to discover that the stalwart cowboy was its rider and was cantering close behind them.

The horseman seemed not to be aware of any scrutiny, but kept his dark, searching eyes on his horse and the road ahead.

Hal, a little embarrassed, soon turned his eyes straight ahead and tried to converse with the driver, but the car at the moment seemed to be snorting and clattering more loudly than ever and the man did not hear him.

He soon gave up trying to make himself heard and leaned back in the bulging seat. The sun was almost overhead and it was getting warmer by the minute. Yet, withal, the heat was soothing and the waving buffalo grass was restful to the eye. The rolling prairie was dotted with grazing cattle and off to the west the foothills of the Rockies looked cool and restful under their vast green forests.

The nearest range, called Crosley's Range by old-timers, stretched its amorphous bulk above Gordon's Creek and cast great zigzag shadows over the shining fertile fields. Hal watched the scene from under half-closed eyes and found that the almost springless car interfered but little with his desire to take a nap.

He dozed for the greater part of ten miles and awakened to find that the Ford was lumbering along a narrow trail that skirted the range. The noise was as deafening as ever and at frequent intervals the engine sputtered and gasped as if it were not hitting on all cylinders.

Hal straightened up, smoothed out his well-fitting gray suit, and brushed off the film of fine dust that had gathered on his knees.

After a moment he was aware of the white horse and its sturdy rider still behind them. His driver was slowing up just then and bellowing over his shoulder something about having engine trouble.

Hal nodded, uninterested, for he had one of those instinctive urges to keep a prudent eye upon the cowboy.

Consequently after a second's rummaging about in his baggage he brought forth a shaving mirror and held it before him at an angle which enabled him to get an unrestricted view of the horseman.

He kept up this careful scrutiny in the mirror for the next full mile and was then convinced that the "taxi" was being followed for the cowboy was keeping his lovely white horse at a speed with the Ford, yet careful always to keep a distance of at least a hundred feet between them.

The driver had no such luxurious appurtenance on his Ford as a mirror, and Hal knew that he couldn't possibly be aware of what was going on behind. The man's mind was obviously occupied with his complaining engine.

He was about to confide his curious discovery to the driver when suddenly he saw in the mirror that the cowboy had reined in his horse toward the right side of the trail and was looking intently toward a nearby butte. The next moment he was sweeping off his wide-brimmed Stetson and making curious gestures with it, swinging his long arm in a sort of half-circle toward the Crosley Range.

Four times he did this with painstaking effort, then put the hat back on his head.

At this moment the "taxi" was making little or no speed and Hal had ample time to watch the whole procedure. Suddenly a shaft of blue smoke rose from about half-way up the butte. Another shaft rose a second later and at that the cowboy waved his hat once more, then turned his horse across the field in the direction of the butte.

Hal watched him, mystified yet fascinated, as the beautiful white horse leaped along toward a deep, grassy coulee alongside the butte. The animal proceeded with

perfect ease as if the region were very familiar to him and now and then he would shake his graceful head as if he were neighing with delight.

Hal could hear absolutely nothing however, for at that moment the Ford was emitting queer, raucous sounds that drowned out everything else. Suddenly the noise ceased and the car shook to a standstill like some decrepit old creature shivering with the ague.

“Wa’al now!” the driver whistled. “If she ain’t gone an’ done it at last!”

“Done what?” Hal asked.

“Stalled, doggone it!” He clambered out of the car.

“Whew!” Hal echoed. “I’m glad it’s no more than that. Think you can crank her up again all right?”

“If I can’t, she ain’t the old Lizzie what I thought she was.”

Hal laughed, but when the driver’s bald head bent down before the hood his expression changed and he looked toward the butte with a sudden frown. Signals had been exchanged between the cowboy and some hidden person on that green, tree-covered hill.

Why?

CHAPTER II

GOSSIP

The spirited horse and its cowboy rider had disappeared when Hal looked again. No more smoke emerged from the tree-covered butte and there was not a sign of life anywhere. Warm, chinook winds murmured through the noonday silence and the distant cry of a bird sounded faintly. Then, suddenly, the ear-splitting noise of the flivver's engine profaned the tranquil scene.

The driver came rushing to his wheel and adjusted the spark. The Ford was again shaking pathetically as its breathless owner climbed hurriedly behind the wheel.

“Hope I ain't made you fidgety a-settin' so long. This car ain't give me trouble like this in quite a spell.” He chuckled. “Maybe it don't like the journey. Cars have got sense, more'n humans have got sometimes. Anyways, this car has. It jest natcherally gits balky when it's forced to travel this region an' that's all I kin make out of it.”

“What's the matter with this region?” Hal asked as the car rattled on over the narrow, dusty trail.

The driver's ears reddened perceptibly. “Doggone, I ain't a-wantin' to seem like a gossip, sir, and you a friend of the Merrivales....”

“I'm merely a friend of Richard Merrivale,” Hal interposed, leaning far forward in the back seat. “This is the first time I've ever been to the Dark Star Ranch. I know nothing about the rest of the Merrivales. Richard I know

merely from visiting Lee Holliday at the Comet X-1 Ranch. I met him there when I was out this way last summer.”

“Ain’t Miss Holliday to Europe?”

“Yep. That’s why Richard Merrivale is going to be my host this fair summer season. He told me last year that he’d be highly insulted if I didn’t crash in on him and pay the Dark Star a visit sometime, so I’m taking him up on it. I love Montana this time of year.”

The driver chuckled audibly. “Pardon my saying so, Mister ... Mister ...”

“Hal Keen.”

“Mister Hal Keen. Wa’al, as I wuz a-goin’ to say, you might love Montana more than the Merrivales ’ll love to see yore smilin’ face comin’ to the Dark Star. They don’t have company and frum all I’ve heerd they ain’t aimin’ to have any.”

“Well, they’re going to have me for company and they’re going to like it,” Hal said with a deep laugh. He whipped his Panama hat from his warm head and smoothed down his red, curling hair. “Of course, Richard Merrivale gave me only a general invitation, but I’m the kind of a fellow who follows up invitations, general or otherwise. So if you’re not really sincere about asking me to your house, cowboy, don’t give me an invitation of any kind. I’m the boy who’ll take you up on it.”

The driver laughed heartily. “Yore welcome to *my* house any time, stranger—I mean Mister Hal Keen.”

“That’s better, and thanks for the invite. And now that we’re on the fair road to being pals, tell me what’s the matter with the Merrivale family. You seem to imply....”

“I mean that they ain’t what you’d call an affectionate family. In fact, there’s some folks what says that the Merrivales hate each other like pizen.”

“*Poison?*”

“Yes sirree, Mister Hal Keen. That’s the talk about ’em. Mebbe you’d say it’s enough to make ’em hate each other when you hear about the will that Old Man Merrivale left. He died jest five years ago. Then two months ago young Ellsworth Merrivale wuz killed. Elly for short, we called him.”

“Who killed him?” Hal asked, interested at once.

The loquacious driver looked over his shoulder and winked confidentially. “He wuz found near the bound’ry of the Mellow Moon Ranch (it’s a rival of the Dark Star and the property adjoins it). Thar ain’t been good feelin’ between the two ranches sence Tuck Liggett bought the Mellow Moon. He started the bound’ry dispute with Old Man Merrivale and claimed that part o’ the creek was his’n. Wa’al the fight’s still on an’ I guess it’ll still be on till one or t’other of ’em wins.”

Hal gasped, surprised at the driver’s rapid-fire chatter. He leaned farther forward and tapped the man on the shoulder. “And this Elly Merrivale—you still haven’t told me who killed him!”

“Thar’s the myst’ry, stranger. The coroner sez he wuz killed accidental. You see he wuz found a-layin’ near his horse deader’n a doornail. A bullet wuz in his head an’ thar wuz powder marks on his face, an’ near him laid his gun. It looked like he wuz thrown frum his horse an’ his gun exploded.”

“That’s probably what *did* happen. I can’t see any mystery....”

“Jest the same thar is. The sheriff admitted thar wuzn’t a doggone bullet missin’ frum Elly’s gun!”

“Hmph! That *is* queer,” Hal mused. Then: “And they accepted the coroner’s verdict of accidental death and just let it ride, did they?”

“Zactly, Mister Hal Keen. Feelin’ is wuss than ever between them ranches—yes sirree! But wust of all, yore friend Richard ain’t been the same since Elly wuz killed. Him an’ Elly wuz twins an’ my, how they stuck together! They jest thought the sun rose an’ set in each other.”

“Too bad! But he’s got another brother, I believe, hasn’t he?”

“Yes, a brother, Clark, and a sister, Aida—twins too.”

“Older than Richard?”

“Four or five years, I reckon. An’ hateful as sin. Wa’al, Mister Hal Keen, I reckon I got you plumb full o’ gossip ’bout the Merrivales, eh? You’ll know jest what yore a-goin’ into.”

“I ought to know after all your earnest efforts,” Hal said, smiling wryly. “And this Tuck Liggett of the Mellow Moon—what about him?”

“He’s some ten years older’n Clark Merrivale. ’Bout forty, I reckon, and a bad hombre fer a-gittin’ what he goes after. He ain’t much wuss than Clark Merrivale, though. Reckon they’re well matched up if it comes to that.”

Hal sat back and, with an air of abstraction, watched some sheep grazing contentedly on a butte near by. A vast herd of cattle roamed the peaceful prairie and spread out like dark specks on the bright noonday horizon. Insects hummed monotonously in the drowsy air, and an azure-blue sky

overhead seemed to complete the atmosphere of contentment which lay over the region.

“Say,” Hal said, his mind on the horse and rider, “what place was that where we broke down before?”

“That wuz a trail what skirts the Mellow Moon property,” the driver answered readily. “We’re still on the same trail, if it comes to that, but about here and on to the other side of the range the Dark Star claims it’s their property.”

“And I suppose the Mellow Moon claims it’s theirs, huh?”

“Jest so.”

“I see. Do we have to cross the range before we get to the Dark Star; is that it?”

The driver nodded. “Crosley’s Range they calls it.”

“Yes, I know,” Hal said reminiscently. “A few years ago I had some corking experiences up in the hills. At the Bitter Root Mine.”

“The year the dam burst?”

“And how! I was visiting the Hollidays that summer for the first time.”

“Now I know who you are!” the driver exclaimed. “The nephew of that government secret service man, Denis Keen!”

“Right the first time,” Hal laughed.

“And you’re the hombre that stopped those mail plane robberies and found out all about that old hermit up on Gordon’s Creek. You sure did get to the bottom of things.”

“Now, now,” Hal interposed modestly. “I had a lot of fun.”

“Yore the kind that jest gets to the bottom of things. That’s what Miss Lee Holliday tole about you in town. She wuz mighty proud o’ you. Guess it comes natcheral to you like, eh, Mister Hal Keen? Bein’s as how yore uncle’s in the secret

service ... mebbe you kin ferret out how Elly Merrivale really wuz killed, even if it *is* two months ago! Mebbe you got an idee already....”

“Say—whoa!” Hal laughed. Suddenly, however, he frowned and lowering his voice said, “Listen, buddy, would you kind of forget those things about me if I asked you to?”

“Reckon I could, and I would—why?”

“Because it suits my purpose not to have anybody around here remember that incident of Gordon’s Creek, if possible. Fortunately most people haven’t your marvelous long memory. I’m counting on the possibility that the Merrivales’ memory won’t be stirred by my name. Also this Tuck Liggett. You see it would hinder me considerably so....”

“I reckon I understand, Mister Hal Keen. I jest don’t remember nothin’ ’bout you from now on.”

“You’re aces high.”

“I’m turrible interested to know what yore a-goin’ to the Merrivales’ for. You got somethin’ up that sleeve o’ yourn an’ I know it.”

“To tell the truth I have, buddy. Say, I’ve not asked you your name all this time—what is it?”

“Buck Perry,” laughed the driver. “I live in the white cottage next to the depot and if you don’t find me one place you’ll find me at t’other. I’m always a-waitin’ fer a fare at train time.”

“O. K., Buck. I’ll remember that tip. Perhaps I may need your taxi sometime again—who knows?”

“Reckon you might,” Perry answered with a chuckle. “If you do, you can depend on Buck any time. Mebbe you’ll kinder let me know, if you can, how things go with you.”

“Bet your life I will,” Hal assured him. He took out a much read letter from his coat pocket and straightened out its many folds to read it once again. Here and there he picked out a sentence which was of particular interest to him: *“Please go to the Dark Star for my sake, Hal ... I told Richard you might be able to help him about poor Ellsworth’s death ... he wants you to come but he can’t send you any specific invitation ... his twin brother and sister are so hateful to him. Still, if you dropped in on them unexpectedly and used Richard’s general invitation as an excuse—common courtesy and real western hospitality are too strong in their veins to refuse you as a guest ... try it for my sake, Hal.... I’m so fond of Richard....”*

He looked up and smiled resignedly. “Just my luck,” he sighed, “that Lee Holliday should be *so* fond of Richard Merrivale. She’s *fond* of me—just *fond*. That’s why I’m reduced to the level of helping this Richard she’s *so* fond of. Oh, well....”

He smiled the rest of the way to the Dark Star Ranch. He really didn’t mind being reduced to the level of helping Richard Merrivale as much as he had thought he would.

CHAPTER III

THE DARK STAR

The Dark Star Ranch lay on the other side of Crosley's Range; one large, sprawling white house and several white painted outbuildings whose composite picture presented a perfect star to the eye of the beholder traveling toward it from the range. And snuggling as it did under the mountain wall, a continual shadow was cast upon it, giving it a sombre aspect even when the sun was at its height.

Hal noticed this and thought a good deal about it when he stood on the veranda of the big house amidst his baggage. Buck Perry had summarily disposed of him and was guiding the roaring, shaking Ford back up the trail, evidently glad to be on his way back to the depot at Gordon's Creek.

Hal peered through the front screen door into the dim hall as he knocked. He heard voices somewhere in the house. Then, almost without warning, a slippared footstep sounded right at hand and on the other side of the door he saw the smiling round face of a Chinaman.

"Hullo!" Hal said, grinning amiably. "Guess I'm in the right place. I've come to visit Richard Merrivale—I'm his friend, Hal Keen, from Ramapo, New Jersey."

The Chinaman's smile deepened perceptibly and he opened the door and came out onto the veranda. "Velly pleased to meet you, Mister Kleen," he said in his sing-song voice. "Velly pleased to meet a flend of Mister Richard's. You come stay while—this your blaggage?"

“It sure is,” Hal answered, studying the Chinaman’s face. Somehow he felt sure of the Oriental and he winked at him confidentially. “I’m told I may not be very welcome here—is that so?” he asked in low tones.

The Chinaman’s smile faded and he looked thoughtful for a moment. Suddenly he cocked his round bald head and listened at the door, then pattered softly to Hal’s side. “It velly true, Mister Kleen,” he whispered, “but you will be welcome velly much by Mister Richard. I know. Mister Clark and Missy Aida—they clanky like everything—they no want anything since the boss died. They’ll be what you call hoppin’ mad, but you keep velly nice smile like you have and stay. Richard be glad—he down now to village on business—he be back three o’clock maybe.”

“Fine. But how about this Mister Clark Merrivale and Miss Aida—are they here, by any misfortune?”

The Chinaman chuckled softly and nodded. “They come down velly soon now. Then they go for afternoon to Yellow City to buy horses. They come now, I think—I hear them. After they go I take you to nice cool room upstairs. You take bath maybe and then have lunch, Mr. Kleen?”

Hal held out his hand to the Chinaman and smiled gratefully. “You’re a fellow after my own heart!”

“My name Sen,” the Oriental grinned, taking his outstretched hand. “I like you velly fine a’ready, Mister Kleen.”

“Same here, Sen,” Hal said with a ring of feeling in his voice. “As we say down east, you’re my pal, *and how!*”

“*And how!*” Sen echoed with a beaming face.

They said no more for heavy footsteps sounded in the hall. Presently the door opened and Hal was a little startled at the

domineering quality so apparent in both Clark and Aida Merrivale as they stepped out on the veranda. Of striking proportions and almost his equal in height, they looked at him searchingly out of dark, deep-set eyes.

Sen bowed profusely and introduced Hal to them in his own inimitable way. "Mister Hal Kleen, he friend of Mister Richard ... he come from Ramplo..."

"Keen—Hal Keen's my name," Hal interposed with his frank smile. "I come from Ramapo, New Jersey, and I met Richard at Lee Holliday's last summer. He insisted on my stopping off here and spending a little time with him this summer. I started from home with the coast as my destination, but when I got to Montana I thought of Richard Merrivale. So here I am!"

Clark Merrivale's smile was forced and he leaned back against the veranda rail, flecking an imaginary piece of dust from his spotless riding habit. When he looked up at Hal there was a suggestion of a frown on his face.

"So you're a friend of Richard's, eh?" he asked tersely. Then after a hasty scrutiny of Hal's handsome face and physique, he added, sarcastically: "Odd that I never heard him mention you, Keen."

Aida Merrivale seemed to rustle in her riding togs and her dark, handsome face puckered into a frown. "There's nothing odd about it, Clark, dear," she said incisively. "It's Richard that's so odd. After all, we know little of him, much less of his friends," she added with a sweeping glance of disapproval at Hal.

Hal bowed his head and smiled goodnaturedly. "The Merrivales have nothing to fear from me, Miss Merrivale," he chuckled. "If there's any doubt about my desirability as

Richard's friend, I can refer you to no better character witness than my own beloved mother."

"We weren't questioning character, Mr. Keen; we were questioning Richard's odd manner of inviting people here without..."

"My fault, Miss Merrivale, my fault," Hal smiled apologetically. "You see, Richard didn't expect me at any definite time. He asked me last summer to drop in on him some time this summer and I said I would. And," he added with light sarcasm, "I've heard so much about western hospitality I just thought..."

"It's all right, Keen," Clark Merrivale said curtly. "I understand perfectly." He looked at Hal again searchingly, then moved slowly toward the steps on his powerful-looking legs. "Richard will be back at..."

"I know," Hal interposed. "Sen told me. Don't bother about me. I'll find plenty to do while I'm waiting for Richard. I'm just that kind of a fellow."

"Odd," said Clark as he stood on the top step. "I had you sized up that way. So long," he added and nodding to his imperious-looking sister, he walked briskly away at her side.

Hal stared after them, scratching his red, curling hair and whistling softly.

CHAPTER IV

SEN

The Dark Star Ranch was the last word in modernism, Hal soon found. Convenience seemed to be its keynote. It was a ranch to be desired by any cattleman even in this day of progress. Nothing was lacking, yet from Sen's great store of information it soon developed that this vast stretch of property and its modern buildings was shadowed by something far more sinister than Crosley's Range.

"She been velly had off since boss died five year back," Sen confided, hovering solicitously about his guest.

Refreshed by a cooling shower bath and with a nicely laid out luncheon before him, Hal pulled the chair across the smooth terrace and sat down at the wicker table. He felt at peace with the world and was ready for anything.

"How do you mean the ranch has been badly off, Sen?" he asked, sipping some consomme.

"Droughts and cheap cattle prices take velly much money, Mister Kleen. Mister Clark and Missy Aida no want to live cheap like Mister Richard and Mister Elly tell them to. Money goes velly quick. Now Mister Richard he worried because expense is allee same and bank wants him to pay money."

"Oh," said Hal sympathetically, "he's got notes to meet—is that it?"

Sen nodded his shining bald head. "Mister Richard no money to pay. I tell you, Mister Kleen, because maybe you help him think how to make money to pay. He no can keep

money when Mister Clark and Missy Aida entertain rich friends and buy big cars and lots race horse. They no care allee same. They want Mister Richard to sellee Dark Star to Mister Tuck Liggett of Mellow Moon. Mister Liggett he got what 'Melicans call the evil eye on Dark Star—he want it bad. He got no good water on his land for cattle. Dark Star has Pine Creek—plenty water with nice springs.”

“And Mister Tuck Liggett wants Dark Star because of that, huh?” Hal asked, pausing a moment. “I suppose he wants to pay a handsome price for it, huh?”

Sen shook his head emphatically. “Mister Liggett he no want to pay for Dark Star allee same it is worth. Mister Richard he say he no sellee Dark Star for allee money in world. He love it like his father.”

“I see,” Hal said musingly; “that changes the color of things entirely. Richard’s Merrivale blood is stronger than the money urge. Native ties—love of one’s forefather’s land ... well, that’s something to be idealistic about. Richard’s just about become aces high in my estimation now that I know that. Man, he must have spirit and courage galore to stand up and face things with such opposition.”

“Mister Richard fine young gentleman, Mister Kleen. He love his father and promise him he would keep Dark Star in the Merrivale familee. It was in the will too.”

“Yes, it seems to me I heard about that will,” Hal murmured, thinking of what Buck Perry had started to tell him. “Tell me about it, Sen!”

“Mister Richard and Mister Elly were good to boss. Mister Clark and Missy Aida never like ranch and they stay allee time east where they spend boss’ money and don’t care how venerable father is. So he remember it when he make

will—he try 'em out like you say. He tell in will that Mister Clark and Missy Aida must come home when he die and stay five year. Mister Richard and Mister Elly must stay too.”

“But they wanted to anyway, didn't they?”

Sen nodded and went on: “It break their heart to go way, they say. But poor Mister Elly he had to go way for good allee same. You heard 'bout him?” he asked, seeing Hal's understanding look. “I tell you about him later. But boss tell in will, that in five year next Christmas, Dark Star must be prosperous like he left it when he die. If not, it must be sold and money divided among children.”

“And that way they wouldn't get as much as if they sold it while it was fairly prosperous.”

“Velly true, Mister Kleen. That is why Missy Aida and Mister Clark want Mister Richard to sell it to Mister Liggett before next Christmas come and they get not much money. They say what Mister Liggett pay now would be velly much more.”

“And if the Dark Star should suddenly take a good turn and get back on its feet—what then?” Hal asked, intensely interested.

“Velly much money goes to who puts Dark Star on feet. The rest get only little of boss' money in big Butte bank. That private money like, Mister Kleen. That has not to do with ranch money. No ranch money now anyway.”

“I see. The money in the Butte bank will be paid to the most willing son or daughter as a reward for their efforts in saving the ranch, huh? Well, that was a darn wise stunt for old Mr. Merrivale to pull. I guess he had in mind which of his children would work to keep the ranch if they could. But

what if the ranch can't be saved? What then? Where does that money go to then?"

"That's what makes hate between Mister Clark and Missy Aida. Velly much hate. They hate each other; they hate Mister Richard. And they will hate you because you his friend. But about the bank money, Mister Kleen, boss say it go to son or daughter who sell ranch and make best business deal."

"And that's what Clark and Aida Merrivale are trying their darndest to do, huh? Richard ought to beat them to it and make the deal first if he thinks the ranch can't be saved."

"Mister Richard say he save Dark Star if it velly last thing he does. And if he not save it, then he know he did his best."

"It's not usual for one fellow to say it about another, but believe me, I love Richard Merrivale for saying a thing like that," Hal said, rising from his chair.

"I think allee same too, Mister Kleen," Sen said, his almond eyes aglow with loyalty.

Hal looked at the Chinaman, understanding. Somehow it was easy to understand that loyalty, for instinctively he felt loyal to Richard Merrivale himself.

CHAPTER V

RECONNOITERING

Hal strolled away from the big house after Sen had cleared away the luncheon and returned to his kitchen duties. It lacked a full hour and a half before Richard was expected home and there was much to look at, considering the fact that the fertile hills and valleys comprising Dark Star Ranch covered an area of almost five square miles.

Down at the well-kept corral Hal met a short, fat cowboy who smilingly introduced himself as Slim, foreman of the ranch.

“Sen told me to come down and ask for a horse,” Hal said. “I’m killing time until Richard gets back. Do you mind....”

“Reckon we don’t mind doing anything for a friend of Richard’s,” Slim interposed significantly. He started off toward the stables on his stumpy bowlegs and called back over his shoulder. “How d’ye ride—*fast*?”

“How did you guess?” Hal called back, laughing.

“Jest a hunch, Mr. Keen,” Slim chuckled. “Mebbe yore hair makes you look as if you could go like the old boy hisself, I don’t know.” He winked and disappeared within the stables. When he came out he was leading a fine, light-brown stallion.

“Man alive, what a beaut!” Hal said admiringly.

“Thought you’d like him,” Slim said delightedly. “Mister Richard has the brother to this one (he’s a little darker), but he likes ’em both.”

