

**SIX-GUN COUNTRY**

**Max Brand**

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# **MAX BRAND**

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# SIX-GUN COUNTRY

# 1

IN all the time I had been hunted by the law, I had had no apprehension quite like that which I experienced when I learned that Andrew Chase had come into the hills to fight it out with me.

I could not get it out of my head that Andrew was invincible, for he had been more than a hero in my eyes ever since that day when he had knocked me flat into the dust after I had fought a fair fight with his brother Harry, and for the second time gained a victory that Harry would have given a great deal to have won.

Now you will remember that I was properly convinced that Andrew Chase was at the bottom of all this mess that I was in. After I had stood up against his brother, Harry, in a gunfight, and come out of the battle unscathed, Andrew had taken the situation into his own hands.

Then there had followed the hiring of Turk Niginski, a gunman, whose services had been bought to put me out of the way, for, reasoned Andrew, it was better that I should die than that his brother should face my weapons again and lose his life.

But Niginski had failed in his undertaking, and you will remember how I had whirled in the saddle and shot him dead, and then ridden straight to the sheriff with my true story of self-defense.

There had followed the trial, and my conviction and sentence to twenty-five years' imprisonment. Not even Father McGuire, with whom I had lived since the age of fourteen, could do anything for me. It remained for Tex Cummins, at that time a perfect stranger to me, to plan my escape and furnish me with a mount with which to make my getaway into the hills.

It was upon that first ride away from pursuit as a fugitive of the law that I met Margaret O'Rourke, "Mike" as I called her, and had fallen promptly in love with her.

So when I had heard that Andrew Chase had come into the hills to get me, and had learned further that he had had the audacity to make friends with Mike, I had promptly warned her to beware of Andrew Chase, that he was not to be trusted. Whereupon we had had a falling out, and I had gotten myself deeper into the entanglements with the law by my headlong rush into more mischief.

Then had come the message that Mike wished to see me, and my heart had swelled within me, only to have my hopes as quickly dashed upon the rocks by her announcement that she loved Andrew Chase and that she had sent for me to exact a promise from me not to fight him for fear that he might lose his life. From that moment I had promptly become a madman, had rushed out into the night, only to meet Andrew and to thrash him to within an inch of his life. Then I had brought him, torn and bleeding, to Mike.

After I heard that Andrew Chase had gained enough strength to leave the bed into which I had put him, and when I heard that, in shame because he could not face the men of the mountains, and because he dared not return to his home in Mendez, he had ridden east; after I heard all this news, I decided to go to see Margaret O'Rourke and ask her, frankly, what chance I had with her.

It was not, really, that I wished to gloat over her because the man she had chosen to love had turned out a rascal—or a rascal to a certain degree, at least. But I knew that Margaret O'Rourke was too brave and too kind and too honest to leave me in doubt as to whether or not I had any hope of winning her in the end. If I had not the shadow of a chance, I frankly wished to tell her that I would never see her face again.

I had had to learn to make decisions and abide by them before. It was now three years since I had lived outside of the law with a price on my head, and the only reason that I had been able to avoid the long arm of the law, I very well knew, was that I had made certain resolutions and stuck grimly to them.

Above all, for instance, I had decided early in my career that I would never associate myself with a partner. For one may be sure of oneself, but never of one's companion, and I had heard of and seen too many keen, alert, intelligent men who could not defy the law because they could not live without companionship. Their companion always proved the weaker link by which their strength was broken.

It was a bitter thing to live like a lone wolf in the mountains through all manner of weather, ever on the alert, and never leaving my secure retreats unless there was an absolute need to go down among other men for the sake of food or of money.

I had clung to that schedule for three years, and the result was that the headhunters had gone without my scalp.

When a man has denied himself human companionship and human liberty, it is possible for him to forswear even the joy of seeing the woman he loves.

With that in mind, I saddled Roanoke and went down to see Margaret O'Rourke.