“What’s this fellow’s name?” Hal went up and stroked the horse’s glistening neck.

“Just Pal,” Slim answered. “He shore lives up to his name ef he takes a likin’ to you. Mister Richard named t’other one Brother. Nothin’ fancy ’bout either one o’ thar names, but they shore are dependable hosses, both of ’em.”

“I dare say,” Hal said slipping into the saddle. “Anyway, I’ll soon see what kind of a pal this fellow is when it comes to carting me about a strange ranch. He’ll have to lead the way and stick by me—I get lost easily.”

“He’ll stick by you a’right, but he’s a hoss that’s got a notion fer leggin’ it, ’less you tell him to stop. When you git ready to turn fer home, jest tell him so an’ he’ll leg it jest as fast back here as he does when he fust sets out from the ranch.”

“I’ll remember that, Slim. Say, by the way,” Hal said, inspired by a sudden thought, “where the deuce is Pine Creek from here?” Slim waved his short, fat arm toward the southeast. “Pine Creek proper is a spankin’ little river what lays over thar. But long afore she ever gits thar she turns an’ twists a pow’ful lot down through the range. Nobuddy seems to know ’zactly whar she does come frum, ’ceptin’ we suspect it’s part an’ parcel o’ Gordon’s Creek. Anyways, Mr. Keen, don’t try an’ foller it too far without somebuddy to show you whar yore a-goin’, ’cause yore like to run smack on Mellow Moon property. It runs purty close to the creek on t’other side.”

“Mm!” Hal whistled. “Would that be dangerous?”

“*Dangerous?* Wa’al, I hope it never gits that bad, Mr. Keen. I didn’t aim to sound that way. It’s jest that things are purty hot between the Liggett crowd and pore Mister

Richard. He ain't got no use for 'em an' he don't make no bones about it. Since Mister Elly died it's been wuss—Mister Richard swears they got somethin' to do with it fer they knew Mister Elly was a-goin' to try and borry some money from an eastern friend an' set up the ranch.”

Hal stayed the impatient horse a moment. “Surely, Richard doesn't suspect that the Liggett crowd...”

“I dunno, I dunno. It's plumb strange, Mr. Keen. But from the looks o' things, the Liggett crowd didn' want to see the ranch set up on its feet—they want the Dark Star fer themselves. Wa'al, it's one o' them things that's jest got to burn out sometime. When it gets too hot it will.”

“And it's getting pretty warm now, huh?”

Slim nodded sagely. “Purty hot, Mr. Keen. That's why I say don't go too far or you might run into one of 'em. After all, yore a friend of Mister Richard's an' like as not if Buck Perry drove you up here, the hull o' Gordon's Creek knows all about you by this time and knows you didn' come to see Mister Clark or Miss Aida.”

Hal groaned. “I asked him not to tell who I was!”

“Buck don't mean to talk, Mr. Keen. It jest ain't natcheral fer him to keep his mouth still, that's all. I know'd who you wuz an' all about thet it wuz you thet wuz in on thet mine mystery of Holliday's that time. He couldn' even keep it still that you was a nephew of the secret service man. He told it to the fust feller he met on the road after he left you—a feller what works on a ranch to the north o' here.”

“All is lost then!” Hal said with a grin. “Darn it though, I didn't want my past, present and future known so quickly.”

“Then you shouldn' o' told Buck Perry yore right name. Wa'al, it's too late now, Mr. Keen. You'll have to make the

best of it.”

“And how!” Hal agreed, spurring the horse lightly.

They headed for a trail to the east and the horse loped along for a few feet, then gained considerable speed and soon took Hal on a flying trot. Slim’s watching figure became a mere speck and then was obscured altogether as they cantered down into a cool, grassy dale.

Pal whinnied in comradely fashion several times and after an encouraging pat from Hal upon his sleek head, he kicked up his heels still harder until they were going at a breathtaking pace. In point of fact, they were almost upon the creek before Hal was aware of it for the stallion dodged in under some trees and came rushing out upon the sandy banks of Pine Creek, snorting.

Hal laughed and dismounted. “You’ve got speed, ole boy!” he said to the animal. Then looking over the murmuring, rushing water, he smiled. “So this is Pine Creek!” he said to himself.

This part of Pine Creek ran through beautiful country. Rushing down from the range, it emptied into a sort of basin and spread out under Hal’s appreciative eyes, then narrowed off through the fertile green ranch and finally converged where the land sloped.

But Hal was not interested in that part of the creek somehow. He was always more interested in where a stream came from than in where it was going. And Pine Creek had interested him considerably since he had learned that it was coveted by Tuck Liggett of the Mellow Moon. He felt that he should like to know just how much it was coveted—how much Liggett would pay to give his cattle that precious drink of water.

He took Pal's halter and led him along the sandy, tree-covered bank of the creek. The air was balmy for the sun had long since left its noonday peak and was shining down through the mid-afternoon hour with soft, mellow rays. Birds chirped and fluttered about, and high overhead a hawk circled dizzily.

They strolled rather than walked and soon left the creek behind. Hal found a pleasant, shady trail that wound uphill like a bolt of shining ribbon wherever the sun's rays caught it. A rabbit scurried across the trail and the stallion pricked up his ears and watched it until it disappeared through the undergrowth. Then he followed on after Hal, occasionally stopping to nibble choice bits of grass that sprang up in tufts along the sandy trail.

Presently Hal heard the sound of rushing water and soon found himself on the banks of the stream again. It was quite narrow here, narrow enough to ford, and came tumbling out over its rocky bed from a narrow gorge that looked to be more than a half mile long.

He looked across the bright stream and caught the occasional gleam of a trout as it swam past. Inspired by a sudden idea, he leaned down and removed his leather puttees, and shoes, pulled off his socks, then rolled up his linen knickers above his knees.

"I feel like a kid again, Pal," he chuckled close to the stallion's ear. "Haven't waded like this in gosh knows when! Guess I brought you out for a walk more than anything, huh? Oh well, I'll give you a chance to tear me along your darndest on the home stretch. We'll wade over and back, then start for home."

The stallion rubbed his soft nose against Hal's arm and they started across the stream. The water, fed by mountain springs, was quite cold and gave Hal a shock at first, but he soon got used to it and found, when he reached the opposite bank, that he felt delightfully exhilarated despite the fact that his knickers were soaked.

He stopped and lighted a cigarette, meaning to smoke it through before they recrossed the stream. The stallion had already espied some succulent grass near by and was happily occupied with it. Hal watched him as he leaned lazily back against a giant yellow pine.

Almost simultaneously he heard the voices and saw the tracks—the voices, a man's and a woman's, were not far away; the tracks were right under his eyes, fresh hoof imprints that had been made not more than an hour before. They led, he saw at first glance, straight into the thick woods beyond the banks of the stream.

"I don't know what luck he's going to have there today," the feminine voice said softly, yet distinctly. "If he has any, I know it won't be much—it won't give him the boost that he needs to keep things going. That chap that was going to lend Elly the money is on a prolonged tour of the world and won't be back until next year. So that's in our favor."

"It shore is," the man said distinctly.

"Can't you say *sure* if you have to say *sure is* at all?" came the query, petulantly. "Your speech is impossible, Tuck."

"Now do we have to go over all that again? I've tole you a hunerd times an' more that it ain't natcheral fer me to talk easterly like you do when I ain't never been away from Montana. All right for you that spent all them years in high

brow eastern schools. Wa'al, thar ain't no use arguin' 'bout how I talk when we got more important things. Ye say this Hal Keen is the same feller what rounded up that Kip feller over at Holliday's?"

"That's what Buck Perry's told around town. He says there isn't anything that that chap misses. He's walking in his uncle's footsteps already. And he's not going to miss anything around here either, Tuck. I've got a feeling that he's come for more than just to see Richard."

"Wa'al, he'd better not poke his freckled nose into Mellow Moon affairs, or...."

Hal drew his breath and threw his cigarette stub into the stream. Then, suddenly, the stallion whinnied.

CHAPTER VI

RICHARD MERRIVALE

It was not a very loud cry, yet it seemed to echo like a bell through the deep silence of the woods. Somewhere near, Hal could hear the crackling of dry underbrush under someone's running feet. He picked up his puttees and shoes and leaped barefoot into Pal's saddle.

"Beat it for home, boy," he whispered excitedly into the stallion's silken ear.

They were over the creek and had left a thin film of spray behind before Hal saw, from the corner of his eye, a tall, sturdy man emerge from the trees and run toward the edge of the bank. He waved his arms and shouted but Hal urged Pal straight for the trail and did not look back again.

A shot sounded and instinctively Hal bent low over the stallion's neck. A bullet screamed past his head and he saw it bury itself in the trunk of a tree not three feet distant. Pal gained more and more speed after that and went racing down past Pine Creek in less than ten minutes.

He did not pause there, but turned straight for the ranch and Hal had all he could do to hold on with his one free hand, and keep his puttees and shoes intact in the other. His socks, he happened to remember, were still lying on the far side of the creek where he had laid them along with his other things when he had paused to light the cigarette. Somehow he had neglected to pick them up.

He chuckled. "Darn lucky I was able to pick myself up," he said aloud.

As he came in view of the corral, he saw a slim, gray-flannel clad figure waving to him. Richard Merrivale! He knew him by the glistening blond head which nodded to him welcomingly.

He waved and shouted and Pal whinnied, then slowed down.

“Hal Keen! If I’m not glad to see you!” Richard Merrivale exclaimed as the stallion pulled up beside him. Suddenly he noticed Hal’s barefoot condition and his brown eyes looked up questioningly. “You rascal—what on earth....”

Hal jumped down and put out his hand to Richard. “You old sea-cook, you! Who thought I’d ever really come to the Dark Star and meet you like this! Now, Rich,” he said in his quizzical way, “why I’m in this state of undress is a long story. I started out fully dressed, I assure you—witness my shoes and puttees.”

“I’ve already witnessed them,” Richard chuckled in his soft, well-modulated voice. “It is true—who thought I’d ever see you again—much less like this? I wanted you to come when I invited you last summer, but I didn’t think you really would.” He smiled. “After all there was no reason for you to come really. My sister Aida is twenty-eight.”

“Now, Rich! I’d have come just the same if she was eighteen and you know it! But seriously, I thought your invitation was just a general one. That’s why I never gave another thought about it until I received Lee’s note last week telling me that you needed some help.”

Richard Merrivale was of only average height and stood well under Hal’s broad shoulders. He looked up at his tall guest and a grateful smile lighted his smooth tanned face.

“A friend in need, eh, Hal? Lee said you were that kind and believe me, I’ll appreciate it. I’m ... well, I am in need of a friend and a fellow like you. It sounds odd to say so, but the Merrivales are a house divided against itself just at present.”

“I’ve heard something about that,” Hal admitted readily. “The rest I’ve guessed myself.”

“Sen told you?”

“Buck Perry gave it to me roughly as he drove me up here. Sen gave it to me thoroughly and your Slim wound up the story. But Sen gave the best version, Rich. Maybe it’s because his interest in it is personal. He’s loyal to you, and how!”

“Loyalty is no word for it, Hal. My father left Sen enough money to live on comfortably for the rest of his life. But do you think he’ll leave that kitchen of ours? Not much! He says he’d die without meals to get and kitchen work to do. The real reason is he won’t leave that kitchen until I leave the ranch. He was just as devoted to my brother Elly. Good old fellow, he wants to lend me every red cent of his.”

“And you won’t take it?”

“Of course not. It’ll take hundreds of thousands to save this ranch now, Hal. Only a miracle can save it and help me to get that much together by next Christmas. You see, I need the whole amount or nothing—that’s how things stand now. My main idea is to keep a strict eye out for Tuck Liggett and see that he doesn’t do anything that will force me to sell it to him. When the time comes that I have to sell it, I’ll find a buyer worthy of this lovely place.”

“It is lovely, Rich,” Hal said sympathetically. “But cheer up! Who knows what may happen. You have some darn good

reason, I suppose, for not wanting Tuck Liggett to have the Dark Star?”

“The best reason in the world,” answered Richard heatedly. “I love the Dark Star—every inch of it. It’ll break me up awfully if I do have to let it go. The love of it must be in my blood. Elly felt that way about it too. Guess we took after my father for that. Clark and Aida don’t give a hoot about it. All they want is to see that it produces some money for them to get away from it for good and for all. But I’ll fight—oh, I forgot about Liggett. I love the place too much to let him ever get his dirty hands on it.”

“Dirty?”

“They’re mucked up with dishonesty, that’s what! He’s the kind of scoundrel who’ll profane anything he lays his hands on. Everything must yield the dollar regardless of what he profanes in doing so. Well, he won’t profane the Dark Star—never!”

“And you want me to help you to keep him from getting it?” Hal asked, puzzled.

“No—that is, unless you could find time to give me some help that way too. You cleared that mystery at the Creek so fine, Hal, that I thought maybe——”

“Yes?”

“I thought perhaps you could find out what really happened to Elly. I know—I just know that his death was not an accident!” He looked at Hal, his brown eyes blazing. “I’ve a feeling that Tuck Liggett fired that shot that killed my brother.”

“Think he’s as bad as that?”

“I just think so, Hal,” Richard answered, lowering his voice, “and I’m asking you to help me find out for certain if

I'm right. Think it can be done after two months have gone?"

"Murder," Hal answered, pulling on his shoes and puttees with a nonchalant air, "will out. Even after a hundred years."

Richard smiled grimly. "Then there's hope after a two months' lapse. But tell me, Hal—you still haven't told me why your barefoot return."

"I haven't, have I?" Hal returned, looking up. "Well, Rich, I'll tell you, but first I want to know something."

"Yes?"

"Has this Tuck Liggett a sister?"

"Yes, and much as I hate to admit anything good about the Liggett family she doesn't look as if she could be as bad as her brother. She's only about twenty, I believe, and she's rather sweet looking. But I suppose that's only on the surface anyhow. Why do you ask?"

"Do you know whether she's been educated in the east?"

"Yes, Corinne Liggett's been in eastern schools most of her life. Her mother and father were killed in an accident shortly after she was born. Tuck hasn't had hardly any education and I guess she notices it."

"She certainly does!" Hal agreed reminiscently.

CHAPTER VII

COWS

They had dinner alone that night, for Clark and Aida had not returned from Yellow City. Richard said nothing about them, seeming rather to be too glad of their absence to talk about it, and they spent a long, delightful hour over a delicious meal which Sen served in his own inimitable way.

They sipped coffee and smoked cigarettes out on the terrace, then decided to stroll about in the sweet-smelling dusk. There were some cattle that Richard wanted Hal to see, cattle that he had hopes would bring high prices in another month.

“I’ve got them in a corral way over on the southwest end. It’s a good two miles. Want to take the horses?”

“Not unless you do,” Hal answered. “Now that I’m in the wide open spaces, I want to see if I can get some exercise.”

“O. K. We’ll hike it. These cows I’m going to show you are worth walking to see—they’d be worth walking five miles to see!”

Hal looked at his friend from the corner of his eye and a quiet smile spread over his handsome features. Here was enthusiasm such as he had rarely seen. Here was love of land and cattle so firmly imbued in a young man’s heart that it was pathetic to think of his being torn away from it!

The Dark Star Ranch was life itself to Richard Merrivale.

Hal thought about it a great deal as he listened intently to Richard’s vivid explanations of ranch life. Before he realized it, he was beginning to feel the thrill of “cows” and prices,

and experienced the suspense that all ranchmen feel lest something may go wrong before market time. This market time, particularly, meant so much to Richard Merrivale—his “cows” would either bring him a little hope or very much despair.

“If prices are only right,” he was saying hopefully. “If they only are.”

“It will solve your problem a little, is that it, Rich?” Hal asked sympathetically.

“A little, yes. Enough to give me hope that I could perhaps borrow some more to add to it and so make up the balance.”

“That would be the miracle, if you could borrow it, huh?”

“You understand it perfectly.”

“But tell me, Rich, why do you have to worry and struggle along like this to make ends meet on this great ranch when a pile of your father’s money lies in the bank at Butte? Wasn’t your father a little eccentric to make such a will?”

“Eccentric, perhaps, but wise, I guess. He knew what he was doing. He knew that Clark and Aida didn’t give a darn about him nor the ranch—he knew all they cared about was the money that they could get so’s to make a hit with their snob friends. Well, he fixed it in the will that they had to live home for the five years and share in the maintenance of the ranch.”

“I guess they’ve never done much toward the maintenance?”

“Nothing,” Richard said wearily. “They insisted on entertaining their rich friends until I put a stop to it. And they buy expensive horses as if the ranch were running on the same basis as it did five or six years ago. But to get back to

my father's reason for this, Hal: he had some psychic knowledge of what was coming—you may laugh, but he predicted the droughts and the drop in prices. He knew it would tax our resources, bring out the fight or bring out the weakness that was in us. And he said in the will that if we couldn't use what he laid aside for the ranch maintenance, then we weren't the business people he thought we were. And he gave us five years to show what we could do. Well, Sen told you about it pretty well. I think though that Dad felt pretty certain that Clark and Aida would soon tire of the whole thing."

"They've held on longer than he thought for, I bet."

"No, he counted on their wanting the money badly enough to stick. That's why he made that provision about keeping the money back at Butte. He said it would make laggards of us to think we could fall back on it for if we were able to dip into it we'd naturally keep right on until it was gone and the likelihood was that we'd lose not only the ranch but the money too."

"I see. He made up his mind that you'd either love the ranch enough to fight to keep it or sell it as honorably as possible. Is that it?"

Richard nodded wistfully. "Dad didn't figure about Elly, though, and he didn't figure that Clark and Aida would actually oppose me. He knew they wouldn't be much help, but he never dreamed, I guess, that they would deliberately try to play into Tuck Liggett's hands against me. And Tuck Liggett was my father's worst enemy."

Hal put his arm out in the dusk and slapped Richard's shoulder fraternally. "Disloyalty is hard to fight, Rich. Darn hard. But have you ever stopped to think what a big thing it

is to fight for something you know is right? Darn it, Rich, that's what you've got on your side and believe me, it's half the battle! Man alive, you've got me keyed up and I'm here to try and help you fight the other half.”

“And don't I know you're here, Hal!” Richard cried gratefully. “Don't I know it!”

They walked the rest of the way in thoughtful silence and crossed a narrow stream which boasted a diminutive wooden bridge not seven feet long. Beyond, looming up against the early evening sky, Hal could make out the roaming figures of the cattle.

“I suppose I should have brought you earlier,” Richard said apologetically.

“It's O. K., Rich. It's surprising what I've seen after the sun goes down.” Hal looked over the bridge rail and pointed to a sturdy looking cow drinking placidly beside the stream. “I can see her pretty well....”

Richard put out a detaining hand. “Can you see the cow beside her?” he asked in a peculiar strained voice.

“Yes, why?” Hal returned, looking at the cow in question which seemed to be lying stretched out on the ground.

Richard was already at the animal's side by the time Hal hurried up to him. He knew something was wrong for the cow's jaws hung open peculiarly, and her large, soft eyes looked wild and staring.

“What's the matter, Rich? What's wrong?” he asked, seeing the fearful look in his friend's eyes.

“One of my best cows, Hal!” Richard was shouting excitedly. “A cool thousand she would have brought and now....”

“Rich, what is it?”

“She’s been poisoned—poisoned!”

CHAPTER VIII

LOST?

Hal stared at the dead cow's rigid jaws and glassy eyes. And, mechanically, he followed the line of Richards' quivering hand and saw that he was pointing to two other cows which were also lying rigid and cold in death. Some of the others were roaming about restlessly on unsteady legs and lowing mournfully.

Richard put his hands before his eyes a moment as if to shut out the scene. Suddenly, however, he got to his feet and hurried down to the stream where he stood contemplating it a moment. Then he bent down and cupped some of the water in his hands, putting it to his lips.

"I think this has done the trick, Hal," he said despairingly.

"You don't mean...." Hal began.

"I mean that I think someone has deliberately poisoned this water! It tastes peculiar."

"Good heavens, Rich—you didn't swallow any, did you?"

Richard shook his head. "It didn't go any further than my lips."

"This is awful!"

"It's tearing the props out from under a fellow," Richard said with a sound of pain in his voice. He buried his face in his hands a moment, then seemed to take hold of himself and straightened up. "I've got to see that the rest don't get it," he said looking around at the cattle, fearfully. "Some of them are already in for it."

"What can I do, Rich?" Hal asked briskly.

“Do? Hal, you’re a brick—how glad I am you’re here! Listen. Will you hike it as fast as you can and tell Slim and the boys to hurry here? They can round up this herd and drive them back to our main corral where we can keep an eye on them. I’ll stay here and see that no more of them take a drink of this water.”

“O. K. I’ll sprint like the Old Boy himself. Got cigarettes enough?” Hal brought out his case and handed it over.

Richard smiled gratefully. “You do think of everything, don’t you? I’ll need them while I’m waiting ... something to keep my mind off of this bitter pill. It’s the worst I’ve swallowed so far.”

“Can’t I see it! But try and pull yourself together, Rich. I hate to sound grandmotherish and string off any boners, but it does sometimes get terribly dark just before the dawn!”

Richard smiled wanly. “You’re enough to convince a bronze Buddha, Hal.”

Hal smiled encouragingly. “I’ll be seeing you, Rich.”

His long, lanky legs started on a half run across the little bridge. For a moment his well-shaped red head was outlined against the remaining line of light beyond, but soon he was obscured by the mist and the gathering shadows and for five minutes afterward Richard listened intently to the light thud of his hurrying feet as he ran on toward the ranch.

Hal’s mind, meanwhile, teemed with conflicting thoughts. He had read and heard of such things going on in ranch life but he had always told himself that it was ninety-nine per cent fiction and one per cent truth. Certainly, he had never believed for a moment that there existed in our present-day civilization a human being so contemptible as to deliberately poison innocent cattle.

The motive was obvious, yet notwithstanding that Hal still wanted to believe that Tuck Liggett had not resorted to such contemptible means in order to force Richard to sell the Dark Star. He was determined to give the Mellow Moon owner the benefit of the doubt as long as it was possible.

“Poisoning!” he said aloud once. “It’s just not human!”

Not human, but true. It had happened and was just as real as the fact that he was now hurrying to the Boys’ House (as the men’s headquarters was called) to rout them out to the rescue of Richard’s finest herd. He felt bewildered by the whole business, as if it were an unpleasant dream, yet always there dwelt in his consciousness the stark truth that an insidious evil held the Dark Star in its grip.

He ran on, trying to keep in mind the direction that he and Richard had taken. They had crossed several fields and had stuck to no one trail. Consequently, it was difficult in the waning light to descry familiar landmarks.

Here and there in the distance he saw small herds of cattle and heard them lowing softly. Eagerly he looked for lights from the ranch buildings to guide him, but it was either not yet dark enough for illumination or he had not reached a point close enough to see the lights.

After a little, however, he remembered that they had two or three times ascended and descended eminences of some little height and that would possibly account for his not being able to see the ranch lights. But he could not tell, nor could he remember, whether he had been running uphill or down dale. All he knew was that he had been running fast.

He stopped after a time and looked about. A dense park of giant trees loomed up to the right and assumed all sorts of fantastic shapes and figures in the gloom. Had he passed that

park on his way over with Richard? Somehow he thought that he had. In point of fact, he told himself he was certain that they had passed close to it.

In a moment he was shuffling through the high, sweet-smelling grass and hurrying toward the park. A sense of doubt began to assail him and he wondered if Richard had not contemplated the possibility of his getting lost. But then he hadn't given a thought to it himself.

He ran on toward the trees and circled one giant trunk to discover that a well-worn trail lay just beyond. Just as he was about to step out to it he saw the tall, familiar figure of a cowboy, the same man that had followed Buck Perry's car only that afternoon—the cowboy on the beautiful white horse!

He was scowling and looked menacingly into the gloom where Hal was standing. A gun was clutched tightly in his left hand.

“Who's in thar, anyway?” he asked crisply.

Before Hal could answer, there was the sound of a metallic click and he felt the sting of a soft-nosed bullet ploughing through the flesh of his lower left arm. He stifled a cry of pain and instinctively stepped back farther into the shadows.

“Cowboy,” he said laconically, “drop that gun! I've got you covered!”

The cowboy did not drop his gun, but he must have believed that Hal really had him covered, for he had taken to his heels almost before the words were uttered. A second later the gloom had completely hidden him and it was difficult to tell in what direction his fleeing steps had gone.

Hal listened long and intently, but all he heard was the distant lowing of cattle and the constant hum of crickets in the high, sweet grass.

CHAPTER IX

LIGHTS

He saw the lights of the ranch after what seemed an eternity and ran toward them. How long he had been on the way he hadn't the slightest idea, but since his encounter with the cowboy he had circled fields and crossed two narrow streams. Then when he found himself at the top of a hill he saw the lights, strung out end to end like so many glittering stars across the valley.

Slim was out making a final inspection for the night when Hal came running past the stables. The foreman stared at him, then pursed his lips as he saw the red smear on his white sleeve.

"Wa'al, Mister Keen...." he began.

"Slim ... no time to talk, ask questions or anything. Richard's down at ... well, it's southwest...."

"Down at the P'int?" Slim asked quickly.

"I don't know the name. It's two miles, he said, and over a little wooden bridge!"

"That's the P'int, Mister Keen."

"Whatever the name is, he's there ... alone with the cattle—some of 'em dead ... *poisoned!*"

"*By Heaven!*"

"It's true, Slim! He wants you to get the boys and round them up and drive them back here before any more go ... he thinks it's the water. I got lost coming back, so time has slipped. Hurry, huh?"

“We shore will!” Slim answered, raising his voice in a thundering shout to the men in the “Boys’ House” who were already retiring for the night. Then he turned to Hal again. “But your arm, Mister Keen?” he asked anxiously.

Hal was already hurrying away toward the big house. “I’ll tell you later, Slim. I met a cowboy somewhere in the dark. Don’t worry—it’s just a flesh wound. I’ll get Sen to fix me up. You’ll hurry, huh?”

Slim’s hearty answer was lost in the shouts of the men who began to pour out of their quarters at that moment. And Hal felt reassured for they were on their horses and riding hard toward the “P’int” before he dragged himself up on the veranda, calling to Sen.

The Chinaman met him in the broad hall. “How are you on first aid, Sen?” he asked, rolling up his white sweater sleeve before the Oriental’s astonished gaze.

“Bullet shot!” gasped Sen. “You not hurt allee same?” he asked, looking up at Hal as if he expected him to topple over any minute.

“It just grazed the side of my arm, Sen. Went in one side and skipped out the other—see?” He held up his arm and showed the clean hole that the bullet had made in the flesh. “I’m more tired from running than anything.”

Sen shook his shining bald head solicitously and led the way out to his spotless kitchen. He bade Hal sit down and in his noiseless, efficient way had sterilized and bandaged the wound within five minutes.

“You velly sure you felt bullet shot go out the skin?” he asked, pressing about the arm gently.

“I certainly did feel it go out. That’s what made it sting so badly.”

“Velly good. Now I make you some sting hot tea, Mister Kleen.”

“Sen, you’re one peach, believe me. You not only know your kitchen, but you know your human beings.”

Sen’s round face lighted up with an amiable smile. “That’s why for I live, Mister Kleen. Now while I make tea, you tell me what happened at the Point.”

“So that’s the real name, huh?” Hal smiled. “Slim calls it the ‘P’int’.”

Sen nodded and put a large tea-kettle on the electric stove. Then he hurried about from cupboard to table, his face more or less inscrutable yet giving an attentive ear to Hal’s vivid description of the poisoned cattle and his subsequent wandering in the maze of falling night.

“That’s how I came to realize I was lost,” he was saying. “When I came out from behind that tree I saw that cowboy standing there in the trail. He must have heard me long before I saw him. But I recognized him right away, Sen. He was the same fellow that followed Buck Perry’s flivver this afternoon and he rode a peach of a white horse.”

Sen said nothing until he had fully completed his story of the cowboy’s signalling that afternoon. “I know him velly well, Mister Kleen. Him Hank Barlow, Mister Tuck Liggett’s man. Him bad hombre, Slim say, and he velly quick with gun.”

“Well, I’ll say he was darn quick with his gun at me! Gosh! He didn’t give me a chance. But then, as I say, I’m certain he heard me long before I saw him and he might have challenged me before I heard him. I was running too fast and stumbling over too much to hear anything but my own clumsy feet. Anyway, when he shot me I wasn’t taking any

chances and I called his bluff. Gosh, if I knew I could make him back water as easily as I did, I'd have jumped out and tackled him right then."

"With your bullet shot arm?" Sen asked, amazed.

"With only one arm, I'd have done it, if I'd have known. But one lives and learns, hey Sen? Guns or no guns, that Liggett crowd isn't scaring me any more. Any fellow that could run like this Barlow did—well, 'birds of a feather' you know. I'd rather enjoy meeting this famous Tuck Liggett now."

He heard someone behind him and turned around to see Clark Merrivale standing just outside the kitchen doorway, a mocking smile flashing out of his cold, black eyes.

CHAPTER X

CLARK MERRIVALE

“Good evening, Keen,” he said sarcastically. “You seem to have gotten the worst of something, eh?” he asked, nodding at Hal’s bandaged arm.

“Not as bad as it might have been, Mr. Merrivale,” Hal retorted with a dazzling smile. “The wound isn’t half as bad as the impression that Mr. Barlow has made on me with his free shooting. Not only Mr. Barlow but his employer, for he must abet that sort of thing.”

“My smart-aleck brother has made threats and has incurred the dislike of Mr. Liggett. You can’t blame Tuck for keeping watch about his property and seeing to it that Richard gets no chance whatsoever to carry out his dangerous threats. I suppose you realize you were trespassing on Mellow Moon property? Hank Barlow had every legal right to fire at you when you didn’t answer his challenge.”

“I suppose you’ve heard the complete story, hey, Mr. Merrivale?” Hal asked, unable to restrain the sarcasm that rose to his lips.

“My sister Aida and myself returned home from Yellow City shortly after you and Richard started off for the Point. We retired to our rooms to read. I heard the confusion down here a few minutes ago and I came down in time to hear you telling Sen.”

“Then you heard me say that Mr. Barlow fired at me without giving me chance to answer?”

“I also heard you say that you felt certain Barlow must have heard you running long before you heard him. That explains why he fired as he did. If he called a challenge before the one you heard him call and got no answer, then I maintain that he was within his rights to fire.”

“I remember giving Barlow the benefit of that doubt, too. Also, I’ll admit that it sounded bad for me to be running on Liggett’s property, particularly when he’s guarding his ranch against an intrusion of anyone as fierce and dangerous as your brother Richard.”

“Are you trying to be sarcastic?” Clark Merrivale asked sharply.

“I’m not trying to be—*I am!*” Hal retorted. “A fellow has only to talk to your brother Richard for five minutes to see that he isn’t the kind to make threats, much less carry them out. An easy-going fellow like him—gosh, his eyes smile too much for him to think evil about anyone or against anyone. You don’t mean to tell me that you believe for one moment....”

“I believe that you don’t know my brother Richard, Keen,” interposed Merrivale. He pulled the cord of his silken dressing-gown more tightly about his waist, then: “He has given you his side of the story.”

“No, he hasn’t. He’s stated facts, but that’s all. It seems to me he doesn’t give a darn about anything except this ranch.”

A sneer appeared on Clark’s thin lips. “There’s something self-righteous about Richard in that role. It isn’t difficult to go native in a big way when one expects to be amply rewarded by one’s father’s money.”

Hal stood up and squared his powerful shoulders until Clark looked small and insignificant beside him. “Excuse me

for saying so, Clark,” he said huskily, “but that’s the most unfair statement you could make about your brother. You must know he’s far from being self-righteous, and you know that the only reward he wants is the satisfaction of seeing the ranch put on its feet. And what’s more, he doesn’t *have* to go native—he’s always *been* native! As a matter of fact, it isn’t difficult to discover that as Merrivales go, Richard is *the* Merrivale!”

Clark’s pointed chin seemed more accentuated when he bit down upon his under lip. His smooth-shaven face reddened perceptibly and his eyes flashed angrily.

“Aren’t you being rather insulting?” he asked, his voice rising. “Aren’t you overstepping your limits as a guest in *my* house?”

“I’m Richard’s guest, Clark,” Hal smiled. “And as I understand it, there doesn’t happen to be any elder son’s rights in this house. Your father gave you all an equal chance. And I wasn’t being insulting—I merely wanted to remind you that when ruin and distress threaten a fine place like the Dark Star it isn’t sporting for you to talk disloyally of any member of your family to a comparative stranger like myself. If saying that is overstepping my limits as a guest, then I’m sorry.”

Clark Merrivale’s face was scarlet. “I don’t know how long you’re going to stay here,” he said shrilly, “but I do know that I will never again tolerate your talking to me like this. What happens between Richard and myself—what happens between this ranch and the Mellow Moon is no concern of yours.”

“You drew me into this conversation yourself,” Hal reminded him without relinquishing his smile. “Being a

human being and a fairly intelligent fellow, I have the right to give my opinion, guest or no guest.”

“Very well. But in the future, keep your opinions to yourself—while you’re in this house, anyway!”

“I’ll do my part as a guest, in keeping things amicable, Mr. Merrivale, but I can’t promise to stifle my opinions. I’m that kind of a bird!”

Merrivale stuffed his clenched fists into his dressing-gown pockets. “You’re trying my patience too far! You’re a meddler and I must warn you that it doesn’t go with me. If you continue to talk and meddle in concerns that are not yours—whether it be ours or Tuck Liggett’s, well, you’ll deserve all you get!”

“O. K. My conscience is my guide.”

Merrivale scowled and, turning on his heel, strode off into the hall. And after his impatient steps had ceased on the upper stair, Hal turned to Sen and winked.

“Now for the tea, hey?” he said. “Maybe you don’t know it, but I get as hungry as the dickens when there’s any excitement around. My weak spot. Things just naturally go to my stomach.”

Sen grinned broadly, returned the wink, and hurried to get the teapot.

CHAPTER XI

A WARNING

Hal and Richard talked far into the wee hours of the morning. They had discussed this new and rather formidable angle of the Dark Star's problem and seemed not to get very far with it. One thing only was certain and that was that ten of the ranch's highest-priced cattle had died of poisoning.

"I'll get a veterinarian out here tomorrow," Richard said gloomily. "We'll know then just what the poison was."

"And meantime?"

"I'm going to post some of the boys as lookouts. They can take turns at night. Stand guard at the places Liggett's crowd are most likely to sneak through."

"Then Barlow isn't his only accomplice?"

"Lord, no. Liggett's got a mob working for him at the Mellow Moon. He's rich, Hal. And I know for certain that most of it is ill-gotten gain. Barlow is his most trusted employee, if one can trust a man like that. He must have been signalling your arrival to them this afternoon. No one enters or leaves the Dark Star that Liggett doesn't know about it very soon. That's his method of wearing down my resistance, I suppose."

"But now this poisoning business, Rich—surely you'll have the law on him for it, won't you?"

"Hal, I read in the papers often that police corruption and official corruption are common occurrences down east."

"I hope to tell you, they are. It's awful in some places."

“Well, it’s no less awful right here in this county of ours. Last year when I first openly opposed Liggett about selling this ranch to him, I began missing some of our thoroughbred cattle. Fifty of them disappeared in one month. The next month we lost two whole acres of wheat in a fire of very mysterious origin. Elly went to town and demanded an investigation. It was the most half-hearted investigation you ever saw in your life. We were convinced then that Liggett has the law sewed up in this county. No, it won’t do me any good to complain about the poisoning now. But I *can* prevent any more of it, and in the future I’ll keep sentries posted the same as Liggett does. Then if any of that crowd come on our land and try their dirty underhand tricks, we’ll catch them and *make* the law sit up and take notice. The sheriff will *have* to do something about it if we catch a Liggett man with the goods.”

“Let’s hope you can catch ’em,” Hal said heartily.

They were sitting on the south end of the veranda in two comfortable rockers. It was comparatively dark save for a few of the ranch night lights gleaming here and there. In the big house only a dim light burned in the wide hall, for everyone else was in bed.

Richard yawned and settled himself drowsily in his chair. “It must be two o’clock,” he said sleepily.

“Man alive, where’s the time gone?” Hal said, sitting up in his chair. “Some fine guest I am to be keeping you up like this!”

“*You* keeping me up! I’m the one that’s kept you up! I’ve been too worked up to think of sleep, I guess. Heavens, you must be all in with that arm of yours.”

“Not at all. I feel wide awake right now and my arm’s as good as new.”

“I could choke Barlow for being so quick on the trigger. It’s just sheer luck you weren’t hurt badly.”

“Well, I wasn’t and that’s that. Let’s forget about it. He probably thought I was some hobo.” Hal thought a moment about his rather heated conversation with Clark, but decided against telling Richard anything of it. One thing, however, he was curious to know, and presently he asked: “Just how friendly are your brother and sister with Tuck Liggett?”

Richard was plainly startled by this question. “They’re not friendly at all on a social basis, if that’s what you mean. Clark and Aida are far too snobbish to talk to an illiterate man like Tuck Liggett. But they’re anxious for me to give in and give my consent to selling the ranch to him. They’re anxious for the man’s money, for they say that good buyers are too few in these days of depression. If you’ve got the impression that this anxiety of theirs is due to any friendliness for Tuck, you’re wrong. They want his money, that’s all. Of course, I know they spy on Sen and me, but it’s only to learn how much nearer I am to selling to Liggett. I don’t discuss it with them because we get to quarreling before we realize it. And I refuse to quarrel. Oh, no, their opposition to me doesn’t mean friendliness to Tuck Liggett—*not ever!*”

Hal was relieved. “You ought to know if anybody does. I’m glad it’s that way.”

“Sure. I don’t hold it against them exactly. My father said he had a brother who was so selfish that it amounted to a vice, so I guess that’s where they get it from. Poor Aida, she’s terribly unhappy when she can’t be spending money

lavishly and living in luxurious city apartments. Ranch life stifles her, she says. Clark wants a yacht. He says that's what he'll buy with his share of father's money and he'll sail the seven seas for the rest of his life. He loves the ocean. Odd how they're twins and yet have such different tastes. But then Elly and myself were not united in all our interests either. We both loved the ranch, but his love was wheat and mine has always been the cows." He smiled, a sweet reminiscent smile that Hal did not fail to catch. Then he glanced at his friend pleasantly. "What's your weakness?"

"People, I guess," Hal chuckled. "People and things. I like to be a spectator and watch old Mother Destiny moving us up and down on this checkerboard of Life. I get an awful big kick out of it, Rich. But I get a bigger kick out of knowing that I can sometimes help a fellow here and there from getting the worst of it. Guess I just naturally gravitate toward trouble, huh? Somebody has to mix in it, so it might as well be me. But as long as I like it—what's the difference! Outside of that, there's nothing better I like to do than eat. That's a weakness too!"

They laughed over that and were stirring in their chairs, just about making up their minds to go in, when they heard the sound of heavy footsteps toward the back of the house. Then suddenly a door slammed.

"Sen?" Hal queried curiously.

"Did you ever know a Chinaman to make his body sound like a truck?" Richard returned, smiling. "One can't hear Sen in the daylight, much less hear him at night. He said it's ugly for a human being to tramp like an elephant and I agree with him."

"I do too. But who do you think that was? Clark?"

“Clark thinks himself too big a Merrivale to use the servants’ stair. Besides, I don’t know what he’d be doing at this hour. Anyway, we’ll soon see. We’ll take a look around.”

“Have you any other servants?”

“Billy and Jake—they’re colored. Jake washes the dishes and helps Sen in the kitchen and Billy waits table, and between the three of them the housework is done. You didn’t see them tonight because Sen let them off on account of Aida and Clark staying at Yellow City till late. You see we didn’t expect you exactly.”

“I forgot about that, Rich. But say, I suppose this Billy and Jake sleep away from this house, huh?”

“They have a shack to themselves on the other side of the men’s headquarters. Sen sleeps in the bedroom next to mine like any gentleman. It’s an express wish of mine for I think Sen’s venerable head deserves to have such a place to rest. The loyal old soul that he is, he’s as noble and true as any Merrivale could ever hope to be!”

“Bravo, Rich! Well, that’s a couple of clues I can’t use.”

“Clues?” Richard laughed. “Surely you’re not serious, Hal. Surely you don’t think those footsteps or the slamming of the door meant anything?”

“I ascribe a meaning to everything until I’ve proof positive that it doesn’t mean anything,” Hal chuckled.

They went through the hall and out to the kitchen where Richard switched on the light. The back stairway came down directly into one end of that large room, but it yielded no sign of anyone. Hal sauntered over to the back door and looked out into the pantry upon which it opened. Beyond that were the steps leading to the yard and, though he even did some reconnoitering there, he heard nothing but the restless

stamping of the cattle and their continual lowing in the corral near by.

They went back to the front of the house after that and upstairs. Clark's snores were evidence of deep slumber as they paused at his door. Sen was evidently in the throes of a nightmare for they plainly heard him talking the gibberish that one talks in a vivid, terrifying dream. And Aida, whose room was between Richard's and Hal's, seemed to be breathing softly, obedient to the will of Mother Nature and forgetting for those short, dark hours that the love of money and luxury beat so strongly in her selfish breast.

"Well, you see it was no one up here," Richard whispered as he paused at Hal's door.

"It was *someone*, though, Rich. We both heard the footsteps and both of us heard that door slam."

"Of course we did. But nothing's been touched that I can see. I looked in at the safe in the library—everything's fit as a fiddle. Pshaw, Hal—we've never had a robbery in this house or on this ranch."

"Except those cattle that you told me about," Hal whispered.

"Oh, that's entirely different. I meant sneak thieves—you know. Kitchen door's never locked."

"I noticed that. Well, as long as you're not worried, Rich."

"I'm not, but I can see you are. Have you any money or jewelry in your baggage?"

"Money, not jewelry," Hal chuckled. "I'm not the jewelry type, Rich. But I'm not worried about my money."

"Well, just the same, look in your things and see before I say good night to you."

Sen had very carefully unpacked his baggage, Hal found. Suits were hung in the closet, shoes where they belonged, and his ties were neatly arranged on the rack. In the chest drawers, his linen and shirts had been placed with care and in the topmost drawer with some miscellaneous things, he found his wallet, money intact.

“Dependable Sen,” he said, holding up the wallet for Richard’s inspection.

“Look what I was standing on there at the door,” Richard said, coming forward and holding out a piece of white paper. “I must have stepped on it when I switched on the light for you.”

“What is it—a note?”

“As you would say—*and how!*” Richard answered with a puzzled frown. “You were right about those footsteps— whoever it was slipped that note under your door.”

Hal had taken the note and spread it out under the glare of his bedroom lamp. Written in a large, bold masculine hand, it was unsigned and brief.

If you know what’s good for you, take a train out of Gordon’s Creek station before sundown tomorrow. And don’t come back! You’re a meddler and we don’t want your kind in this county—one warning should be sufficient!

“Just by way of welcoming me, huh?” Hal grinned, looking up.

“I’d give my life right now,” Richard said darkly, “to know who dared to write that.”

“Well, it’ll be a pleasant diversion for me to find out,” Hal said quietly. “And just by way of celebrating the occasion, I’ll make it my business to start the hunt at about sundown tomorrow.”

Richard looked at him worriedly, but Hal laughed reassuringly. He meant just what he had said—and more.

CHAPTER XII

RESTLESS

A veterinarian arrived from Yellow City a little before noon the next day. He was a slight, dark man and wore thick glasses. Hal watched him sauntering off toward the corral with Richard who was engrossed in telling him of the experience with the poisoned cattle.

He knew he had a few hours in which there was nothing to do but kill time. He was sitting on the stone parapet which surrounded the wide veranda and wondering what to do. It was another pleasant day—bright blue sky and brilliant sun and the murmuring sound of chinook winds rustling through the trees and stirring the high grass.

“Bored, Mr. Keen?” a woman’s low voice asked.

He turned to see Aida Merrivale, tall and imperious looking, beside him. A vague smile lighted her handsome face and she scrutinized the nonchalant, red-haired guest thoroughly.

“I’m never bored, Miss Merrivale,” Hal answered in his deep, drawling voice. “Life’s got too much to offer me.”

“You’re fortunate. I’ve never found too much in life yet.”

“That’s almost sad,” Hal observed, and meant it. “You see I take what the gods have to offer. And somehow they’re always serving me refreshments,” he added with a chuckle.

When Aida Merrivale was annoyed or perplexed she had an odd mannerism of twisting herself from shoulder to waist and her inevitable riding togs would make a soft, rustling

sound. Hal was beginning to recognize the trick, and as she did so now he instantly wondered what she was thinking of.

“You’re a queer fellow, Mr. Keen,” she said at length. “I can’t make you out, and I don’t like it at all.”

“Don’t try to make me out,” Hal said whimsically. “It’s a waste of time. I’ve been trying to make myself out for years and I can’t, and who should know me better than I.”

“You’re ridiculing me,” said the young woman and she smiled the first and only genuine smile that Hal had been privileged to see.

“I never ridiculed a lady in my life, Miss Merrivale,” he said with a twinkle in his deep blue eyes. “And never would I ridicule a sister of Richard’s.”

“*Richard!*” she repeated scornfully. Her dark eyes blazed and her slim body moved restlessly. “I’d like you better perhaps if you did not side with him. He needs only someone to encourage him in hanging on to this hateful place to spoil Clark’s and my plans. He’s ridiculous, fanatical, to think he can run an entire ranch like this and make it pay at his age. *Twenty-five!* Why Clark and I are four years older and we don’t begin to understand the first thing about it!”

“Isn’t it because you don’t want to understand the first thing about it?” Hal queried suddenly. “You like the city and....”

Aida Merrivale blanched. “What if I do—*it’s life to me!*” she said curtly. “And without taking that into consideration, I know my father realized the odds were against Richard being able to keep it going. Tuck Liggett is willing to pay us a handsome price, considering the times. He says if Richard doesn’t come to terms with Clark and me, he’ll withdraw his offer next week. It’s like throwing a fortune to the four winds

for Richard to be so stubborn. We won't get an offer like that again—I know it!"

"Of course I don't pretend to know Richard like you do, Miss Merrivale, but I know he's got faith enough in this ranch to do wonders. It helps an awful lot you know. You can't blame him for not wanting this beautiful place to slip through his fingers forever, when there's a chance that it might be saved."

"Mr. Keen, I know better than you what chance Richard has. If I didn't, I wouldn't be so insistent about his selling the place before we're forced to let it go at auction next Christmas and get a paltry sum out of it. The business depression has been felt on ranches. The cattle that we bought at high prices have to be sold at market for a song. They're almost a total loss and it's a farce to even take them to market! Even those cattle that were poisoned last night—they'd have been a loss to us anyway. We were saved the expense of shipping them. And as for Richard trying to borrow money! It's suicide! You'd be a real friend to him, Mr. Keen, if you'd try to dissuade him from going on with this farce. He'll get that money father left at Butte for he has worked hard and the executors will decide that he's earned it, anyway! But why he wants to keep Clark and myself from getting our share out of this ranch before it's too late...." Her voice broke passionately.

"Richard hasn't any such idea in his head, Miss Merrivale. I know that! It's because he's anxious that you should all share and share alike, that he's trying to hang on. He has the feeling that something will turn up before next Christmas."

"Christmas, bah! *Dreams!* If I stay here another month, I'll go mad! I want what's coming to me and I want to get

out—get away *forever!*” She hurried down the steps and off toward the stables.

Hal saw her a few minutes later on a lovely gray mare, headed for the range and Gordon’s Creek. She held her head high and looked neither to the right nor left. There was something almost pathetic about the worldly attitude which she assumed so fiercely.

Hal yawned and left the veranda too. He sauntered to the stables and threw a light saddle on Pal’s gleaming back, then led the stallion out to the Pine Creek trail before he mounted him. A thoughtful smile lighted his face as they sped away.

Birds flew over their heads and sang in sweet delight. Insects hummed a medley all their own in the grass, and the distant lowing of cattle seemed never out of the air. Hal loved it all and it made him wonder all the more why Aida Merrivale, still a young woman, did not love it too. Rather, she seemed to hate all these things.

A woman who hated birds! There was something lacking, indeed, in the soul of Aida Merrivale.

Arrived at that conclusion, he put her out of his mind entirely and gave all his attention to Pal’s excellent trot and almost psychic knowledge of his rider’s moods. At present, the stallion was stepping along carefully and his small hoofs made but little sound on the soft, grassy trail.

A peace had settled upon Hal’s soul. No troublesome thoughts disturbed that tranquillity, not even the sudden remembrance of the threatening note. He was enjoying the birds, soothed by the soft winds and shaded by the big trees under which they were passing. Just ahead sparkled the clear waters of Pine Creek, and he was inspired with the happy thought of a swim, alone and unmolested.