I rode through the day until I was in the forest at the edge of the big valley. Then, in the dusk, I sent Roanoke down the steep descent to the floor of the valley itself—a dizzy pitch which no horse could have negotiated, but the mule, as a mountain flyer, was to the manner born. He skidded or bounced down the ragged slopes and then bore me across the valley at his swinging trot.

I came up the ravine where O'Rourke lived, in the black heart of the night. It was no longer necessary for me to whistle my signal from beneath the trees opposite the house. All I had to do was to make sure that no one was in the house except the family. They knew me now, and I felt that I knew them well enough to trust them—once in a long while!

For, other than upon exceptional occasions, there were only three people in the world whom I would really trust, and they were Sheriff Dick Lawton, Father McGuire, and Margaret O'Rourke herself. An odd assemblage for an outlaw to know, you may say!

So I left Roanoke under the trees, picking at the grass in the darkness, and I went across to the house to scout around. I looked in the dining room first, to see if Pat

O'Rourke had any callers. There were none. He sat in one chair with his boots scarring the cane bottom of another chair, and the newspaper spread in front of him.

But I was fairly certain that Margaret herself was entertaining company, for I could hear her singing and playing the piano in the parlor. Certainly she would not be so gay except for the sake of another person—not when it was a scant fortnight since the man she loved had left the house.

I slipped up onto the porch and peeked in under the bottom of the shade. I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw that she was alone in the room, with her head tilted back, singing like a bird!

So I went to the front door and tapped softly. She opened it a moment later, and when she saw me, she cried out happily and drew me into the room.

“I thought that you were never coming again, Leon,” said she.

“I wasn't sure that you'd ever want to see me again,” I explained.

“You might take off your hat,” said she.

I snatched it off. One can't be three years in the high rocks and remember all the amenities of polite society.

“Confound it, Mike,” said I, getting a little red, “you might give me time to get my bearings.”

She looked me up and down, surveying my ragged clothes and the two guns strapped at my hips and the Indian brown of my face and hands; and she smiled her crooked smile, which sank a dimple exactly in the center of one cheek.

“There you are,” said Mike. “You haven't been here ten seconds—and you begin to fight so soon!”

“That's not fair,” said I. “I came—”

“Well, sit down,” said she. “Shall I let the family know that you're here?”

“Darn the family,” said I. “I want you. I've gone on short rations for a long time so far as seeing you is concerned.”

She sat down on the piano bench, still studying me.

“You're bigger than ever, Lee,” said she.

“What I've come to say—” I began again.

“And that frown,” said she, “is getting to be a habit.”

“All right,” said I, settling back with a sigh, “when you're through looking me over, I'll try to talk.”

“There is to be a pardon granted to you, isn't there?” she asked. “I understand that Sheriff Lawton is doing a great deal to square you with the law.”

“I don't know. I don't dare to think about it.”

“Everyone else is thinking, though,” said she. “We hear that Sheriff Lawton has made a trip to see the governor and talk to him about you.”

“Sheriff Lawton is an honest man!” said I.



“Then there’s word that Father McGuire has gone from Mendez to back up Lawton with the governor.”

“God bless Father McGuire,” said I. “I’d rather have his good word than be president of the United States!”

“But all the trouble is going to end, Lee. Oh, how glad I am! It’s making an old man of you!”

“What I want to know,” said I, “is just exactly how glad you are.”

“Nobody in the world could be happier about it,” said she.

“Wait a minute,” said I, feeling that old, wild hope surge up in me. “Think that over before you say it.”

She answered gently: “Unless you’ve found a girl to marry you, Leon Porfilo.”

“I’ve found the only girl that I can ever marry,” said I, very solemn. “That’s what I came down here to talk about.”

She shook her head.

“Oh,” I explained, “I don’t mean that I want any promises. I want a chance to hope. That’s all.”

She said nothing, but looked at me sadly and thoughtfully.

“When I heard you singing so happily,” said I, “I thought you might have decided to forget him.”

“I can never forget Andrew,” said Mike.

“Then that’s the end for me,” said I, and stood up.

“Lee,” said she, “are you really going to run off again with only two words spoken between us?”

“Well, why should I talk?” said I.