Suddenly he heard a shrill scream—the scream of a girl!

CHAPTER XIII

A GIRL

Hal spurred the stallion on and they went flying out on the banks of the creek in a few seconds. Up and down he looked, and on the opposite side where there was a thick forest of yellow pine. There seemed to be no visible trail on that side of the broad stream and he turned his attention to the trail along which he had made his flight the previous afternoon.

“Someone help me!” the voice cried.

Hal knew then that it was up that trail and nowhere else that the call came from. He patted the horse and with a swift turn they started up the tree-arched trail.

“*Coming!*” He called with as much cheerfulness as he could muster. “On my way!”

The fact that his imprudent visit of yesterday in this same neighborhood had brought about a hasty retreat, did not deter him today. He was human enough, of course, to hope that he would not be obliged to cross the stream again and so walk open-eyed into trouble, but his uppermost thought was to get to the assistance of this distressed girl as quickly as possible.

He had gone about half-way up the steep trail when he saw a black horse grazing placidly under the trees. About twenty-five feet beyond, a pretty girl of some twenty years sat on the ground waving her tanned arms and smiling gratefully at Hal as he approached.

“I can’t get up,” she called as he jumped from the stallion and hurried toward her. “I got down from my horse to look at

his shoe and I turned on my ankle. I just can't step on it, at all!"



“I CAN’T GET UP,” SHE CALLED AS HE HURRIED
TOWARD HER.

“Don’t think you’ve broken it, do you?” Hal asked sympathetically. He glanced quickly at her lovely

combination of golden brown hair and hazel eyes, then:
“Doesn’t pain you right now, does it?”

She shook her head and her short, fluffy hair fell softly about her small face. “I haven’t a pain when I sit like this—it just feels terribly sore. It’s just that it pains me unbearably even when I attempt to get up.” She smiled and nodded toward the horse. “Blacky has been so complacent about this. He’s not at all like the horses we read about in fiction, for he hasn’t made the slightest attempt to go and get help for the heroine in distress as the authors always have it.”

“Don’t blame it on poor Blacky,” Hal laughed. “Perhaps the authors have made us expect too much of mere horses.”

Her laugh was low and husky. “Blacky is just a gourmand—I’ve found that out. In a crisis, he just eats.”

Hal grinned. “Kindred spirits. I do the same thing. Maybe he isn’t so stupid after all. He knows it quiets the nerves to fill up the stomach. Gives one perspective and all that sort of thing.”

“That’s rich,” she said with a hearty laugh. “You’ve helped me to understand Blacky better, Mr....”

“Hal Keen. I’m staying over at the Dark Star with Richard Merrivale.”

The young woman smiled. “I had an idea you were *you*, all along, Mr. Keen,” she said quizzically. “I’ve heard much about you—both good and otherwise. For one thing, I heard you had flaming red hair, freckles, and were like a six-foot beanstalk. But you’re none of those things at all! Your hair’s a soft, glinty red like the sun and I envy the wave. I really do! Your freckles aren’t obtrusive at all—they’re piquant, in fact. And you’ve got shoulders—well, whoever said you were beanstalkish....”

“Young lady, I’m here to help you to your feet or something of that sort. Spare my blushes, will you! Think I can help you up on your horse, or do you think it will be better for you to ride with me?”

“I can ride my horse perfectly if you could only boost me on to him,” the girl answered. “But you’ve got a sore arm yourself,” she added, pointing to his bandaged left arm.

“Not bad,” he said, wriggling his fingers. “See, I can move them.”

“Sprained?” she asked solicitously.

“Something like that. Now, I’ll bring your horse back here and we’ll see about getting you up. Guess you ought to have your ankle bandaged as soon as possible.”

“Yes, I must indeed. I’m so glad it was you that came along, Mr. Keen. You see, I was on my way to the Dark Star anyhow.”

“You were?”

“Uh huh. Oh, I understand—you’re wondering who I am?”

“Naturally.”

“How stupid of me, Mr. Keen. It was an oversight, I assure you. You see I am Corinne Liggett of the Mellow Moon.”

Hal stared at her—he couldn’t help it.

CHAPTER XIV

SUSPICION?

“You’ve heard of me, haven’t you?” she asked, after an uncomfortable silence.

Hal pulled himself together and smiled apologetically. “Of course. I—maybe that’s why it sort of startled me. I’ve heard about you and then—well, meeting you like this and all....”

“Oh, I understand,” Corinne laughed softly. “I know what that is. One hears this and that and the other thing about people, then all of a sudden one comes face to face with them and, well—somehow no one is just like we visualize them to be from mere hearsay. They’re either far better or much worse. And I’m....”

“You’re a pretty darn good sport to sit there and joke and laugh with a bum ankle,” Hal interposed, walking away toward the horse. In a few seconds he was leading him back. “Now, here we are,” he was saying. “Sure you want to go on to the Dark Star and visit? I don’t mind seeing that you get back to your home if you’d rather go.”

“Oh, no, thanks,” the girl replied. “I’m going on to the Dark Star no matter what!”

Hal looked at her puzzled, then motioned for her to put her arm about his shoulders. When he had raised her up to a standing position, he was able to help her into her saddle with but little pain.

“Now just keep your Blacky nice and quiet until I get Pal under way. We’ll ride abreast and keep a nice easy pace.”

“Oh, I’m fine now, Mr. Keen, thanks. All I feel is a throbbing soreness.”

Hal had mounted Pal and they were off. “You’ll get rid of that too, Miss Liggett, as soon as we can get to the house. You know Aida, of course?”

“Only as a neighbor. You see, she’s quite a little older than I. She and Clark were grown up when I was a little girl. Elly and Richard I know much better. I knew Elly very well—he—well, we were sort of childhood sweethearts. He was a dear those days. I was only twelve the last time I saw him. I just graduated from school in June—a month after Elly had that unfortunate accident.”

“*Accident?*” Hal asked.

“Yes. Didn’t you know about that accident?”

“Oh, yes,” Hal looked at her out of the corner of his eye, but she was looking straight ahead, thoughtfully. “You’ve not seen Richard since you were twelve either, huh?”

“No, I haven’t. I’ve been meaning to, but it’s difficult. I suppose you know that my brother Tuck and Richard dislike each other very much.”

“Yes, I do know it.”

“That’s what’s held me back from coming over. Particularly since this question of property is hanging fire. But now I’ve *had* to come whether or no, and I shall have to stay I’m afraid! It’ll only be a week at the most. Until I can make other arrangements. I don’t think Richard will let his hospitality be influenced by prejudice, do you?”

“Richard’s a gentleman,” Hal answered. He did not know what Richard’s attitude would be in this matter—he only knew that it would be the most difficult thing in the world to feel prejudice of any kind toward Corinne Liggett.

“Thank heaven for that!” the girl said passionately. “You see, I’ll only stay long enough to make arrangements with some relatives of mine on the coast. I’m not going back to live with my brother!”

Hal stared at her, aghast. “*What?*”

They had turned away from the creek by that time and were headed slowly for the ranch. Corinne said nothing for a long time. In point of fact, they were in plain view of the ranch buildings before she answered Hal’s query.

“I mean I’m not going home again!” she said, as if she had been turning the words over and over again in her mind. “You see, I’ve not seen my brother either for eight years until I came home this past month. Not having a father or mother, he sent me to boarding school. Then came prep school and, of course, college. Naturally, things were much changed at the Mellow Moon after all that time had elapsed.”

“You must have been lonesome,” Hal said, finding himself pitying her. “Eight years without seeing your brother!”

“He never cared about me as a child, Mr. Keen. Being so much older he wasn’t interested. But I wasn’t as lonesome as you’d think. People are sometimes especially kind to an orphan like myself. There was always one or another of my schoolmates asking me home at vacation times. I’m an honorary member of at least a dozen families, east.” She laughed softly. “I’ve a few relatives on the coast and I know they’ll be glad to have me come.”

“But—I don’t like to be curious, Miss Liggett,” Hal said hesitantly, “but have you had trouble with your brother?”

She nodded slowly, seeming to avoid his gaze. “You won’t mind if I don’t talk about it just now?” She sighed. “I

feel too badly about it.”

“Why, of course!” Hal said, instinctively chivalrous. “As I told you, I didn’t mean to be curious. I—I just felt sympathetic about it all. You see, I haven’t any brothers or sisters and I’ve always wished I had. That’s why it always makes me feel bad to see brothers and sisters quarreling. Life’s so darn short.”

“Yes, I know. In this case—well, you see I’m going away to avoid quarreling forever and ever. I can’t stand quarreling. That’s all,” she said.

They rode on side by side in silence. The hum and bustle of the after-luncheon hour filled the air. Cowboys hurried to and from the stables and Slim was busily engaged currying a horse as they approached. Hal had a queer thought at that moment and he stole a look at Corinne’s tanned face. He had the not very chivalrous suspicion in his alert mind that there was something odd about the whole thing.

Had she been telling him lies? Was her sprained ankle and the story of a quarrel with her brother just a ruse? Had she deliberately concocted the tale in order to force the Merrivales to offer her hospitality? Why would she not tell him what had happened between her brother and herself? He looked at her to see if he could find some sign that would betray her true feelings.

She smiled sweetly and presently she laughed. “My, what a serious, searching look that was you gave me! It was penetrating enough almost for you to know just what was on my mind. Could you tell me what I was thinking of?”

“Nope,” Hal said, trying not to look as serious as he felt, “I couldn’t see anything but what’s on the surface. As a fortune-teller, I’m terrible.”

She shook a long, white finger at him admonishingly. “It’s just as well you couldn’t go any deeper than that, Mr. Keen. You’d be terribly surprised to know just what’s turning over and over in my head at present.”

“Perhaps I wouldn’t be as surprised as you think,” Hal retorted.

Corinne Liggett smiled.

CHAPTER XV

A FOOL?

Hal was just turning the corner of the house, preparatory to cleaning up for lunch. Richard was standing out in the driveway alongside of the veterinarian's dark car.

"Well, how's everything, Rich? Things straightened out any?"

Richard nodded and smiled a little wearily, he thought. "Doctor Dix is just going. He won't stay for lunch; he has an appointment in Yellow City."

Hal glanced at the doctor as he approached and nodded indifferently. "Pretty rotten trick about those cattle, huh?" he asked.

"Doctor Dix found that it wasn't poisoning," Richard interposed.

"Yes," said the doctor, coughing rather affectedly. "They died of a very rare kind of hoof and mouth disease. Very rare," he repeated.

Hal found himself staring at the veterinarian—he didn't know why. Doctor Dix's small eyes blinked behind his thick glasses and he turned away to start his car. Then he turned and nodded to the two young men hastily.

"Must be going," he said apologetically. "Goodbye."

He didn't really look at either of them as he spoke, but started off and rounded the drive in a moment. Hal stared after the man as if he were fascinated. Then Slim called to Richard and they turned simultaneously as the foreman approached.

“I seed that the vet got off at last, so I thought I’d come and tell yer what wuz on my mind, Mister Richard,” Slim said.

“What is it, Slim?”

“Plenty, Mister Richard. One o’ the boys jest tole me that the vet tole yer them cows died o’ some rare kind o’ hoof an’ mouth disease.”

“That’s right, Slim. He did tell me that.”

“Wa’al, pardon my sayin’ so, Mister Richard, but that vet must a’ studied some kind o’ hocus-pocus instead o’ cows. I’ve been with cows most o’ my life, an’ I ain’t never seed ’em die so rigid-like before. ’Nother thing, the only kind o’ hoof an’ mouth trouble I ever seed worked like any other disease—you know, it runs its course. Besides, the hoofs split an’ them cows o’ yourn didn’t have no more split hoofs nor split tongues than I got.”

“But Doctor Dix said it’s a rare kind that affected them, Slim. Perhaps that’s the reason for the absence of the usual symptoms.”

“Mebbe, Mister Richard, mebbe,” Slim said thoughtfully. “I ain’t aimin’ ter say I know more than a vet what studies cows inside an’ out, but I tell yer, young son, if I don’t know a poisoned cow when I seed ’em with my own eyes, then I ain’t fit ter be yore foreman no more. If it wuzn’t in the brook....”

“Doctor Dix examined the brook at the Point, Slim,” Richard interposed. “And I tasted it—it was all right. I guess it was my imagination last night that made it seem to taste so peculiar.”

“Reckon it wuz fed to ’em some way then, Mister Richard,” Slim persisted. “Course it ain’t a-doin’ the pore

dead things any good now ter argue 'bout it....”

“Listen, Rich,” Hal interposed suddenly, “I’m a tenderfoot and I don’t know a darn thing about cows. But what Slim said has—well, I have the feeling that he’s right and that the learned veterinarian isn’t.”

“I never picked you out as a skeptic, Hal,” Richard said with a wan smile.

“Darn it, I’m not,” Hal protested. “You may laugh at me, but I had a feeling about that man. Right from the start. He sort of couldn’t look us square in the eye when he started off. You can’t deny that.”

Richard didn’t smile but he said, “What’s that got to do with the cows?”

“That’s what I’m going to find out!” Hal squared his broad shoulders and suddenly looked off to the north hill. The veterinarian’s car had not yet reached the top—the learned doctor seemed not to be a very fast driver. An idea flashed through his mind and he turned suddenly to his friend and asked: “What can you see from that hill?”

“Almost clear to the main trail,” Richard answered. “The Mellow Moon runs down that way and meets our property on the other side of the range. Why do you ask?”

Hal was already running toward the stables. “I’ll be a little late for luncheon, perhaps. I’m going to take Pal and run him up that trail as fast as I can.”

“What for, Hal?”

“I want to get a bird’s-eye view of that main trail and the part of the Mellow Moon that runs down that way. Somehow, I’ve got a longing to see the learned Doctor Dix departing.”

Richard shook his head goodnaturedly and went into the house. Slim hurried after Hal and helped him saddle Pal and

get started. As they cantered off, the foreman waved heartily.

“Reckon ye’ve got the same idee in yore mind that I got, Mister Keen. Anyway, it ain’t a-goin’ ter hurt none to jest watch that thar vet!”

“You bet, Slim. I’ll be seeing you!”

Pal needed no spurring. He seemed to know just what was expected of him and he snorted pridefully out of the drive and on up the range trail, mane flying in the warm breeze and head erect. The doctor’s car had already slipped over the hill and was out of sight on the down trail, but Hal was not worried. He had a growing faith in the stallion’s speed.

They reached the peak of the north hill in good time, Hal keeping the horse close to the trees as they made the climb. Before he dismounted he made certain of the doctor’s dark car, moving slowly over the winding trail. As he looked the car slowed down and he saw a white horse and its rider coming down the west trail as if to meet the veterinarian.

Hank Barlow!

Hal saw the cowboy signal to Doctor Dix, and suddenly the car turned into the trail, following Barlow slowly and carefully back up to the forest-bordered boundaries of the Mellow Moon Ranch.

Hal stopped only a second to think about it, then impulsively he turned Pal about and said, “Stay here and wait for me awhile, Pal. If I’m too long, go on back home!”

The horse whinnied and rubbed his soft nose in Hal’s neck, then stood watching intently as the young man stole off around the hill and on down, slipping from tree to tree in order to escape detection. Hal always declared that the animal understood every word that he had said to him for

two hours later, when he had not returned, Pal trotted back to the Dark Star alone.

Hal made his way carefully, not once showing himself in the open. Just where the boundary of the Mellow Moon was he had no way of knowing. But he kept his eye on the west trail, and eagerly sought an eminence somewhere in that thickly wooded area whence he could look down upon it.

He did not find it, however, and so kept going. He crawled through the high grass at intervals and, after about fifteen minutes' reconnoitering, he was startled by the sudden sound of voices not far distant. Peering from behind a broad tree trunk, he saw that the west trail lay only a few feet from him.

The voices were distinctly male and seemed to keep up a steady, droning chatter. That convinced him that no one had heard him and he cautiously crept farther up, nearer and nearer to the voices. He was confident now and strangely thrilled for a sense of something unusual pervaded him.

A huge rock about ten feet high and eight inches in diameter stood a little to the southwest, and he hurried up behind it. It was an excellent hiding place and he knew that he had only to lean around the farther end to get an unrestricted view of the other side of the west trail where it continued on beyond the woods and thence toward the Mellow Moon proper. The only disappointment he felt when he looked out from his vantage-ground was that he could see Pal distinctly up on the north hill, grazing contentedly and waiting for his return.

“A fool I was to leave that horse right there in plain view from the trail!” he thought bitterly.

But it was too late to regret it then, and he took comfort in the hope that he might learn enough from his eavesdropping

at this secret rendezvous to make the trip worth while and yet get back to north hill before anyone discovered the stallion.

He soon forgot any misgiving however, for his interest was centered upon a rider coming down the trail at a pretty fast clip. He leaned out and looked around the rock, and, to his satisfaction, saw that the rider was going straight toward Doctor Dix who was sitting languidly back in his parked car under the trees.

Hank Barlow was standing with one long leg resting on the running board of the veterinarian's car. His white horse stood patiently beside him, nibbling occasionally at the grass.

"He's late," the doctor was saying in his clipped manner.

"Reckon he had to go to town an' wuz detained," Barlow explained.

The rider had approached them by that time and jumped gracefully from his horse. He was a man of average height, dark and with an unusual protruding jaw. As he came toward the doctor and Barlow he seemed to lunge ahead rather than walk and Hal afterward remembered that mannerism of the man more than anything else about him.

"Wa'al, I didn't aim ter keep yer waitin' so long, Doctor Dix," he said with the ghost of a smile about his lean cheeks. His eyes had a sort of fixed expression that seemed not to alter as he talked or smiled. "How'd ye find things?"

"Just as you told me to say," Doctor Dix answered flippantly. "I wouldn't want to do that thing often, Liggett—it'd hurt my business some. As it is, I ain't sure but what that powerful red-haired feller had a hunch I was lying. He stared at me so's I couldn't look him in the eye—that's a fact! I just had to drive away 'fore he could ask me any more questions."

Hal felt a tremor of suspense run down his spine, for a tense silence followed this declaration. Hank Barlow spat uneasily on the grass and Tuck Liggett flipped a cigarette into shape before he spoke.

“Jest what d’ye mean ’bout that red-haired feller, eh? Ye mean he asked yer p’int blank ’bout them cows?”

“He sure did,” replied the veterinarian, lighting a cigarette himself. “He looked right at me and asked me if I didn’t think it was a pretty rotten trick about the cows bein’ poisoned.”

“What’d yer tell him?” Tuck Liggett asked anxiously.

“Well, Richard Merrivale spoke up and told him the story that I’d spilled. So I adds on to it and says, yes, it was a very rare hoof and mouth trouble that the cows died of. Then was the time that red-haired feller stared me to death so I said goodbye. Another thing, that foreman they got at the Dark Star ain’t nobody’s fool—I could tell that by the way them boys o’ his acted around there. Well, I hope it ain’t spread around that I made such a diagnosis—it won’t help me none.”

“Listen, Doc,” Tuck said in a low, whining voice. “Yore as safe as anybuddy. Jest let one peep come from anybuddy at the Dark Star an’ see how fast they shet up. I tole yer the law’s on Tuck Liggett’s side—else what am I a-payin’ out good money fer! Slim an’ his boys ain’t aimin’ ter git on the wrong side o’ me—mebbe some day they’ll hev to work fer me—*who knows?*” He chuckled gleefully and leaned over the door of the doctor’s car. “And as fer this meddlin’ red-head, Keen-wa’al, Doc, thar’s ways an’ means fer sech as him. Know that? Yes sir, we’ll hev ter see ’bout that heavy-weight six-foot meddler if he don’t keep his two cents worth

out o' things! As 'tis, he's expected ter leave these parts by sundown."

"I reckon yer don't know what to expect of a feller like Keen, boss," Hank Barlow spoke up. "I jest got a feelin' he's a-goin' ter be troublesome."

Liggett smiled slowly. "Hank, ain't yer learned me yet, eh? I ain't a man ter take chances 'less I know fer shore, but thar's times when I jest fergit thar's a law an' I take things kind o' in hand meself fer the good o' the county."

"Well, all right, Liggett," Doctor Dix said, nervously, "so far, so good. But if anything comes up, I'll look to you to see that I'm cleared. And if I were you—well, I'd lay off that arsenic ... any more cows gone that way and it won't look like a rare case of hoof and mouth."

"Doc," drawled Tuck Liggett patronizingly, "you ain't fer a minit accusin' *me* o' feedin' them cows arsenic? If ye are, fergit it. Jest 'cause I hire you to give a quiet diagnosis, don't say I fed cows arsenic."

"All right, Liggett, all right," Doctor Dix interposed uneasily. "I want to forget the hull thing anyway. Give me the money and I'll be off."

Hal watched in amazement while Liggett placidly counted off from a thick roll of bills, several crisp notes. How much the doctor was paid for his contemptible part in the unsavory affair he hadn't any way of knowing. It was a tidy sum, he was certain, for the veterinarian's sallow face brightened with a smile as he pocketed his ill-gotten gain.

Hal knew then that he had learned all that he wanted to know. His suspicions of Doctor Dix had been well founded and now that he was satisfied on that score he began to think of a quick and unobtrusive departure. In point of fact, he had

already hurried away from the rock and had reached the protection of the trees, when he heard on the soft breeze, the faint sound of a whinnying horse.

It was Pal up on North Hill.

Hal instinctively shinnied up the nearest tree and did not stop climbing until he found a limb so thick with foliage that it hid him effectually.

Doctor Dix's car started up immediately. Liggett's voice and Barlow's voice sounded clearly on the trail, and Hal peered cautiously through the foliage and saw that both men were staring up at Pal's graceful figure on the hill. The veterinarian had already backed his car from the west trail and turning about on the main trail headed hastily in the direction of Gordon's Creek.

"Merrivale's hoss," Barlow observed presently.

"The hoss that I saw the red-head one on yestiddy when I give him the run with my gun up on the range," Tuck Liggett said between his yellowed teeth. "What's it look like, Hank?"

"Thet he's either been somewhar 'round listenin' an' on his way back, or he's still here somewhar."

"Zactly what I think. Take yore hoss, Hank, an' go up toward the hill. I'll stand watch here an' if I see him run out frum anywhar I'll fire twice. Think 'twould do any good fer us ter go huntin' him?"

"I wouldn't, boss. You shot after him yestiddy, an' we've heerd how he got the wust o' my gun last night. He'd be a fool not ter carry a gun himself now, an' somethin' tells me he ain't no fool."

"Wa'al, we can't let him talk 'bout this, Hank. We jest *got* ter stop him. An' if somethin' tells yer he ain't a fool, somethin' tells me that too. Partic'lar, somethin' tells me he

follered the doc right plum down here. Yes sir,” he said, looking over the ground toward the rock, “he wuz hidin’ behind thar an’ listenin’ to us, Hank. Look thar!”

Hank looked and stared cautiously toward the trees, but he made no attempt to come toward them. “Boss, we should o’ looked ’round! Yessir, we should o’ looked ’round!”

“Guess ye better stay here, Hank,” Liggett said, drawing his body in behind the rock. Barlow followed him willingly.

“We got the draw on him if he’s ’round here an’ makes a rustle, eh? An’ I think he must be ’round here, boss. He ain’t had a chance ter git very far.”

“That’s what I’m a-countin’ on, Hank. Wa’al, we’ll see, if it takes us all day!”

Hal could not see them down behind the rock, though he could hear their every word. He told himself that that was just as it should be, for if Hank Barlow caught one glimpse of him he would know that he was wrong.

He, Hal Keen, *was* the greatest fool alive.

CHAPTER XVI

“AND WITH THE DARK”

For the next few hours, Hal could hear nothing but the soft murmur of their voices. Whether they had moved farther away to a more advantageous spot or whether they were deliberately keeping quiet, he did not know. Be that as it might, he soon ceased to hear them at all.

Pal had long since whinnied his last inquiry as to his return and, despairing, had turned away and trotted out of sight. That Liggett and Barlow had witnessed his departure, he was certain, for he had heard a stirring below at that moment, and he knew they were watching the stallion eagerly, to make sure that he bore no rider.

After what seemed an eternity, Hal saw Slim and Richard ride to the top of the hill. They stayed there for fully fifteen minutes, scanning the fertile, undulating valley and calling his name, vehemently. But some inner voice stayed him from answering; something stayed his aching limbs from jumping to the ground and running to their protection.

He had no illusions about Tuck Liggett now. He knew him to be a lawless creature who ran the gamut of evil—all the way from the crime of poisoning innocent cattle to the corrupting of law officials so that he might gain his own selfish ends.

He had heard Liggett's threat to stifle his own interference in Richard's behalf. And that the Mellow Moon Ranch owner would promptly find ways to carry out those threats, he knew perfectly well. He had only to try and run from cover to

know just what Liggett would do. And though he had not a cowardly streak in him, Hal loved life too dearly to sacrifice it through sheer impulse.

He knew that both Liggett and Barlow must think he had a gun, else they wouldn't be playing this tiresome game of hide and seek. He wondered over and over why they didn't suspect he was unarmed when he stayed in hiding so long, and the only deduction he could make was that they were counting on his having some advantage over them if the first move was made.

The afternoon waned and the sun spread her scarlet cloak over the Rockies. Purple shadows drifted over the green of the forests, a deep lull seemed to settle over everything and Hal heard a familiar screech—the screech of an eagle.

He did not try to see where it was. It was enough that he had heard it, for he dared not move the branches any more than he had already done in stretching out a cramped foot or an arm. When that was accomplished, all he could do was to listen.

Long hours ago, it seemed, he had heard the dull thud of hoofs, but he could not tell where they were. He could see only the North Hill and part of the west trail from his perch in the tree.

Birds fluttered in and out of the tree and stared at him curiously as they flew to the upper or lower branches. Then as the sun dipped lower and lower behind the dark mountains, he heard them no more and concluded that they had settled themselves for the long night.

There was a dead silence for a time. It was the hour between the daylight and twilight when that awesome hush seems to hold the world in its grip. Nothing stirred, not even

a breeze, and Hal felt at times as if his breathing could be heard for miles.

He was terribly hungry and very weary from his long vigil. At times, he was tempted to take a chance and run, but he would bethink himself of Liggett's horse and Barlow's horse and he knew that to think he could outrun either animal was sheer folly.

After another eternity, however, he was heartened by the sight of shadows gathering in the trail. They stole up the grassy place like so many filmy gray witches, creeping restlessly about. But soon they halted and, like a vast curtain, spread themselves end to end, shutting out the departed day forever, yet waiting the time between as if loath to bid the dark night enter.

The time between was an eon to Hal. When night did come, a light came from the direction of the rock, also—a glaring searchlight. It played between the trees, off the grass—everywhere except where he was hiding. He waited patiently for it to concentrate upon the grass, and at that moment he slipped noiselessly to the ground and ran as fast as he could toward the open space beyond the trees.

He was halfway to the hill and safely out of the light's area before he stopped. No one had heard him, fortunately; no twig nor sound of slipping earth had betrayed his flight. Once beyond the hill and he would be safe.

He looked back once or twice before he reached the top of the hill and he saw the light moving all about the trees. They were getting bolder when it was too late, he thought.

It was almost nine o'clock before he came in sight of the welcoming lights of the ranch. He ran almost all the way down the hill and around the drive, and stumbled

breathlessly up to the veranda. Figures stirred there in the dark and suddenly he saw Richard.

“Hal! Where the dickens....”

Hal made out the faces of Aida, Clark and Corinne Liggett all staring curiously at him from the gloom. He laughed and giving Richard a significant wink, walked toward the door.

“I’ve been going places and doing things, Rich,” he said over his shoulder. “But I feel rather messed up. I’d like to wash and....”

“You all right, Hal?” Richard asked solicitously, noting the fatigued expression on his friend’s face.

“Sure—why not?”

“Nothing—oh, nothing,” Richard answered, looking, Hal thought, a little uneasily toward Corinne Liggett. “Someone called on the phone and though I thought you’d be late—I didn’t expect....”

“Someone called, you say?” Hal interposed, forgetting for the moment his eager audience.

“Yes. Someone from Gordon’s Creek. They said you had been detained, but that you’d be along. That’s all. But I suppose you know who it was, hey? They didn’t give any name. Sen took the message.”

“Oh, yes—yes. I *was* detained. Hope I didn’t give you any worry!”

“Well, a little,” Richard admitted, looking around again, uneasily. “Slim and I went looking. Then we got that message around late afternoon.”

“Gosh, I’m sorry, if I split the schedule or anything like that.”

“Nothing like that, Hal. We don’t have schedules here. I’m just glad you’re all right.”

“Bet your sweet life, I am,” Hal said. He had his hand on the screen door then, about to go in, when he noticed Corinne Liggett sitting over near the parapet.

She was actually smiling—not at him, but to herself.

CHAPTER XVII

TWO FRIENDS

Sen was putting the finishing touches to his spotless kitchen for the night, when Hal stormed the door. He smiled at the Chinaman, then sank wearily into a chair.

“Is it too much to ask you where I could find a sandwich and a glass of milk or something?” he asked. “Or is it too much to ask to get myself anything to eat at this hour?”

Sen spread his graceful hands deprecatingly. “Mister Kleen, I would be velly mad if you not wanted at all something to eat. I likee kitchen allee same as you do horse. If I go to my room I read—I can do that allee same later. Now you go to your room and take shower. You velly tired. I bring up nice hot tray then, yes?”

“Sen, you’re a polished diamond and I don’t mean maybe! I’m so gol darn tired that about all I can do is eat and sleep.”

Richard accompanied Sen and the hot tray up to Hal’s room. He looked worried and anxious and seemed greatly relieved when his friend had disposed of the Chinaman’s dainty hot repast.

Sen had hardly closed the door when he said, “Tell me all about this afternoon, the telephone call particularly. I had a feeling there was something wrong about it.”

“You felt right,” Hal said, sitting back in bed and lighting a cigarette. “I didn’t make that call, but I can come pretty close to telling you who it was.”

“Who?”

“Either Liggett or one of that crowd.”

“I was afraid of it.” Richard flopped on the end of the bed and stared moodily. Then, “I’m glad you weren’t hurt.”

Hal told him briefly all that had happened.

“I never dreamed Tuck Liggett would go as far as poisoning our cattle,” Richard groaned, when he had finished.

“What about those cattle that disappeared last year and your wheat burning?” Hal reminded him. “Seems to me like he had started to force your hand even then.”

Richard admitted that it seemed likely. “It’s worse,” he said hotly, “even worse than one reads about the things that go on in cities. Gangsters are nothing compared to Tuck Liggett.”

“He’s a racketeer on a large scale, Rich.” Hal blew out a smoke ring and watched it rise toward the ceiling. “Racketeers and gangsters kill each other though when things get hot! Liggett happens to be the only one of his kind out here evidently. Who’s going to do the job? You say he has the law sewed up and he brags about it himself. If that’s the case, how about going over the heads of Gordon Creek’s petty officialdom?”

“If I saw the most remote chance of any success, I’d do it,” Richard answered hopelessly. “But Liggett would buy somebody off before I got there. You haven’t any witness to all you’ve heard and seen! To think I can’t do anything about that heartless poisoning of my best cows!”

“It seems there ought to be some way....”

“Not now, Hal. What chance there was has slipped by. You see, Liggett will have our every move watched. He can do it too. They can see everybody coming over the hill trail.”

“How about fooling them and going east? Or south? Or even west?”

“This is serious, Hal. The only decent roads in this part of the country are north of here. Even if we tried to elude them that way, I’m afraid news of our movements would slip out. It’s the darndest thing the way news like that does.”

“What about your most recent guest? Did she tell you the harrowing story of her quarrel with her noble brother and her subsequent ankle sprain?”

Richard could not suppress a smile. “Boy, you’re prejudiced right from the start!”

“And how! After what I heard and saw of this Tuck Liggett, his sister will have to show me that she isn’t cut out of the same material.”

“Then you’ll be surprised to know that her ankle is really badly sprained, Hal. Aida fixed it up and verified that much. Clark has been carrying her around and setting her down whenever she decides to move about. She really is a sweet sort of kid, Hal.”

“What, you too, Rich!”

“*What?*”

Hal said nothing for he had suddenly remembered the fact that he had thought the same thing about Corinne Liggett only that afternoon. Instead, he asked: “What of that story about her brother—you don’t believe that too, do you?”

“She didn’t say anything, except that Tuck and she hadn’t agreed about something and that she was going to the coast to live with relatives. She asked if we could keep her here for a few days until she knows where she stands. What Merrivale could refuse such a plea, from such a young lady?”

She said Buck Perry would bring her things over in the morning. So there you are.”

“I’m not anywhere, Rich. It’s you who’ll have to be on your guard. How do you know that clever Tuck hasn’t schemed this out for her the way he does everything else? How do you know it isn’t a fine plan for her to learn all that goes on here—all that’s said? It’s darn funny she just happened to come along today, just after I’m here and just when her brother’s so anxious to bring this property matter to a quick finish.”

“I can’t believe she....”

“Rich, remember that conversation I overheard up on the range in the woods there?”

“Yesterday afternoon when I met you? Yes. You told me you heard a feminine voice and the man was addressed as Tuck.”

“Well, the feminine voice sounded low like Corinne’s. Who else? Didn’t I hear her say to Liggett that your not getting the money you went after yesterday would be in their favor? Who else’s favor but Tuck’s and hers—sister and brother in crime, huh? He said something about me poking my nose into Mellow Moon affairs. Right off the bat this afternoon when I met Corinne, she said something about hearing I had big freckles on my nose. How where’d she get that, huh? Use your head, Rich.”

“I’m tired of using it. Tired and disillusioned, I guess.”

“How, Rich—where’s the old stiff-legged spirit, huh?”

“I lost it with those cows,” was the dejected answer.

“Aw, now! It’s pretty discouraging I’ll admit; fighting off a snake like Liggett constantly and fighting off misfortune

too. But there's something else—there's *got* to be something else for you to stake your hopes on!”

“If that were only possible. But it sounds like the stuff dreams are made of.”

“Dreams,” Hal said, yawning and snuggling down under the bedclothes, “very often come true. Don't forget that, my boy!” Richard didn't forget—how could he!

CHAPTER XVIII

ACCUSATION

It was midnight when Hal heard the sound of footsteps just outside his door but he didn't pay any attention to it. He turned over on his right side and was only vaguely aware of a sudden creaking on the back stairs and the subsequent closing of the lower back door.

He was sound asleep in the next second and had a vivid dream that a giant tree pinned him down hand and foot. Then suddenly a shooting star would fall upon him and when he wriggled his hand out to get it, it proved to be a searchlight.

Over and over he had this dream, and when toward early morning he awoke, feeling shaken and fidgety, he got up and paced the room a few times in order to get the annoying picture out of his mind.

A few puffs of a cigarette helped restore his peace of mind. He went to one of the windows and pressed his flushed face against the cool screen, inhaling deeply the sweet damp air of early morning. The stables, too, he could smell on the breeze and the tang of horses and hay made a pleasant combination.

He listened for a moment to the restless stamping of the animals in their stalls, listened to the lowing cattle, restless too, in the long night hours. Then when he was about to move away from the window and go back to bed, he suddenly saw a shadow moving across the grassy lawn from the stables.

He pressed closer to the screen but though the figure moved steadily toward the big house, it made no sound. Rather it seemed almost to drift along, and it wasn't until it came close and passed directly under the window toward the back of the house, that he realized it was not a man.

He could not see the head, for a dark hat of some kind covered it. The only thing visible was a shadowy sort of skirt that fluttered as the wearer hurried on. Then the pantry door downstairs closed ever so softly.

Hal felt terribly upset by the incident without any real reason. He wanted to put his ear close to his door and listen, but he felt mean and contemptible about it and decided not to. After all, he told himself, it wasn't his affair who wanted to walk about the ranch grounds in the early morning hours. He presently heard the creaking of the stair and he was tempted again to listen, but went to bed instead.

After he was snug once more, he bethought himself that it couldn't possibly have been Corinne—Corinne couldn't step on her foot. Hadn't Richard told him that Clark had had to carry her about that evening? Then it must be Aida—perhaps she was sick or something!

He flung back the covers and got into his dressing-gown. Then on tiptoe he went to his door and opened it, peering cautiously out into the hall at first, but growing bolder he stepped out and almost fell over a shadowy-robed creature who was standing just outside his door.

“Oh!” he muttered apologetically.

“Is that you, Mr. Keen?” came the whispered query.

“Yes,” Hal answered and peered down into the face of Corinne Liggett.

“I heard some noises,” she said softly. “A long time ago and then again, just now. It was like a thief sneaking up the stairs. I got awfully frightened. Did you hear them?”

“Yes,” Hal murmured, staring at her. “How is it—you’re walking?” It was an accusation.

“That’s what fright does,” she said, pulling her negligee about her. “I forgot the pain until just now. That’s the way I am—I’m terribly afraid of burglars. When I hear noises like I did—why, before I realize it, I’m on my feet and looking about!”

“Huh!” said Hal. Then, insistently: “How did you walk?”

“That’s what I’m wondering,” she answered, looking up at him appealingly. “That’s why I was standing in front of your door. When I got out here, I couldn’t get back.”

“Where’s your room?” he asked brusquely.

She pointed a slim finger toward the opened door in the southeast corner. Hal looked, then glanced back at her, more puzzled than ever, for the room was a good fifteen feet away from where they stood.

“Did you walk that with a bad ankle?”

“Mr. Keen, haven’t you heard of apparently hopeless paralytics getting up and walking out of a hospital that’s afire?”

“I don’t seem to have noticed any fire in this hospital!” Hal did not mean to be as sarcastic as he sounded.

Corinne bit her pretty, full under lip, but passed it off. “Whether you believe it or not, sheer fright and nothing else gave me the power to walk this far. When it was over, I couldn’t move.”

“Oh, all right, Miss Liggett. What difference does it make what I believe! Let’s cut this talk and get back to our rooms.

There's not many hours left to sleep. I'll carry you to your door and put you inside if you seem to think you're suddenly incapacitated again."

"*Seem?* Mr. Keen, you're positively rude! Unpardonably so. Go to your room—I don't need *your* help! Even if I did, I'd die before I'd accept it! I'll get to my room—*if I have to crawl!*"

And that is just what Corinne Liggett did, while Hal stood by and watched her with astonishment.

CHAPTER XIX

BREAKFAST TALK

Hal's treatment of Corinne caused quite a little discussion the next day. Clark Merrivale told him he resented it and even Richard seemed a little annoyed that his guest and friend should have openly showed his suspicion of the young lady.

They were at breakfast alone, for Aida was sleeping late and Corinne had sent down word that she would like to be excused for the greater part of the day. Hal was too goodnatured, too innately chivalrous, not to feel that he had been small and contemptible. Certainly, he felt thoroughly rebuked by the girl's refusal to come down in his presence.

"I'm terribly sorry," he said, after the thing had been discussed pro and con. "But you see how it looked to me—I couldn't help feeling she had been out, communicating with her scoundrel of a brother. Then to have her fake about that ankle...."

"Even if all that you say is true, Keen, she still deserves a humble apology from you for your rudeness," Clark said without any bitterness. "What if she was communicating with her brother—who has a better right? And as for her ankle—that's her privilege too. A *gentleman* will always pretend to believe a lady, no matter how much he thinks she's lying."

"Clark's older than we, Hal," Richard explained gently. "He can see those things better."

Hal was charming in remorse—he was never more so than at that moment. “I’m squelched and don’t I know it! I’ll grovel at the young lady’s feet, whether she’s an accomplice of her brother’s or whether she isn’t! I’d have apologized when she got to her room, only she didn’t give me a chance—she slammed the door in my face.”

Richard was called to the telephone at that moment, but after a few short replies he was back at the table, frowning. Hal looked at him questioningly.

“Something wrong?”

“Must be,” Richard answered, “when Tuck Liggett calls me on the telephone and tells me he’d like to see me on some important business over at the Mellow Moon.”

“What did you tell him?” Clark asked.

“No, of course. I hung up.” Richard looked over at Hal. “Clark and I were talking things over before you came down to breakfast. I told him in detail all that happened yesterday afternoon. I’ve convinced him that Tuck Liggett is just what he is—a modern outlaw.”

“I like racketeer better,” Hal grinned. He nodded in a friendly manner to Clark. “There was nothing added, nothing taken away from that story. I heard and saw just what Richard told you and I still maintain that there ought to be some way of punishing that blackguard.”

“I can’t believe that that smiling faced man could be so inhuman!” Clark exclaimed. “I thought he just wanted this property....”

“Have you thought just what he wants it so badly for?” Hal interposed. “Have you stopped to think that Liggett isn’t a cattleman? Richard tells me he doesn’t know for certain,

but it's suspected that he operates a still on his place somewhere—a huge still at that.”

“I've heard that. All I can say is that I'm sorry I was so taken in. What do you suppose he wants to buy the Dark Star for?”

“Heaven only knows!” Hal answered. “After yesterday, the man stops at nothing according to my estimation. He wants this place for something.”

Clark rolled his napkin up into a little ball and rose from the table. “Well, I know this much,” he said, looking steadily at the two young men, “if I'm going to be a party in the sale of this ranch, I'm going to know first why Tuck Liggett wants to buy it so badly—why he's gone to the trouble of poisoning healthy cows in order to force our hand. That's opened my eyes!”

“Bravo!” said Hal.

Just at that moment, Aida Merrivale walked into the room. “So they've won you over, eh Clark?” she asked, looking at her brother with some show of annoyance.

“You haven't heard the whole story of what happened to Keen yesterday—you haven't heard what he saw and heard?” Clark asked his sister.

“No! Some new adventures of our illustrious guest?” she said with a rising note in her voice.

“Hold your sarcasm until after you've heard, Aida. There isn't a woman alive who wouldn't shudder at the thought of Tuck Liggett's methods. Why, he'd poison birds, I do believe!”

“I don't care for birds myself,” Aida smiled. “In fact, I don't care enough about them to do anything. Haven't you

silly boys accepted the veterinarian's word that the cattle were not poisoned?"

"We have not. What's more, we're not going to, ever! And I'll tell you why...."

Aida listened to the story intently, munching her toast and drinking coffee the while. When her brother had finished, she said: "Then all this happening means we won't be able to sell the ranch to Mr. Liggett, ever, eh? And I won't get my money so I can go to the city and...."

Richard gave his brother a knowing wink and rose from his chair. "Hal, would the suggestion of a swim appeal to you very much? We'll go over to Pine Creek and splash around there the rest of the morning. Will you?"

"Did I say I wouldn't?" Hal smiled.

CHAPTER XX

GONE?

They took the horses and sauntered all the way. Richard, Hal thought, seemed in better spirits than he had seen him since his arrival. He was just beginning to wonder about it when the reason itself became known.

“I can stand things so much better when Clark and Aida don’t oppose me,” Richard said wistfully. “I’ll never cease to regret the poisoning of those cows and your peril yesterday, but do you know it brought Clark to his senses! He actually reasoned this morning, something he hasn’t done in a couple of years. I feel now that he’ll stand behind me and push, instead of pulling away from me as he has been doing.

“And your sister?”

“Aida will chatter away about the money and clothes and cars she wants all her life. She was always that way, Hal. It’s nothing new. But as long as I have Clark on my side—gosh, do you know I feel indebted to you for bringing us together?”

“Go on!”

“That’s a fact. And say, Hal, you never told me about the lacing you gave Clark the other night in Sen’s kitchen?”

“Lacing?”

“Sure. He admitted to me that you made him feel pretty darn mean when you accused him of being a disloyal sort of Merrivale. He told me the whole business—said he deserved what you said about him. He seemed taken off his feet when I told him you hadn’t said a word about it to me. Gosh, you

grew a few inches higher in his estimation for that sporting silence. Incidentally, you've grown in mine too."

"How about my falling from grace in being so rude to Corinne?"

"Do you think we hold that against you? Even Clark said it's easy to see you don't know much about girls—not any kind."

"Maybe I don't," Hal admitted thoughtfully. "Maybe that's the trouble."

"What trouble?"

"Oh, nothing."

"You should worry about girls when Clark and I think you're aces high. Sen thinks so too. He says you 'velly white Chlistian young man.' What Sen says, goes."

"I should hope so. China never turned out anything better than Sen."

And so they talked until once again Pal dodged down through the grassy coulee and brought Hal up in sight of the sandy banks of Pine Creek. Richard was not far behind and after they had tied up the horses, they prepared for a cooling plunge.

Hal got in first and splashed around vigorously for a time. The water was pretty cold. "Do you serve ice with this so-called creek?" he called.

Richard dived off the bank and swam toward him. "It's shivery at first," he laughed. "Makes you feel great after you get out, though. Exhilarating!"

"Who cares after they're out!" Hal teased. "It's now that I care most about. Trouble is you've got to keep going."

"Well, do that," Richard said, splashing about. He waved his arm toward where the creek took a turn and disappeared.

“It continues on for almost a mile down that way, Hal. Goes straight down to the falls. The forest follows it too. It’s good swimming if you can stand it. I can’t. I’m not so strong on wind. You go ahead and try it if you want to. When I get tired, I’ll climb up on the bank and lie in the sun.”

“O. K.,” Hal called cheerfully. “I just feel like distance today. Mind?”

“Course not. Go to it. Only watch out and don’t keep going until the falls carry you over.”

And that is precisely what Hal almost did. He swam along briskly, warming up with every added stroke and soon he found himself thrust his way and that by the rush of the water as it struck the first marked declivity in its downward trend. Suddenly he was aware that the falls were not far distant.

The roar of the torrent pounded hard in his head as the water rolled him about at its mercy. He struggled back, back until he no longer felt his body being tugged along against his will. Then, almost exhausted, he crept up on the bank, eager for a little rest before he swam back.

His disturbed rest the night before had perhaps much to do with his rather unusual fatigue. Be that as it may, he felt very drowsy and when the warm, soothing sun shone down on his supine body sleep overcame him almost immediately.

How long he slept he was at a loss to know. His wrist watch was lying among his clothes up on the bank of the creek. One thing he was certain of, it was after the noon hour when he awakened and the sun was high overhead.

He plunged back into the water and swam furiously. All sorts of thoughts raced through his mind, particularly the thought that Richard would think he was a pretty poor sort of guest, going off as he did and sleeping away the precious

hours. He began to call apologies the moment he reached the bend.

There was no answering voice, however, and he called again when he had fully rounded the turn. “Hey, Rich! I’ve been asleep down the line—do you hear me? I’m awfully sorry!” He waited a moment, then: “Say, are you asleep too?”

He paddled with his hands up to the bank and crawled up. Still no sound. Suddenly a bird sang shrilly in a tree near by.

He looked all about him, up and down the bank. He could see a depression in the grass where Richard had been lying to sun himself, but there was no sign of his friend anywhere except his footprints which seemed confused with others.

Hal thought nothing of that, however. The cowboys often drove the cows down to the creek just before sundown and there was apt to be a confusing array of footprints on those banks. One thing he suddenly thought of, and that was the clothing.

He hurried over and there under the trees were their clothes, just as they had left them. The horses too were still side by side munching all the shoots they could find around them. But Richard was nowhere to be seen.

“Rich! *Rich!*”

Hal called until his throat felt sore. He paced back and forth, back and forth, until the constant thudding of his bare feet annoyed him. Suddenly, he walked clear to the edge of the creek and stood on the bank, staring into the water.

Could such a terrible thing have happened while he was gone? He gulped hard at the thought.

CHAPTER XXI

THE TRAIL BACK

Hal jumped back into the water after a moment and hunted about furiously. He kicked and tried to find out the creek's depth, but to no avail. After a half hour's intensive search, he climbed back to the bank feeling saddened and sick.

There was only one conclusion to be drawn and that was that Richard had gone back into the water after his sun bath. Hadn't he admitted that he wasn't so good on the wind? Fellows with that weakness were taken before they realized it. Hal felt miserable with the knowledge that he had been too far away and too sound asleep to hear his friend's pathetic cries for help.

He flung himself down on the ground and buried his face in his hands. It was too late to do anything for Richard, yet too soon to go back to the Dark Star and tell Clark and Aida of their brother's tragic death. Any time would be too soon—too awful.

After a time he roused himself, knew that he must go through with it. For some reason or other, he blamed himself constantly and bitterly, saying over and over that he should never have left Richard alone after he had admitted that his wind wasn't good in the water.

By the time he was dressed his despair brought on a nausea that made him feel utterly miserable and he picked up Richard's clothes gingerly as if he felt that his slightest touch on them was contaminating. He bundled them under his arm,

and got the horses together, mounting Pal and letting Brother trail behind.

Clark was down at Gordon's Creek, he learned when he got to the ranch, and when he blurted out his tragic news, Slim spread it like an automaton. Everything seemed paralyzed at the Dark Star for the rest of that day—a pall held the entire place in its grip.

Sen was the one Hal shrank from most. The Chinaman, sensing something wrong, had come out to meet him, his almond eyes looking straight at him, patient, yet questioning.

"I might as well tell you, Sen," Hal said, feeling like a criminal. "Richard's drowned—*dead!*" Then, after a moment's awkward silence, he added: "And it's my fault."

"Allee same I know it isn't, Mister Kleen," the Chinaman murmured with moist eyes.

Hal looked up, cheered for the first time in hours.

"How tell me, Mister Kleen—tell me velly much," Sen urged.

Hal told him the story in detail and Sen repeated that he could not see in what way the blame for the tragic accident could be placed upon him. Also, he seemed to feel some hope for his beloved "Mister Richard," for he insisted, even after all those hours and no word had been received from him, that a man wasn't dead until he was found to be dead.

Hal felt a little hopeful with that much encouragement. He sat on the veranda throughout the long afternoon and watched for the boys to come back from the creek. They had gone to drag it and occasionally Sen and he would hear their loud shouts echoing down the warm breeze. At five o'clock they returned, weary, dejected looking and without hope.

Hal followed Sen to the kitchen to watch him prepare dinner. He couldn't bear to be alone. "You say Miss Aida and Mr. Clark went to Gordon's Creek early this afternoon?" he asked for the hundredth time.

Sen nodded. "They say they be back at six, Mister Kleen. I not know whether they come home together. Mister Clark, he velly much in thought. Say he wanted see a man maybe in Gordon's Creek. Missy Aida, she went to shop—she always shop."

"I suppose so," Hal moaned. "Maybe I'd better dress—it'll give me something to do, huh?"

"Shower bath make you feel better, Mister Kleen. I have sting hot tea when you come down."

"Oh, Sen," Hal said, gulping back a sob, "when there's a man like you to watch over him, why did Richard have to come to such a fate!"

"Allee same, I not think he dead, Mister Kleen. Mister Richard, he—well, boss say Mister Richard is always in eye of great God. He in Buddha's eye, allee same too! Me not think Mister Richard dead till I see brown eyes closed and not look no more at Sen."

Hal hurried away from the kitchen to get control of himself. At the front door, he met Clark, anxious and distressed. "Look here, Keen," he said huskily, "Buck Perry handed me this note from Aida when I was down in the village."

Hal took the note and glanced up at him.

"Then you haven't heard——?"

"Yes. It's terrible and I can't believe it. But Slim tells me you're blaming yourself."

"I should."

“Cut it, Keen. If Richard’s really drowned, you’ve got nothing to reproach yourself for. In two short days, you’ve been more of a brother to him than I’ve been in a lifetime. It’s me that has the heavy conscience—not you! I’ve got something that I can’t live down—not ever!”

Hal put out his hand and grasped Clark’s shoulder. “Cut it, too, Clark. If you knew how pleased Rich was that you sided with him this morning and made up with him—well, you’ve got nothing to regret either. Be thankful that you did those things before it was too late.”

They stood in awkward silence for a long time before Hal opened the note. But as he started to read, his eyes brightened and as he came to the last line....

Be at Tuck Liggett’s at eight o’clock sharp.
He sent me a note to come right away ... I put it
at eight for you not knowing where you were or
when you’d return.... T.L. says it’s urgent, so let
your prejudice pass and come promptly!

Aida.

“What do you make of it, Keen?”

Hal looked up and a hopeful smile lighted his handsome face. “I think it’s great!”

“Great?” Clark was nonplussed. “How do you mean?”

“I’m going with you, Clark. I’m going and how!”

“*You?*”

“Why, of course I am!”

“*You!*” Clark was obviously thunderstruck.

“*Me* is right,” Hal smiled. “And it’s going to be nobody else but!”

CHAPTER XXII

DUSK

It was dusk before they started out. Sen watched them go not without some foreboding, and Slim and the boys called after them wishing them luck and promising to call at the Mellow Moon Ranch in two hours if neither of them returned.

“But I don’t think it’s going to be necessary to have that armed guard call for us,” Hal said as they were going up the north hill.

“If you’d just tell me what you’ve got in your mind, Keen,” Clark said. “Perhaps I could be some use to you if you’d only take me into your confidence.”

“Gosh, I’d do that in a minute, only—listen, Clark, you know how it is when you know just what the other fellow’s going to do. You sort of can’t keep it out of your face. Well, that’s why I’d rather not say anything. Anyway, I haven’t got it planned out what I’m really going to do. It depends on the way Liggett and his crowd act. Once I see what their reaction is to me, then I’ll know what to do.”

“You’re taking one chance walking right in on them.”

“Not as big a chance as if they were expecting me. They’ll get the surprise of their life. You know the right direction after we get to that west trail?”

“Of course. I’ve lived all my life here, outside of the years I spent in the city with Aida.”

“Then it’s a pretty good guess that they won’t have any lookout. If they have I can take them by surprise too. Slim

gave me two of his best guns.” Hal laughed outright. “Whoever thought I’d live to be Two-Gun Keen! Ha, that isn’t so had for a monicker, what, Clark?”

“Pretty gangsterish.”

“We live in a gangster age, huh? In the old days it would have fit some lone pony express bandit great. Two-Gun Keen holds up the Sioux City Express! Doesn’t sound so gangsterish when you associate it with the days of our forefathers.”

They had descended into the valley and were moving along swiftly. Not a light shone anywhere and Hal had to follow Clark’s horse the entire distance. As they neared the west trail they could hear faintly the hum of motor cars speeding along the distant highway leading out of Gordon’s Creek.

“If I should be asked about you, Keen?” Clark queried in a whisper.

“Tell them you brought me along as your witness. Insist that you want me to be your witness if there’s any transfer of property to be made.”

“A splendid idea. You seem to have no end of them.”

“What?”

“Ideas.”

“Well,” Hal said modestly, “sometimes that’s all they amount to—*ideas*.”

“A fellow can’t win all the time, and it takes courage to admit it.”

They turned into the trail then, and were silent. It was starless and pitch dark and an ominous rumble of thunder sounded off in the distance. The horses’ hoofs seemed to pound upon the hard ground more noisily than was

necessary, Hal thought. Each step echoed eerily and when Pal suddenly snorted Clark started visibly in his saddle.

Just before they reached the big rock they heard something stir beyond the trees. A man glided out from behind them and stood about twenty feet ahead.

“Mr. Merrivale?” he asked softly.

“Yes—who are you?”

“Collins, one of Mr. Liggett’s men.”

“Oh.”

“Who’s that with you, Mr. Merrivale? I got orders to find out who comes in, you know.”

“Of course,” Clark answered quietly. “This gentleman is my friend, Collins. I’ve brought him along as my witness in some property transfer that Mr. Liggett may transact with me tonight.”

Hal held his breath a moment and let his hands steal down to his trousers pockets, making certain that his borrowed guns were intact. But there was no need for that gesture; Collins was more than amiable.

“O. K., Mr. Merrivale,” he said. “Guess the boss has been waitin’ fer yer this long time.”

He slid back among the trees and as Hal and Clark passed by on their horses, they saw the tiny flash of a match and presently the fragrant smell of tobacco mingled with the warm, still air. Hal held his head down until they were well past Collins’ horse, whose large dark outline was barely visible against the black night.

“You might know I’d forget to wear a hat,” he said in an undertone.

“It’s easy to forget when you haven’t got the habit. And I’ve noticed that hat wearing isn’t a habit with you, Keen.”

Hal chuckled. “I never think about the blamed things unless I’m traveling or I’m in the city—any city. When in civilization do as the civilians do, huh? I just naturally revert to type when I’m in the wide open spaces.”

Clark laughed softly but said nothing for a time. He led the way down a rather steep hill that was almost covered with trees and their trail leading through this dank, verdurous avenue was pitch black. Hal could see nothing at all and he simply let Pal follow in the wake of Merrivale’s horse.

“Why all this darkness, I wonder,” he said softly. “Collins had no light—there’s no lights through here—you’d think Liggett could have some illumination here if he and his men use it so much. Is this the main approach?”

“No, no. The main driveway really starts from the state highway, the same as ours, but Liggett and his men never use it. They seem to prefer this entrance.”

“But not for the same reason that you use the North Hill Trail entrance to the Dark Star. You people and your friends really use it for convenience, but the Liggett crowd—well, it looks to me as if they use it for purposes of their own. It’s a little used trail—Buck Perry told me that not many people know about it even down in Gordon’s Creek.”

“I know it,” Clark agreed. “That was the start of Tuck Liggett’s quarrel with my father. You see, the Mellow Moon takes in this west trail only down as far as the North Hill Trail. The rest of the place is ours. Father forbade their using the North Hill Trail but Liggett always defied him. He claimed so many feet over the North Hill Trail so as to give him the right of way and there were many lawsuits started, but for some reason or other, the thing was never settled.”

They came out suddenly then in view of a few flickering lights. A main building, outbuildings large and small, were vaguely outlined in the feeble illumination. Hal did not know whether or not he imagined it, but there seemed to him to be a furtive note in this composite view of Mellow Moon.

“You’re wondering where the mellow moon of it comes in, eh?” Clark queried, reading his thoughts. “Well, it doesn’t come in at all, save for the fact that when there’s a mellow moon it shines on this ranch the same as any other and provides more illumination than they ordinarily seem to have. The name comes down from Tuck Liggett’s grandfather from whom Tuck inherited the place.”

Hal had nothing to say to this for he was thinking very hard. In point of fact, he was dwelling on the thought that perhaps Tuck Liggett’s dislike of illumination on his ranch might prove a boon to himself in some crucial moment. Just how, he had not quite decided.

He had, however, a comforting sense in the possession of Slim’s two guns and suddenly he was inspired with an idea.

“Listen, Clark,” he said impulsively, “I’ve got it!”

“For heaven’s sake—*what?*”

“I’m going in with you. You tell Liggett at the start that I’m now in sympathy with this whole business—that you’ve talked me into it. And like you told Collins, you say you brought me along as your witness.”

“But Liggett knows that you’ve openly sided with Richard against this whole matter! He has rare cunning, this man, even if he is illiterate. He seems to read people in a flash. He knows Aida and myself rather loathe him despite the fact that we have been attracted by the generous offer he’s made for the Dark Star. Oh, there’s no fooling that scoundrel.”

Hal chuckled softly. “I’m glad to hear you admit he’s a scoundrel.” Then, thoughtfully, he added: “Richard would feel his fight wasn’t in vain if he could hear you say that too.”

“I’ve always known he was a scoundrel and more!” Clark said with whispered vehemence. “But I never knew he’d stoop to forcing Richard’s hand by poisoning those cows! It’s taken that much to make me believe the man is utterly despicable and not one whit better than your city gangster. Well, we’re coming closer, Keen. You must give me some hint as to what you’re going to do and what you intend for me to do.”

“Just act naturally—as if you’re going through with it as he expects you to. You must act the same about me and explain my sudden change of heart as if it’s nothing extraordinary. You won’t have to keep up the fiction long. Just for a few minutes until I see how the land lies. You bluff and I’ll bluff—then, I’ll act. Leave it to me, Clark—*everything!*”

Clark Merrivale did not anticipate what a tremendous scope Hal had in mind when he uttered that simple word, *everything!*

CHAPTER XXIII

MEG, AND——

Unlike the quiet luxury of the Merrivale home, the big, barn-like house in which Liggett dwelt was a riot of color and ostentation. He seemed to have set out to buy furnishings as huge as himself and the result was a glaring triumph. Even Meg, his six-foot negro houseman and cook, seemed to have been deliberately chosen in order to retain the keynote of this scheme throughout the house.

Meg opened the front door furtively and silently admitted them into the dimly lighted hall. He gave Clark Merrivale a perfunctory nod, stared at Hal with a moment's flash of surprise in his smoldering black eyes, then looked along the ridiculously red-drapered hall to a door through which came the sound of masculine voices.

“Mas' Liggett expect's on'y you, Mistah Merrivale,” he said.

Hal stepped up close to the negro. “And Mr. Liggett isn't going to know that anybody but Mr. Merrivale is here for the present!” he whispered ominously. “*Understand?*”

He clapped his hands to his pockets and Meg, his face showing ashen spots here and there, followed the course of those hands mechanically.

“You'll take Mr. Merrivale to that room and you'll announce him without stepping your foot inside that door. If you make any attempt to signal, I'll....”

“Yassuh, yassuh!” Meg whispered understandingly. “Jest tuh the door.”

“See that you hurry right back here!”

“Yassuh, yassuh,” came the whispered reply.

Clark Merrivale glanced at Hal, fearfully. Hal smiled. “Go to it, Clark. I’ll be seeing you!”

“In—in *there*?” Clark whispered, pointing to the room.

Hal nodded. “I’ve got a lot to talk over with this fellow first.”

Clark hesitated a moment, then seeing the look of determination in Hal’s deep blue eyes, he followed Meg with noiseless tread over the thick, red carpet and up to the door.

Meg looked back just before he knocked and his black eyes darted back and forth fearfully. He saw that Hal was as good as his word, for though he had retreated into the shadows, the gleam of two muzzles, protruding a little into the light, was a terrifying reminder.

Hal did not know who opened the door. He was only aware of Meg announcing the arrival of “Mistah” Merrivale. Then the door opened wider to admit Clark, letting out a broad shaft of light into the hall. In a moment, however, it had vanished and a resounding bang told him that the door had closed.

He stepped forward a little as Meg came hurrying back to him with heavy, thudding footsteps. The negro looked up at him nervously.

“Yassuh?” he asked.

“Now, quiet as you can, Meg. You’re going to be truthful and nothing else but. If you’re not, it’ll be just too bad for you. There’s too much at stake for any nonsense. How many of Mr. Liggett’s men are in that room?”

“Jes’ Mas’ Barlow, suh. Das de Lawd’s truth, Mas’ Keen.”

“Oh, you know who I am, huh?”

“Yassuh, I only had tuh see yuh dodgin’ yo’ red-head ’neath dat front do’ an’ I said tuh myself, ‘uh, uh—Mas’ Keen, sho’ ’nough!’”

Hal repressed a smile and nodded severely. “Who else of Mr. Liggett’s crowd is in this house right now besides yourself—I mean outside of that room?”

“Not a soul, Mas’ Keen, and das de Lawd’s truth. Mas’ Liggett don’t want any ob de boys tuh know his bizness. I know dat. Only Mas’ Barlow.”

“Mm, I see,” said Hal, leaning impulsively over and patting Meg’s pockets one by one. Satisfied that the negro was unarmed, he asked: “I suppose there’s some telephone communication between that room Mr. Liggett is in and the outbuildings, huh?”

“Oh yassuh. From his office—dat’s what he calls dat room—he kin talk ’mos’ anywhar on dis heah ranch.”

“All right, Meg. We’ll go out this front door and lock it after us and snip those wires from the outside. Then we’ll enter again through the back way and you can give both keys to me. Any other entrances in this house besides the front and back?”

“No suh, dat’s all dey is.”

“O. K. Take that key out and come on. I’ll never take my eyes from you.”

“Yassuh, Mas’ Keen. I won’t do nuthin’ but what you say. I heerd too much how clevah yo’ all is, when it comes tuh things like this an’ I ain’t takin’ no chances; no *suh*! Mas’ Liggett or no Mas’ Liggett! Meg likes tuh go on livin’.”

“That’s talking. Now hurry!” Hal said.

Meg had no more to say but quickly locked the door and led the way around the side of the house. There he pointed out the wires, and taking a proffered jackknife from Hal, clipped them quietly. After that they reentered the house through a back pantry door, locking it securely behind them.

Hal pocketed the keys when they got into the kitchen and asked the negro for some heavy rope. Wonderingly, Meg procured some from the pantry only to learn that it was to bind up his own ample person, safely and securely.

“You see, it will help you afterward,” Hal explained as he bade the negro sit down in the nearest chair. He laid down one of the guns on the table and held fast to the other until he had the rope sufficiently twisted about the man’s body to insure his helplessness for the time. Then he put down the other gun and tied the hemp fast with both hands.

As he was leaving the kitchen, he said, “Meg, you can tell your Mr. Liggett after we’re gone that I stole in here after you admitted Mr. Merrivale and I tied you up like this. Understand?”



“YOU CAN TELL MR. LIGGETT AFTER WE’RE GONE THAT I STOLE IN AND TIED YOU UP,” HAL SAID.

“Yassuh, oh yassuh. He won’t lay it on tuh me so much, ef he sees how pow’ful tight yo’ all tied me.”

“Why should he lay it on to you at all, huh? It isn’t your fault!”

“He’ll tell me why didn’ I yell, Mas’ Keen!”

Hal smiled and came back. “Glad you reminded me, Meg. You might yell at that. A gag is what you need and I’ve got the material,” he said, whisking out a handkerchief from his hip pocket.

Meg did not protest, but groaned submissively as the linen was drawn effectually though not too tightly about his wide mouth.

“There,” Hal said when it was finished, “now your Mr. Liggett can’t reproach you for a thing. I’m sorry, Meg, but it’s for your own good. Glad you reminded me of the gag.” He chuckled. “I’d make a heck of a gangster, wouldn’t I? It’ll pay me to learn about gags in the future. Well, so long, old fellow. I’ll hurry, so you won’t be in misery too long. Don’t hold this against me—your Mr. Liggett’s brought this about himself.”

Meg’s eyes rolled understandingly and Hal hurried from the kitchen and into the hall. He stole along on tiptoe until he got to Liggett’s office door; then he stopped and pressed his ear tightly against the panel.

“Then you’re refusing to accept Mr. Liggett’s offer, Clark?” Aida was saying in a petulant voice.

“Of course I am. There may have been a chance of my accepting before, but now....”

“I reckon yore a-meanin’ that as final, eh?” Tuck Liggett’s drawling voice interposed.

“That’s it, Liggett,” said Clark sarcastically. “A refusal is usually a final decision. Not only am I finished with this property decision, but I’m finished with you. I *would* deserve condemnation from my brother if I’d be a party to this holdup of yours. I heard that you were an old hand at just this sort of thing, but somehow, I couldn’t believe that such men

still lived in our West. Now I know. You're simply the western brother of the racketeer. I don't wonder my father said you lived like a snake."

"Did he say I'd die like one?" Liggett's question was a sneer.

"Yes, he said that very thing," Clark answered sharply. "Your conscience must trouble you occasionally to make you ask that apt question. You've given some thought to it, I gather."

"What I think about ain't no business o' yourn, Clark Merrivale."

"*Mr. Clark Merrivale to you.* Tuck Liggett. And now I guess there's nothing more to say. I've got too much to do at home. I..."

"You'll have plenty more ter say, *Mr. Clark Merrivale*, cause I ain't aimin' ter let yer go anywhar's near yet—see?"

"Oh, yes?"

"Don't be stupid and pigheaded, Clark!" Aida broke in impatiently. "Come to Tuck's terms and sign those papers so we can get home. I'm tired—tired of this whole business with its everlasting wrangling."

"You can talk of it in that vein after Liggett's tactics with Richard?" Clark asked in cutting tones. "The wonder to me is that you can even tolerate the man's presence after this last, and to me, the crowning, outrage, upon our family."

"She knows she jest might as well be tol'able 'bout the hull thing," said Tuck Liggett ominously. "She knows it ain't a-goin' ter do her a mite o' good not ter be tol'able. And nuther is it a-goin' ter do *you* any good, *Mr. Clark Merrivale*. Thar's ways an' means that I have fer folks that won't listen! Seems like yer a-forcin' me ter make yer. Wa'al, I found out

a way to make the proud Richard....” The rest of the sentence was lost in a booming laugh.

Suddenly there came a sort of muffled groan.

Clark shouted. “Take that gag off, Liggett! Take that gag from my....”

Hal burst into the room with a bound, guns aimed and his deep blue eyes challenging.

Liggett’s crafty, leather-like face, Barlow’s insolent mouth, both seemed to fade into oblivion for an instant, for just behind them, gagged and strapped to a large chair, was the blond head and brown, appealing eyes of someone he had thought dead.

Richard Merrivale!

CHAPTER XXIV

CORNERED

Tuck Liggett, sprawling at his desk, had caught the sides of it tenaciously, and Barlow, standing just behind him, must have thought he had a flashing chance because of Hal's surprise at seeing Richard. Be that as it may, he let his hand steal slowly down to his pocket.

It never got there, however, for Hal aimed instantly and let the bullet graze the fleshy part of Hank's sturdy arm.

"*Ouch!*" cried Liggett's man and brought both his hands around before him in a suppliant attitude.

Hal grinned. "Atta boy, Barlow. Tit for tat, huh? Now keep 'em there." He looked at the frowning Liggett then and chuckled, "Why, Tuck, old scout, you look positively funereal. Get up and get those things off of Richard as fast as you can!"

"He's got a gun on his lap, Hal!" Clark cried. "Barlow has one...."

"Get them both, Clark." Hal's deep voice seemed to thunder, then: "And if either one of you make any attempt to do so much as move a little finger...."

"Aw'right, Sherlock Holmes!" Liggett sneered as he rose from behind his desk, his arms outstretched.

"Fine, Mr. Racketeer Liggett!" Hal smiled. "Now get Richard free of that stuff and make it snappy!" He nodded to Clark, now in possession of the enemies' guns. "So far, so good. Keep Barlow and the racketeer under your eye, huh? I want to talk to Aida a minute."

Aida laughed hysterically from the big chair in the corner of the room. “I thought you hadn’t seen me at all, Mr. Keen,” she said as she calmed down.

“I saw you, all right—I saw everybody,” Hal said, looking at her earnestly. Richard was relieved of his gag at that moment and smiled gratefully over at his friend. Hal returned the look then glowered at the young woman. “Where’s your horse?”

“At the corral,” she answered petulantly.

“All right—go get it! And let me give you a tip—don’t breathe a word to any of Liggett’s men if you should happen to meet them down there! Get your horse and come back here as fast as you can. I’ve got the key—I’ll let you out the front door.”

“And suppose someone should ask for Mr. Liggett?” she asked, rising.

“Then you’re to tell them he’s in conference,” Hal laughed, letting her out of the door. He accompanied her to the front door and unlocked it. As she was passing through, he said, “Remember my tip. For Mr. Liggett’s men to come here now would mean nothing but bloodshed. Slim and all your men from the Dark Star are to come here armed, if we don’t return in a little while. And there’s been trouble enough—we want to do all we can to avoid bloodshed.”

Aida Merrivale looked up at him searchingly. “Really, you know, this wouldn’t have happened except for you, Mr. Keen,” she said with a bitter laugh. “This hateful, boresome question of the money that I want my share of, so’s to clear out of here, would have been settled amicably, but for you! I’ve no reason to like you and yet I can’t truthfully say I hate you.”

“Thank you, Miss Aida,” Hal grinned amiably. “Thank you so much! Perhaps you don’t hate me because in your heart you know that I’ve done nothing that a real friend wouldn’t do! I’m sorry to be the cause of your staying on at the Dark Star indefinitely, but I can’t stand by and see a scoundrel like this Liggett actually kidnap Richard and bring him here in order to force his hand. Surely you don’t countenance that!”

“Of course I don’t uphold Mr. Liggett!” Aida exclaimed, her dark eyes blazing. “Neither do I uphold you for siding with Richard and adding to his stubbornness and also bringing Clark around to your way of thinking!”

“It was the poisoned cattle that decided your brother Clark against Liggett, not I.”

“That was an accident, Clark ought to know....”

“It wasn’t an accident and you know I can prove it! Because it’s hurtful to your own insane desire to get your money and get away, you won’t believe that Liggett is the rotten man I’ve seen him to be with my own eyes. The very fact that he kidnapped Richard as he did and allowed us to think for this whole day that the poor fellow was drowned—dead, in Pine Creek—that’s enough!”

“Richard wouldn’t accept Mr. Liggett’s invitations to come here and talk things over as a level-headed gentleman should. He ignored Mr. Liggett entirely, so this incident today was the only means that Mr. Liggett could think of to get Richard here and listen to reason....”

Hal laughed outright. “It’s listening to reason, I suppose, for a man to be bound and gagged all day!”

“He’s only been bound and gagged a few hours. Richard got positively mulish and their only alternative was to do

what they did so he would sit still and listen. I felt sorry for him, of course, but he can be awfully stubborn when he doesn't want to do a thing. It's just because he begrudges me the pleasure of living....”

“All right, Miss Aida,” Hal sighed impatiently. “Get your horse!”

He watched her tall, haughty figure go down the steps and off into the darkness and he realized that he felt almost sorry for her. She could not seem to understand that her brother Richard was doing all he could so that some day she might have her full share and not the kind of share that Tuck Liggett would trick her out of in the end. But Hal understood what was in her selfish mind.

Money today was money—money tomorrow was merely an empty promise.

He tossed his head and hurried back to find Richard free and smiling, though a little weary looking. Clark was keeping Liggett and Barlow under strict guard and giving the latter his Merrivale point of view about the whole matter.

Richard, clad in borrowed shoes, trousers and an old sweater, came up to Hal and grasped his arm gratefully. “I'm still in my bathing suit, Hal,” he said, pointing to his borrowed things. “Even though you can't see it, I can—almost.” He smiled. “I know it's underneath and I'm dying to get into some decent clothes. Ever since this morning....”

“Who kidnapped you, huh?”

“Barlow and Tuck. I was half asleep.”

“Mm,” said Hal, looking up. “There's a penalty for kidnapers in this state, Liggett—you know that?”

“Oh yeah?” Liggett answered mockingly. “Wa'al, what yuh intend to do about it, eh?”

“There’s plenty I *could* do and you know it!” Hal retorted.

“Wa’al, yer couldn’ do nuthin’ in this county, yer young meddler!”

“Yes, I know all about you having this county sewed up, Liggett. But that wouldn’t faze me one gosh darn bit! I’d talk so that the whole state would hear me if it wasn’t for Richard and Clark. Their name is too fine a one to be messed up with a skunk like you. That’s why I’ve come here like this tonight—that’s why you’re not riding away with the state police right now—understand? So, let me warn you, Liggett, to keep those greedy eyes of yours off the Dark Star for once and for all.”

“Exactly!” said Richard and Clark with a severe finality.

“Mebbe yore a-goin’ ter see that we do!” Hank Barlow cut in sarcastically to all three of them.

Hal chuckled and looked straight at Barlow. “If Richard and Clark don’t see to it, they’ll leave it to me, perhaps. You know, there’s people like Tuck Liggett who finally hang themselves with their own ropes. Well, that’s where I’ll come in and it won’t make a bit of difference whether I’m in Montana or back home in my little bed at Ramapo, N. J. You see, Barlow, there’s a lot that the government can do to cattle poisoners, for after all it becomes an interstate and, finally, a federal offense. So, in that case, having the county sewed up isn’t going to help you poor boobs one darn bit. Well, a word to the wise ought to be sufficient, huh?”

Clark looked at Barlow and Liggett disgustedly, then nodded at Hal. “It’s too much of a compliment to even give them a wise hint. Come on, let’s get out of here.” Suddenly he turned back and faced the two men. “And in case you doubt it,” he said between clenched teeth, “we stand behind

every word Keen has spoken! You better get it into your ignorant head, Liggett, that we mean tonight to hear the last of you and your rotten crowd!”

Richard nodded his agreement and turned to lead the way. Hal motioned the two men out of the room next.

“We’re giving you a little treat by allowing you to see us to the door,” he chuckled.

Liggett muttered something in an undertone, but they did as they were told. When Hal had unlocked the door and Clark and Richard had gone out, he turned, smiling.

“I’m locking the door after us, just in case you can’t be trusted,” he said. “The back door’s locked too. Sorry I can’t give you the keys, but it’s a case of safety first with us. We need a little time to get away. Meanwhile you boys can climb out a window. I’ll leave the keys somewhere out here on this nice, wide veranda of yours. Well, so long—oh yes, I almost forgot—Meg’s back in the kitchen all fixed up the way you fixed up Richard. He must be impatient by now. So long!”

He slammed the door with a smile, locked it hurriedly and dropped the two keys on a cushion in one of the veranda rocking chairs. Then he ran down the steps and got upon his horse. Aida was waiting on hers, submissive but frowning, and Clark and Richard were mounted on the one stallion.

“All set, Hal?” Richard asked eagerly.

“And how!”

“Good!” said Clark, spurring his horse and leading the way.

Hal reined up at Aida’s side and they rode in silence until the horses reached the woods. Then she turned and, though it was pitch dark, he could almost see the smile on her dark, handsome face.

“You do things when you set out, don’t you, Mr. Keen?”

“I try, Miss Aida.”

“If at first you don’t succeed!...”

“One usually succeeds if the right is on his side—it seems that way with me anyway. And I make pretty certain first that I *am* right! That’s what makes me try so hard.”

“I’ve never thought about doing things that way,” she said thoughtfully.

“If you’re right, you’ll win out, no matter what. That’s my creed.”

“No matter what?” she asked breathlessly.

“Sure. That’s why if you’re not right, you’ll pretty soon find it out. And I guess maybe you’ve found out that’s what happened tonight, huh? I guess you’ve found out that it wasn’t right for you to get your money through Tuck Liggett that way.”

“I guess so,” she admitted with a light laugh.

“That’s being a good sport, Miss Aida. Richard and Clark will be glad to know you feel that way about it. They’ll be glad to hear the last of Tuck Liggett, even from you!”

“Yes, I guess they will,” she agreed.

But Hal couldn’t help wondering if they really had seen and heard the last of Tuck Liggett.

CHAPTER XXV

A PLAN

Clark and Hal sat at Richard's bedside long after the rest of the household were asleep. After the nerve-racking day it was a relief to sit back and talk things over calmly, and for the two brothers it was an almost momentous occasion, marking the first time in five years that they had talked together in peace and understanding.

Hal was as overjoyed as if they had been his own brothers. "Now you two will get somewhere," he said. "You ought to be able to dope out some way of beating misfortune—two heads are better than one. And if mine will help things along, I'll let you have the use of it."

"Fine," Clark chuckled. "If it helps in the future as it's helped in the past, why, we'll have no complaint."

"I'll say we won't!" Richard said vehemently. He was lying back on a much punched pillow, smoking leisurely and watching Hal with grateful eyes.

Hal waved away the compliment modestly. "Darn little help I've been to you so far. With the exception of what I learned about the cattle...."

"You can't even minimize that, Keen," said Clark. "You can't do that because it was the one thing that opened my eyes to Liggett. Not only that but the way you gave it to me on the chin the other night—well, it made me see what a rotten brother I've really been to Richard—a pigheaded, stubborn fool! It takes a man to show another man he's that.

But say, you had it in your mind perhaps that Richard was at Liggett's, didn't you?"

Hal grinned and nodded. "I didn't until you showed me that note of Liggett's. Then it occurred to me that there was something darn strange about Richard disappearing and Liggett sending for you the very same night. I just put two and two together, that's all."

"That was all we needed, Hal—you!" Richard said. "I suppose you heard what Liggett was saying just before you burst in the room? Well, he was all set to *make* Clark come to terms. And before the night was over we would all have had to sign, or.... But you certainly broke up that party and how! Oh boy, but Tuck was hopping!"

"Mm, and that's why I can't believe he'll let me slide," Hal said with a grin. "He's going to trap me some way if he can."

"He'll try it," said Clark, "but you can be on your guard. Don't stray off anywhere alone, then you'll be safe."

"Well, I'm not going to deliberately run into his open arms," Hal said thoughtfully. "But I would love to get something on that bird that wouldn't involve you people—boy!"

"You would," Richard smiled. "But be careful for our sake, Hal. Now that Liggett knows where Clark and I stand, I don't think he'll think it worth his while to try very hard anyway. And if Aida is as acquiescent as you say, then I think we've heard the last of him."

"She seemed to agree absolutely that she wasn't on the right track to think she could get what she wanted from Liggett that way. I told her most likely her share of what money that skunk would pay wouldn't amount to but little

after all was said and done. She was darn thoughtful about it when I said good night to her before.”

Clark pursed his lips and shook his head. “Well, you can make up your mind that for Aida to give in means that she’ll be either floored by the disappointment or it’ll give her the incentive to start on an entirely new tack that will take her away from here. Aida’s always been that way, Keen. Her life’s been a continuous chain of obsessions, if it wasn’t one thing, it was another. And her worst obsession of all was this idea that Tuck Liggett’s buying the Dark Star was her one means of getting enough money so that she could get away from here for good and all. She talked of it so much, even up to this morning, that I was almost afraid for her. But I guess that’s all forgotten now and we’ve you to thank for it. She’d never have listened to Richard or to me.”

“Doesn’t look that way,” Hal agreed. “Well, that’s that. But what about Corinne? I haven’t seen her yet to apologize to her. Even if she did sneak out and get into communication with her brother last night, she’ll be ashamed of this latest move of his when she hears of it. That is, if she’s the honorable girl she seems to be—don’t you think so?”

“I’m certain of it,” Clark answered gallantly. “I can’t believe that she would countenance Tuck’s methods, I really can’t. Oh, I know it looked pretty bad for her last night. But who knows why she went? Circumstantial evidence doesn’t prove anything.”

“Well, whether she’s for or against her brother doesn’t make a whole lot of difference now. She told Sen that she’d be leaving for the coast in four days,” Richard said. “So whatever we do now won’t help Liggett one bit, whether she

tells him of our plans or not. He's simply out of the picture now."

"Let's consider him so now anyway, Richard," Clark said hopefully. "We've got to get our heads together and talk of constructive measures—Liggett isn't one. For instance, what have we got on the Dark Star that's certain to bring in large monetary returns? That's the important thing now."

"And that's what discourages me, Clark," Richard said, gloomily. "What is there that will actually help us?"

"Timber," Hal answered suddenly. "Miles and miles—square miles of it! I know it's beautiful down there at the creek and it would be almost a shame to pull down such towering forests, but believe me, it's better to see those barren acres for a time than to let this place slip from you when you can save it by selling all that timber. And you could do it, do you realize that? Forests will spring up again, but once the Dark Star goes...."

Clark was on his feet, his face beaming and hand outstretched to Hal. "And you had to come here to tell us *that*, Keen!" He looked at his brother. "Blockheads that we were, Richard, why didn't we ever think of that timber before?"

"I'll never know why," Richard answered truthfully. He smiled. "It's just one of those things that it takes a Hal Keen to tell us about—things that we never think of."

They said good night after that, happy but tired. Clark and Hal parted at their respective doors and in a few moments the house was in utter silence.

Hal lay awake for a long time. Thoroughly tired though he was, he could not cease thinking of the day's excitement and the result was that when he did sleep, his rest was continually

disturbed by harrowing dreams. So it was no wonder that when he heard the sudden closing of a door somewhere in the quiet house, he should wake quickly.

Even as he sat up he could hear footsteps, but in his sleepy, bewildered state of mind, he could not seem to place them. And then when he was fully awake and on his feet, a door closed again. The house lapsed into its usual silence after that and though he listened intently he heard no further sound.

He fell into a deep sleep and remained blissfully unaware of earthly concerns for a few hours. When he awoke again, he knew it was early morning by the fresh, damp breeze that blew through the room. It was still dark and starless, but the threatening storm of the evening had long passed over the mountains, leaving a tense hush in the air.

He got up and paced the room, conscious that he had done this very same thing at about the same hour the previous morning. Suddenly he remembered something and he stepped over to the nearest window and peered out into the shadows. He heard nothing at first, but as he pressed his warm face close against the cool screen he vaguely discerned a shadowy something coming across the dewladen grass from the stables.

It all came to him then! It was the same figure he had seen the morning of the day before.

Corinne!

He did not wait a moment, but grabbed his bath robe and ran down the front stairway. The front door was loose, of course—doors were never locked at the big house. When he went out, he closed it quickly but quietly after him, and ran

down the steps, across the drive, then onto the grassy lawn around the side of the house.

He caught a fleeting glimpse of a light, flimsy dress and some kind of a dark hat and jacket. It was just a glimpse and that was all, for even as he watched, the figure had hurriedly disappeared around the back of the house. And, though he darted after it immediately, he distinctly heard the closing of the door.

He came up to it breathlessly, and listened intently for a moment before he put his hand on the knob. But there was no sound. It wasn't until he had stepped noiselessly into the dark pantry that he heard the soft tread of footsteps on the back stairway.

He had followed only a few feet in their wake, however, when he realized that his chase was futile. A door was already closing upstairs—closing, and hiding effectually this surreptitious night prowler from his accusing stare.

He felt completely frustrated as he stood in the upper hall, listening. There wasn't a light and the only sound was the soft hum of deep sleepers about him. Sen's slumber, no doubt, had been made doubly peaceful by Richard's safe return, for he was emitting long, nasal snores that seemed to come from the very depths of his amiable soul.

Suddenly Hal heard someone whisper his name and he turned to see Richard staring at him from his bedroom doorway.

“What's the matter, Rich?”

“What's the matter yourself?” Richard returned sleepily. “I heard you prowling around out here. You woke me up, I guess.”

“Sorry,” said Hal. He stepped into the room and closed the door softly behind him.

Richard switched on the light. “Well?” he asked.

“I saw her again.”

“Who?”

Hal told him.

Richard shook his head when the story was finished. “I know it looks blamed funny, Hal,” he said thoughtfully. “But as Clark told you yesterday morning, what can we do about it? It isn’t our business if Corinne steals out of this house bent on some clandestine appointment between midnight and dawn. As long as it’s not hurtful to our interests, what can we do? And what could she do that could possibly hurt us?”

“That’s what I’d give anything to find out,” Hal answered, flinging himself on Richard’s bed. “Have you stopped to think that it’s darn funny that Liggett knew you were going to be down at the creek yesterday morning? You don’t suppose it was an accident that he just happened to find you there and thought it was a good time to carry you off and force you to sell the Dark Star?”

“I never thought of it that way!” exclaimed Richard. “Why, of course he didn’t just happen on me there yesterday—what a fool I’ve been not to think of that! Spying, hey? So we’re being spied upon!” Suddenly he paced the room, back and forth, perhaps a dozen times. Then he stopped and looked at Hal, questioningly. “But Corinne’s story of her quarrel with Tuck—her story that she’s going on to the coast to live with relatives?”

“Much as I hate to say it of any lady,” Hal said, leaning over to the night table and helping himself to a cigarette, “I think she’s told nothing but lies right from the minute I first

laid eyes on her! Even the ankle story—bah! Liggett’s capable of anything—would it be such a shock to find out that his sister is too?”

“She’d have to be a fine actress to do all this so convincingly,” Richard mused.

“Of course. She *is* a fine actress! Not only that, but her story is darn plausible. You hear a lot about this business of blood being thicker than water. Well, I guess it must be so in this case, even if Corinne is an educated girl and hadn’t seen her ignorant scoundrel of a brother in so many years.”

“You’ve taken a dislike to her, Hal,” Richard said suddenly.

“On the contrary,” Hal grinned, “I like her pretty darn well in spite of it all. So it doesn’t come as easy as you’d think to say those things about her.”

“I believe you. But after yesterday, what would there be for her to tell Tuck that would interest him now? If he’s lost hope of forcing our hand to sell him the Dark Star, what then could there be?”

“But has he lost hope? I don’t know, Rich ... why does she say she’ll stay here four more days if it isn’t that it’ll give her a little more time to find out for her brother what your attitude is and just what you intend doing? Maybe I’m wrong.... Clark and you and myself were talking in here last night—a few hours ago only. Do you remember what about?”

“Sure, about trying to sell the timber in the creek region as a means to save the Dark Star. Your own inspiring suggestion, Hal. Oh, I see now what you’re getting at! You think perhaps Corinne was eavesdropping on that little talk of ours, hey?”

“Yes, just thinking that she might have been listening.”

“But even so, Hal! What on earth can Tuck do about it, granting that Corinne tells him what she heard us say? It’s our timber and we have a right to....”

“Rich, Tuck Liggett wants the Dark Star and he wants it bad! That’s as plain as the nose on your face. You can be certain he’s got some darn good reason for wanting it so badly. We nipped his main plan in the bud last night, but I’ve got a hunch he’s got others up his sleeve. And that’s why I bet sister Corinne is staying on here longer. She’s going to report your new plans, and brother Tuck will be better able to work more in harmony with you so as to accomplish his aim.”

“But, Hal, there’s nothing Corinne could have told him of new plans outside of your idea of selling the timber. And as I said before, even if he has learned about that, what can he do if it’s our timber?”

“I don’t know what he can do, Rich. But from what I’ve witnessed already, there seems to be a whole lot that Tuck Liggett can do and get away with. What he can do about preventing you from selling that timber, he’ll do if he possibly can and you know it. He’ll try, if there’s one chance of cutting you off from any possible source of money which will put you on your feet. He’ll hope to the last that poverty will bring you to him, begging for his terms.”

“Yes, I know that.”

“I may be looking for trouble when I say that he’ll do something to prevent you from selling that timber, but.... Well, we’ll wait and see.”

“Yes, that’s all we *can* do. If Corinne’s carried the news to him, I guess we’ll find that out soon enough, hey?”

Hal got up, preparatory to leaving the room. Suddenly he turned to Richard. "I tell you what—we'll make no secret of it at the breakfast table that the three of us are going to spend a good part of the day looking over that timber! We'll go, but we'll each have a gun and we'll keep our eyes open. If anything happens that proves to us they're watching our movements, we'll know that I've been right about Corinne; if not—well, then I'll be wrong as I usually am," he added with a chuckle.

"It's a go!" Richard said enthusiastically.

Hal grinned and opened the door. Somewhere along that long hall another door closed softly. And, though the two young men peered out and listened intently, they heard no further sound, saw no betraying light under any of the doors.

They said not a word, but simply stared at each other.

CHAPTER XXVI

A SUDDEN DEPARTURE

Hal slept until almost eleven o'clock and when he had emerged from a shower and dressed, he hurried downstairs and into the dining room to find that only one place was still set on the snowy cloth. Sen came in from the kitchen, smiling and happy.

"Mister Richard and Mister Clark 'um out on terrace, smoking. They say you come out soon you finish breakfas'."

Hal did as he was told. He swallowed a good breakfast in five minutes' time and hurried out to the terrace to find the brothers smoking in grave silence.

Hal looked up at the blue sky. "Why all this gloom on such a nice day?"

"Too nice," Clark said, turning around and smiling. "We needed that storm last night—things are too dry. Bad weather for forest fires."

"I still insist—why all the gloom?"

"Not gloom, Hal," Richard answered, getting up from his chair and strolling about, "just thinking. We had a rather unpleasant job here this morning."

"What?"

"Well, I couldn't sleep after you left my room, so I came down very early. For some reason Clark came down early too. I told him about your experience and our talk. He decided that instead of putting Corinne to any further test, we should ask her out and out whether or not she was spying upon our movements and reporting them to her brother."

“I thought it was the better plan, Hal,” Clark interposed.

“Of course. It’s your house—you had a right to know. What did you find out?”

“Luckily, she came down real early for breakfast,” Clark answered. “Her foot was much better, she said—she seemed to walk fine.”

“That’s interesting.”

“Well,” Clark continued, “Richard and I were rather glad you didn’t show up. It would have been twice as embarrassing for the poor girl. I *did* feel sorry for her, but what was one to do? Anyway, she sat down with us, seeming rather bright and cheerful, making it more difficult to ask her. But I did.”

“She sort of stared at Clark, Hal, and she put down her coffee cup with a bang. Then she asked him how sure he really felt that she was at the Dark Star for the purpose of spying.”

“I told her I wasn’t sure at all,” Clark said, taking up the thread. “I said we were all suspicious about it since Richard’s curious abduction yesterday and in fairness to her, as our guest, we wanted to know the whole truth.”

“What did she say?”

“She said that if we were all suspicious of her, then she’d rather not stay an hour longer. She wasn’t angry—she just smiled—you know, oddly, like some girls do when you can’t tell exactly how they feel about a thing. Well, that’s the way she did. She got up from the table and she said it would be a waste of time for her to say anything. Where there was suspicion, there could not be truth—we wouldn’t believe the truth if we heard it, that’s exactly what she said.”

“Did she go away after that?” Hal asked, feeling curiously disappointed at not having seen her to at least say goodbye.

“Yes, she left quietly. Not only that, she wouldn’t accept a ride to town in any of our cars. She called up Buck Perry and had him come for her.”

“Independent, huh?” Hal remarked admiringly. Then he qualified it by adding: “She would be.”

“She asked to be remembered to you, Hal,” Richard said, smiling. “The last thing she said, was that she hoped you wouldn’t think too harshly of her.”

“She did?” Hal asked, his face flushing brilliantly.

Richard nodded. “Clark and I felt kind of awful about it, believe me. She looked so pretty and all. Not as pretty as Lee Holliday is, of course, but pretty enough for us to feel sorry for her, and mean.”

“But I asked her if she wouldn’t please go on and tell the truth,” Clark added. “I told her we’d believe her. But she just shook her head and got into Buck’s tin-can taxi and said goodbye.”

“Gosh!” Hal said. “Maybe it’s all my fault—maybe....”

“Maybe nothing,” Clark said. “I felt sorry for her, but on the other hand she had plenty of chance to talk. And as for us believing the truth if she told it—why, of course we’d have believed it. Suspicion or no suspicion—do we look as bad as that? I don’t think so. No, Keen, don’t feel you’ve been unjust to her. You’ve just been a fine friend to us in pointing out the danger of her staying on here and spying. It’s just too bad that it had to be a nice, pretty girl like Corinne.”

“And it’s just too bad that she has such a brother,” Hal reflected. “If it wasn’t for him I could think of her—well, there’s no telling what I might think of her.”

There wasn't any telling at all.

CHAPTER XXVII

A GOOD START

They started away at noontime, bound for a tour of inspection through their timber lands as Richard jokingly called it. Clark was the only one armed and that was just to make certain of their protection, he had said. For with Corinne Liggett's departure that morning, they felt that their movements were quite safe from prying eyes and evil minds.

"Your sister Aida didn't care to come, huh?" Hal asked when they were well on the trail to the creek.

"Aida's about reached Yellow City by this time," Clark answered with a smile. "She's shopping as usual—she left shortly after Corinne did."

"What did she think about Miss Liggett going away?"

"She said it was too bad, but that Corinne deserved it if she'd been spying. Oh, Aida's too much concerned with herself to be concerned about anyone else. Her mind was all set on Yellow City—said she was going to have luncheon with some friends and then play bridge. Well, that's that."

"Sure," Hal agreed. "We'll look over the Merrivale Lumber Company's interests and then, after deciding when work can be started on the project, we'll throw ourselves in the creek for a nice, cool swim, huh?"

Richard and Clark laughed.

"That means you're both on, huh?" Hal insisted.

"A swim sounds good to me," Clark agreed. "It's awfully hot and still today. Yes, I'll enjoy it."

“Same here,” said Richard. “Maybe I can finish the extra ducking I was promising myself the other day just before I was interrupted.”

“You’ll be ducked!” Hal promised him.

“And I don’t think Richard will be interrupted again,” Clark said confidently. “If Liggett or any of his crowd come anywhere near to watch us—that will be all it will amount to.”

“There’s safety in numbers too,” Hal said just as confidently.

“We’ll soon see,” Richard said. “We’re almost there.”

They rode the rest of the way in silence, but all looking about and listening intently. They saw nothing but the birds fluttering about and winging their way skyward, and no sound reached them, save the riotous clicking of locusts and the constant hum of crickets.

A silence pervaded the creek and seemed to follow them all along the up trail. Hal kept his bright eyes out for some signs of footprints, but he saw not one. And after they had crossed the stream, and peace and quiet still reigned over the region, he concluded that Liggett and his crowd must certainly mean not to molest the Merrivales that day.

This decision was strengthened by the fact that they had traversed the entire section upon their horses without any untoward incident marring the peace of those afternoon hours. Indeed, they dismounted in the thickest of the timber region to smoke and hold a sort of pow-wow to celebrate their good fortune.

It was a cool, shady dell in which they rested, shady to a degree that was almost gloom at mid-afternoon. But the heat

of the day was so intense that they welcomed it and sprawled lazily on a thick carpet of moss under the trees.

“I know darn little about the lumber business,” Clark said, “but believe me, Keen has certainly got me started on this idea, Richard. Particularly since we’ve taken this look at it. I haven’t been through here since I was a kid.”

“What’ll we do about it?” Richard asked, enthusiastically. “I mean how’ll we go about it?”

Clark chuckled. “I’ve already gone about it,” he said, enjoying his brother’s surprise. “That’s what I got up so early for this morning. I had a phone call to make. To Butte.”

Richard was puzzled and looked it.

“I had a classmate in college,” Clark explained. “Harry Dell is his name, and his father’s one of the biggest lumber men in the state.”

“Oh, I remember him!” Richard said, joyfully. “Did you call him?”

“Uh huh. I told him the whole story. It went over big! Harry’s in business with his father and he ought to know. I explained to him as well as I could and he said they’ll send a man up here to look it over tomorrow. Harry’s coming up here the end of the week to close the deal. From my explanation, he said he figured the whole lot would net us more than enough to put the Dark Star back where Father left it.”

“Clark!” Richard breathed happily.

“Absolutely, Dick. The lumber people come up here with their men, do the work and cart off the logs. We get the money! Now!”

Suddenly both brothers looked at Hal, smiling.

“And you, Keen,” Clark said, “you’re entitled to some percentage. If it wasn’t for you....”

“He’s *got* to take it!” Richard said excitedly. “Hal, do you realize what you’ve done for us? Do you....”

“I’ve done nothing!” Hal protested. “I suggested something that most anybody would think of.”

“But that *we* didn’t think of,” Clark reminded him.

“All right,” Hal smiled. “I’ll tell you what—when the Dark Star sees the first day of its freedom from debt and worry, then let me know. I’ll come out and help you celebrate and we’ll talk over this other angle. But I warn you!”

“What?” Richard laughed.

“I always get my own way,” Hal grinned.

“And your way?” Clark queried.

“My way is to get a kick out of a thing like this,” Hal answered earnestly, “not money. Nothing has tickled me more than to see you and Richard make up and stick together as brothers should—nothing will tickle me more than to have you write to me and say that you’ve put things over. To talk about sharing any of the money would embarrass me and make me feel as if I wanted to sneak a thousand miles away—understand. I’m that way and that’s all there is to it.”

The brothers did understand perfectly and never brought up the topic again. They had a friend that they did not want to lose, a friend whose friendship could not be had for any price and they were willing to take him just as he was.

They had been talking for ten minutes and more, when Clark suggested that they reconnoiter a little to see if there was any overgrown trail in the neighborhood that would lead directly to the heart of the creek. He remembered, he said, some such trail when he was a young boy, that was a short-

cut to the water, and which now would be invaluable to the loggers.

“I didn’t take particular notice of it on our way through,” he said, getting up and looking about the silent place. Suddenly, he became reminiscent, then: “It was somewhere around here, that short-cut. I’m positive!” he added, strolling off through the trees. “It cut off some distance—saves that long climb up trail before you can cross. Want to walk a little way with me?”

“Through all that underbrush?” Hal laughed. “I’m not that fond of walking. And today I’m lazy as they make ’em.”

“You look it,” Clark called back. “I suppose you’re Hal’s kindred spirit, eh, Rich?”

“And how!” Richard laughed. “Take a peek yourself, Clark. But don’t be long—I’m getting terrifically hungry.”

“All right,” Clark said goodnaturedly. He had deserted the underbrush and struck out into the half-overgrown trail again, a little farther up. “I’ll do better sticking to this trail—the one I’m looking for struck off from this. Well, I’ll be seeing you fellows!”

They listened to his steady tramp, tramp in search of the old, almost forgotten trail. Richard’s cigarette had burned itself out and Hal ground his out on a tree stump. He got up and paced about, suddenly sniffing the air.

“I sort of smell smoke,” he said.

“I thought I did too,” Richard admitted. “Thought it was your cigarette until you put it out. Maybe it’s some of the Liggett crowd burning down weeds over on the other side of the hill. What breeze there is, is blowing this way.”

“Seems to be getting stronger,” Hal said, his head high in the air. “If there’s one thing that makes me uneasy it’s to

smell....”

His sentence was cut short by the sound of a shot.

CHAPTER XXVIII

TRAPPED

Richard was on his feet in an instant. “Where?” he asked. “Sounded up the trail,” Hal answered excitedly.

“Let’s go. It sounded very near, don’t you think so?”

Hal nodded and started to run. Richard followed, forgetting about the three horses which were grazing peacefully near by. Neither one of them thought about anything but the crack of that shot echoing down the trail. It had been just one, clear and distinct, yet causing them to wonder if they weren’t getting excited about nothing. After all, one shot might mean anything.

Anything? Hal could not define that himself and he did not try to. So many things, so many thoughts filled his mind, he could not think any one thought clearly, particularly when the smell of acrid smoke filled his nostrils.

But he had not time to ponder very long. Just ahead he saw something that almost brought him to a standstill. Richard too saw it and he grasped Hal’s arm, shouting hoarsely.

It was Clark lying prone on the grassy trail just ahead, face down.

“Hal, he—he’s....”

Hal ran up and turned him over gently. A red stain just above his right cheek bone gave them a start. He was unconscious, his lips were pale and his face ashen.

Hal felt his pulse. “It isn’t so bad, Rich,” he said grimly. “I—I think maybe....”

“He’s not dying?” Richard’s question was a cry from the heart.

“His pulse isn’t bad,” Hal answered, feeling pitifully unqualified to answer the question. “That’s all I can tell you. I think we’d better take him home as fast as we can and call a doctor.”

Richard groaned and leaned down, as if in a daze, to help him lift Clark’s prostrate body. Suddenly, however, they heard a roar and looking up the trail they saw that the trees surrounding it had burst into flame. And, to their dismay, they also saw that the timber all over the slope was ablaze.

For a moment, Hal could do nothing but stare in stark horror. Then Richard touched him on the shoulder like a spectre and pointed behind them to the south.

That too was ablaze.

“We’re trapped!” Richard cried. “*We’re trapped!*”

Hal rubbed his hand over his curling red hair with a mechanical gesture. There was a sound of hoofs, rushing hoofs, trampling down twigs, crashing under half dead limbs of trees that snapped from the impact and fell to the ground with a soft thud.

“Whoever shot him,” Hal said in an awed whisper. “Whoever did is riding away on that horse!”

“What trail?” Richard cried, twisting his fingers.

“Perhaps the one Clark went to look for,” Hal answered. “It sounds in that direction. We must try for it, Rich—quick!”

The roar of flames boomed all about them.

Then, presently, the horses got the choking, acrid smell in their delicate nostrils. They sensed the danger for they whinnied fearfully. And, as the two boys lifted Clark’s

prostrate form from the ground they began stamping around in blind fear.

The two hurried as much as it was possible considering their burden, and shouted to the horses as they went. But it was of no avail, for two of the horses ran back directly into the flaming area, leaving Pal stamping about alone.

“Pal—*here!*” Hal cried desperately.

The horse trotted up to them, whinnying at every step. Hal put out a hand and rubbed his nose, then motioned to Richard to mount him quickly.

“We’ll ease Clark up there first, then you get up, do you hear?”

“But——”

“No buts now, Rich. There isn’t time. We’ll be trapped if you waste any. Now, here, get him across Pal’s back—so. There!”

Richard jumped into the saddle obediently. “Hal?” He could not keep the question from his lips.

“I’m going to follow you. Don’t worry. Pal isn’t an ordinary horse, you ought to know that, Rich. He won’t do his best if we load down on him like a mule.”

Richard shook his head worriedly, but Hal hurried to the stallion’s head and patted him gently. “Now get home, sport,” he whispered. “And make it as snappy as you know how!”

“Force him straight through toward the creek,” he said briskly. “It seems the only way clear now.”

Richard gasped, but he knew it was useless to protest. Hal was a tower of strength in those moments—he expected obedience and he got it. One was helpless to do anything else under his powerful influence.

The horse darted straight away under the trees and Hal ran hard at his heels. They trampled down underbrush, dodged in and out and coughed and choked with the smoke in their lungs. The heat was getting unbearable and always there was the terrifying roar of flames consuming everything with which they came in contact.



THEY DODGED IN AND OUT AND COUGHED
AND CHOKED WITH THE SMOKE IN THEIR

LUNGS.

They had gone a little to the north, the stallion instinctively edging in that direction when Richard looked back at Hal and shouted.

“The trail!” he cried, pointing to a winding lane between the trees which was almost covered with undergrowth. “The trail Clark was looking for...” He gulped again, then: “See, Hal! It leads in the direction of the creek!”

The flames, Hal saw with not a little fear, were bearing down upon even this nearly forgotten trail. About a hundred feet ahead, they were licking at the grass and crawling up the trunks of the trees on either side of the pathway. There wasn't much time—not much....

“Step on it, Pal!” he shouted. “*Hurry!*”

Pal did hurry, and it was with much more speed than Hal had wanted for his own safety. The stallion had leaped ahead with the command to hurry in his silken ears and his nimble feet put a terrifying distance between them in less than a minute. Hal tried to keep up with him, but his own wind had been taxed too much already. Pal was five hundred feet away.

Suddenly, the flames leaped across the trail and cut him off entirely.

He stood a second staring and listening to Richard's frantic shouts. Also, he heard Pal's flying hoofs putting more and more distance between them. And he was glad—it would be madness for Richard to turn back now with any thought of saving him. He would have to save himself!

Then he heard, during a momentary lull in the roar of the flames, the shrill scream of a woman.

“Help! *Help!*”

CHAPTER XXIX

SAFETY

“Where are you?” Hal shouted hoarsely. “*Where?*”

But no answer came to his question. The fire had taken a fresh hold on the dry, parched timber and was roaring its destructive way onward. He could hear nothing but the boom and crash of burning trees, and growing ever faint in the distance was the sound of Pal’s rushing hoofs as he hurried toward the water.

Hal struck through the trees to the south, then plunged west again so that he too would eventually come to the creek. The heat was so intense and the smoke so thick, that he knew it would be nothing short of sheer luck if he reached the river without having to cut south again in order to avoid the onrushing flames.

But luck was with him. He cut far south, then turned back west again and while the underbrush was so thick as to make the going slow, he managed to plunge through without suffering anything worse than scratched hands and a badly scratched face.

At intervals he could see through the drifting smoke over the tree tops, an ominously stormy sky. Black clouds vied with the smoke and he guessed from the looks of it, that thunder rumbled through the heavenly spaces.

He had been plunging about for perhaps an hour and a half when he saw the gladsome sight of the creek rushing by not five hundred feet ahead. With a shout he ran toward it.

As he came out on the bank, he could hear, mingled with all the other noises, the sound of falls not far off. He was just about in the same spot that he had swum to the previous day. He was certain of it.

Impulsively then, he kicked off his shoes, pulled off his puttees, and dove into the cold water. Lightning flashed across the darkened sky seeming but a puny, flaming thing compared to the great red glare that held the north and northeast regions in its fierce grip. The south too was being rapidly consumed, and he realized when he climbed up on the opposite bank and looked behind, that he had beaten the demon by only a very few minutes.

He stood a moment in his dripping clothes, then ran barefoot up along the grassy banks. A fresh breeze was blowing from the east and as he ran he could feel its motion increase until, when he came in sight of the creek itself, it was blowing a gale. Then the storm broke in all its fury.

He ran faster than ever and rounded the bend. He heard shouting voices and as he came out in full view of the trail he saw a crowd of men standing on the bank. They stared at him as if he had been a ghost.

He picked out Slim's rotund face and staggered toward it, feeling faint and sick with exhaustion. Somehow he hadn't given a thought to his feelings before—there hadn't been time. But now he realized just what he had been through and the thought of it made him want to drop right then and there. But he staggered on.

"Thank God, you're safe, Mr. Keen!" Slim was calling.

Hal straightened up instinctively and walked toward the foreman, head up, shoulders squared and a forced grin on his scratched and bleeding face. He was safe!

CHAPTER XXX

A GUN—WHY?

Hal flung himself down on the ground underneath the trees and out of the worst of the storm. The cowboys huddled about him, eager to hear how he had escaped. Richard had told them that the last he saw of Hal was when a sheet of flame cut them off from each other.

“Then Richard is safe, huh? And Clark?”

“Mr. Richard’s safe,” Slim answered. “And Mr. Clark is restin’ pretty comfortable, I reckon. One o’ the boys jest came back from the house an’ said he was conscious an’ the doc’s on his way. Frum what we seen o’ that wound o’ his’n I think he jest escaped an’ no more.”

“I was afraid so too,” Hal said, leaning his head back against the trunk of a tree. “But tell me, were all you boys down here looking for us?”

“Shore. It’s a story how we come ter find it out, Mr. Keen. Mighty interestin’ how this fire started.”

“It’s terrible,” Hal said. “After Richard and Clark put all their hopes on that timber. I tell you, Slim—say, give me a cigarette, will you? Mine got soaked in my pocket.”

A half dozen cigarettes were offered, but Hal took one from Slim and smiled his thanks to the others. “Just tell me about it and then I’ll be getting back to the house. Boy, I’m kind of tired, you know it?”

“Shore, we could see it, the minute we laid eyes on yer. Ye jest look fagged an’ no wonder. Wa’al, as I wuz a-going ter say, Sen come a-rushin’ out a couple hours back and he sez

Miss Corinne Liggett called up and sez that us boys should quick rush down here and over the creek, that the hull forest wuz afire. She said she thought that mebbe you an' the Merrivale brothers wuz a-goin' thar today an' she thought she better warn us."

"Very kind," Hal cut in sarcastically.

"Reckon she really meant it thataway, Mr. Keen," Slim assured him. "She told Sen how she come ter know wuz that Meg confessed to her when she questioned him 'bout whar her brother wuz. Ye see, Tuck wuzn't home when Buck Perry let her off'n at the Mellow Moon this mornin'. He'd already started off to make a neat job o' the Merrivale timber when she got home."

"You mean...." Hal began with a gasp.

"Thet Tuck Liggett and Hank Barlow set fire to thet timber deliberate this mornin'. Meg confessed ter Miss Corinne an' she called up. Then later, she called up agin an' said she rode over past North Hill way east an' she sees a man a-crawlin' out from the smokin' woods on his hands an' knees. When she gets to him, she sees it's Hank Barlow."

"Good Heavens!" Hal said.

"Yes sir, Mr. Keen. And she sezs he's a-dyin', he wuz that burned on his face and body. So he tells her thet to get revenge on Mr. Richard and Mr. Clark, Tuck thinks up the scheme o' burnin' the timber. So they goes in, he tells her, an' sets it afire here and afire there—you know, north and south and east, so it'd be a thorough job. Wa'al, you wuz in it, you know how fast it burned. So wuz they. They got lost in it, after they'd set it afire. Their hosses run back into the flames like hosses will do an' they couldn' find their way out ter save their souls."

“And Tuck?” Hal asked.

“He dropped. Hank Barlow found his way when it wuz too late. He died frum his burns while he wuz confessin’ ter Miss Corinne.”

Hal was too shocked to speak. The beating rain was rapidly putting the flames to flight and over all the charred forest a pall of smoke floated like some spectral cloak of death.

Suddenly he was startled by shouts coming from up trail. A group of four men were just returning from a part of the hill region which had first been devastated by the fire, Slim explained. They had gone, he said, to see if there was any trace of the blackguard Liggett.

“No trace uv him,” called one of them to an inquiry from Slim. “But we found somebuddy else right near the edge o’ the woods ’bout a half-mile upstream.”

Slim had run on ahead and viewed the “somebuddy” and was already returning before Hal had risen from his resting place.

“What is it?” Hal asked, fearfully, starting to rise.

“Don’t, Mr. Keen!” Slim answered, putting out a detaining hand. “I wouldn’ want to’v seen it, if I’d known. She’s turrible burned an’ all—she must o’ been trapped bad.”

“*She?*”

“Miss Aida, it is, Mr. Keen.”

“*Miss Aida!* Why, I thought she was in Yellow....”

“So did I, Mr. Keen. Here’s what the boys found clutched tight in her hand.”

Hal looked and saw that Slim was holding out a gun.

He took it and examined it, then studied it thoughtfully. Someone was coming on horseback down the trail from the

ranch, but he did not even seem to hear it so engrossed was he with the gun. And when the rider dismounted and came running over to him, breathless and smiling, he was still too absorbed to be aware of the anxious eyes that were staring up at his scratched and bleeding face.

“Oh, Mr. Keen—you’re—you’re not really hurt, are you?” came the anxious query.

Hal looked down and saw Corinne Liggett staring up at him.

CHAPTER XXXI

GOLD!

They rode back to the ranch side by side, Hal hanging on Corinne's every word and oblivious of the pouring rain and driving wind. Time seemed to stand still for him in those minutes, for he was listening to something which he had been suspecting, but which his gentleman's soul refused to believe.

"I would never have told you anything," Corinne was saying, "if you had not first apologized to me and told me that you simply pinned things on me, because you couldn't believe any woman...."

"Who could believe that any woman would murder her own brother and attempt to murder another brother?" Just to say it made Hal wince.

"And you believe Aida Merrivale really...."

"Corinne," Hal interrupted, unconsciously using her Christian name, "there are two bullets missing in that gun that Aida Merrivale carried. How can I help but believe! It's too awful, of course, but there's a fact staring us in the face. Her brother Ellsworth first ... then Clark, because he too was going to keep her from getting what she wanted right away."

"Oh, oh!" the girl cried, covering her pretty face with her hands. "Hal, I really think her selfishness was a sort of mania—money and the getting of it obsessed her to a degree of madness."

"And cunning," Hal answered, thoughtfully. "I knew in my heart that it must have been she who put that warning

note under my door the first night I came. I saw some letters of hers on a table downstairs the next day, letters that she was going to take to town to mail. I felt contemptible but I compared the handwriting.”

“And?” Corinne asked in a whisper.

“It was so much like the writing on the note—you know, bold and masculine, the kind that’s hard to disguise—well, I was so convinced that it was hers, but I just couldn’t believe it. You can do those things, you know, strange as it seems.”

“Oh, I know. You would be that chivalrous because Aida was a woman and a sister of Richard’s. I know that she met my brother on the North Hill trail and told him everything that was going on here. She despised Tuck, I know, but she thought everything she could tell him in that way would hasten the sale of the Dark Star and give her the money she wanted. She didn’t realize what my brother was and how he merely played on her obsession so that he, too, could get what *he* wanted.”

“And you knew it was she who was stealing out after midnight, huh? And you never said a word in your own defense.”

Corinne smiled sadly. “I came over to the Dark Star that day really to see if I couldn’t talk to Aida.”

“And did you?”

The girl nodded. “She wouldn’t listen. She said if I breathed a word of what I knew she’d kill me. She looked green with rage when she said it. I was really afraid of her and yet more afraid of the look I would see on Richard’s face if I told him that it was his own sister who poisoned his cattle.”

“*Corinne!*”

“Yes, that’s what started the quarrel between my brother and me. You see, I overheard all that quite accidentally. Hank Barlow and Tuck were discussing it. Tuck promised her he would bribe the veterinarian. He helped her, but he didn’t actually have anything to do with it. It was her idea entirely.”

“A woman to plan such things!” Hal shuddered.

“I know. I loathed my brother from that moment for even abetting her. I had been learning gradually what a scoundrel he was, taking land by any means he could and doing all sorts of unlawful things. I told him I loathed him and I said just what I thought of him, playing on that vicious strain in Aida Merrivale and setting her against her brothers just so he could get the ranch.”

“What did he say?”

“He said I could get out if I didn’t like the way he did things,” Corinne continued. “And I told him I would, but that I’d come to the Dark Star and expose him. He told me to go ahead, but that if I did anything like that, Aida would kill me.”

“And I guess she would have!” Hal said, looking at the girl with something like relief in his deep blue eyes. “But your ankle?” he asked, suddenly reminded of the incident.

“Oh, that ankle,” she laughed. “I *did* really sprain it. But for some reason you expected me to act as if I had broken it. It isn’t so odd for a person to walk on a sprained ankle the very day it’s hurt. And I was telling you the truth that night. I was so frightened because I knew it was Aida going out again to meet my brother.”

“You poor kid! I’ll never forgive myself for accusing you so unjustly.”

“Oh, I understand, Hal. Perfectly. I wanted to tell you, but it was so difficult to tell you that one of my own sex and Richard’s sister was the woman I knew her to be. That’s why I was so glad that night you came back and told how you had seen my brother bribing that horrid veterinarian. I thought perhaps at last something could be done to prosecute Tuck and get him away where Aida couldn’t be tempted by his fraudulent promises. I wanted it for poor Richard’s sake and....”

“But Tuck Liggett was your own flesh and....”

“No,” Corinne interposed promptly. “Few people knew it, but Tuck Liggett was merely an adopted son of my father’s. Thank heaven, I haven’t a drop of his blood in my veins.”

Hal thanked heaven for that too, but he didn’t say it aloud. Instead, he said, “So now the Mellow Moon is yours, Corinne. Yours to carry on with, huh?”

“Yes, the Mellow Moon is mine, but how differently it will be mine, Hal. I shall be satisfied to have it just as it is, without coveting the Dark Star as Tuck did. I heard him say to Hank Barlow that it wasn’t the Dark Star he cared about—it was Pine Creek.”

“I wonder why?” Hal mused. “Of course you didn’t hear him say why?”

“No, except that he said it was worth its weight in gold. And that wasn’t any explanation.”

Hal shouted exultantly. “Not any explanation! But Corinne—can’t you see? *It is!* It’s all the explanation I need. Listen Corinne——”

“*What?*”

“There’s gold in Pine Creek, sure as I’m six feet high!”

“Then there must be!” the girl cried, breathlessly. “Yes, Hal, I would never have thought of it. I saw Hank and Tuck come down from North Hill one day and they were positively beaming. Then I heard Tuck say something about ‘oodles of gold.’ After that he said quite vehemently, that he would get the Dark Star or die in the attempt!”

“He died in the attempt, all right,” Hal agreed grimly. “He certainly did. He trapped himself!”

CHAPTER XXXII

SEN FINISHES IT

Hal and Richard and Corinne sat talking about it on the veranda. Clark was on the rapid road to recovery, the doctor had said, and was sleeping peacefully upstairs. The storm had passed on its noisy way over the mountains, and the forest, so green and living only that morning, was a dead, charred heap of ruins with only a lingering pall of smoke on the horizon to remind them of the tragedy.

The sun was setting, promising a clear day for the morrow, a new day, a day that would spell hope and promise for the future. Hal had convinced Richard of it in his own way.

“It’s a cinch that a fortune lies in the creek, Rich!” he said convincingly. “Do you suppose a crafty fellow like Tuck Liggett wanted this ranch for sentimental reasons?”

“Hal!” Richard said, excitedly. “I feel that you’re right! And listen—Dad once said something about gold in that creek—he said when he had the time he’d get some men over there. He said he had a feeling that there was. Oh, Hal.... you’ve opened another way....”

“And a really successful way this time, Rich. Timber may burn, but gold....”

“*Gold!*” Richard echoed. Suddenly a frown darkened his face, then: “But Aida—I can’t understand—what was she doing there when we thought she was in Yellow City?”

“I’m certain she must have heard about the fire,” Hal answered, averting his face from Richard’s sorrowed gaze.

“She must have heard we were there and came to warn us.”

“I guess that was it,” Richard said sadly. “Fire news travels fast.”

“Awfully fast,” Corinne said stoutly. “Poor girl, she did what any of us would do—the best that we know how.”

They were silent a moment, then Richard said, “I can’t understand why Tuck should have shot at poor Clark in such a desperate hour. What did it gain him unless he thought Clark suspected him of starting the fire? But none of us heard any talk—not a human voice?”

“Tuck must have shot him and then run back into his own fire,” Hal said quickly.

“I guess so,” Richard said thoughtfully. “Well, if Tuck’s body is ever found, we’ll soon know by his gun.”

But the ranchman’s body was never found. The fire that he had created had consumed him completely, for there never was found one single bit of evidence, nothing to mark the passing of Tuck Liggett.

And so it was that while Hal and Richard and Corinne were musing upon the tragic experiences of the day, Sen appeared, smiling and happy.

“No more talkee now, eh, Mister Kleen?” he asked, bestowing a happy, benign look upon his favorite, Richard. “Velly much trouble make you velly much hungly, you tell me that night, eh? So I make you some sting hot tea and velly many sandwich.”

“Sen, what a scout you are!” Hal said, beaming at the Chinaman. “What a memory! So you’ve got sting hot tea and sandwiches for me, huh?”

Sen nodded, his old, wrinkled face aglow. “I remember you say you velly much like ham sandwich after you have

vely much trouble and excitement. So I make it and....”

“And cheese sandwiches too?” Hal asked with a mischievous wink.

“*And how, Mister Kleen!*” Sen said with a chuckle.

THE END

[The end of *The Mystery at Dark Star Ranch* by Percy Keese Fitzhugh (as Hugh Lloyd)]