“Are we at least friends?” she asked me.

“No,” said I. “Either I have a hope to have you someday as my wife, or else I’ll never see your face again. I’ll go no half measures and torment myself for years. Either I’ll have a hope, or I have no hope at all!”

“Am I to tell you just what you mean to me?” she asked.

“Yes, if you will.”

“Of course I will. I’ve always loved you, Lee, since the first day I put eyes on you.”

“That’s a fair start,” said I without enthusiasm. “That’s a pretty good opening. You always loved me, so you decided to marry another man?”

“There are all sorts of love,” said she. “Andrew Chase took me off my feet. When you came down to kill him—or he you—I suppose that I hated you, for a while. But now he’s gone.”

“For good?”

“I suppose so.”

“Mike, do you really expect that you’ll never see him again? Do you care?”

She studied the floor for a moment and spoke with her head still bent down.

“A year ago I would have said that I would despise forever any man who did to Leon Porfilo such a dastardly thing as Andrew did to you in hiring Turk Niginski. Well, since Andrew left, I have thought it over and tried to look at it and at myself frankly. I am ashamed to confess that I do not despise him, Lee. Or, if I despise him, I’m almost fonder of him than ever. Can you understand that?”

“I cannot,” said I bluntly.

“I don’t suppose you can. You’re a man all fire and iron. You want everything or nothing. But women aren’t that way, you know. They hardly know what they want in a man, I suppose. But I know this—that I don’t want to give you up, Leon! I think of Andrew once a day, and the thought of him makes my heart jump. I think of you every minute, and it always makes me happy—quietly happy. But I know that isn’t enough for you.”

“It isn’t,” said I bitterly. “I think of my mule, Roanoke, and it makes me quietly happy. But I want something more than that. I’ve got to have something more than that! Can you give it to me, Mike?”

“I’ve told you everything,” said she.

“It’s not enough,” said I, dragging the words up from the roots of my heart. “I’m going to shut out the thought of you, Mike. I’ve got to do it.”

She turned half away from me.

“Mike,” said I, holding out my hand, “good-by.”

She murmured swiftly: “Will you go quickly—before I start crying like a silly little fool?”

I jammed my hat on my head and strode out of that house, never to see it again, I thought.

## 2

ONE cannot be forever cautious. Besides, when I left Mike O'Rourke, I was so full of my vow never to see her again, but to shut her firmly from my life, that I did not much care what became of me. I turned Roanoke up the valley and rode straight on at the lights of the town!

It was not such complete madness as you might imagine, because since it was so generally believed that the governor was about to grant me a pardon—what with the good offices of Sheriff Lawton and half a dozen other prominent people on the range—the boys were not so keen to hunt me as they had been before.

They could not be sure, you see, that when they risked their lives to get me, they were not hunting down a man whom a proclamation had cleared of all crime.

I was fairly sure, therefore, that I underwent no real risk in venturing into Sanburn. There was no reason why the people in that town should have a peculiar grudge against me! In fact, I could not recall that I had ever harmed any one of the citizens.

So I let Roanoke drift boldly into the little village, only pulling him aside from the main street and putting him through a side alley. We turned a corner into a huddle of noise and cursing. The Sanburn stagecoach was rolling down the street surrounded by a score of excited horsemen; and from the interior of the coach, now and then, heavy groans reached my ear.

I had only time to hear and see this much when someone shouted:

“He's come back to see what trouble he's raised! Let's get him, boys!”

He who raised the shout fairly led the way by sending a .45-caliber slug through the brim of my sombrero. I could not imagine what the confusion was about, but I did not stay to ask questions. Roanoke turned like a cat, and I drove him through a narrow gap between two houses. There he wove back and forth among boxes and cans, leaped a high back fence, and took me into the open running beyond.

I heard the pursuit crashing and raving among the obstacles in that narrow alley. But the greater part of those hot riders had not tried the narrow pass at all, but spilled out on either side and came combing out after me by more roundabout ways. I gave Roanoke his head, and he streaked away.

He had as much foot as a good cow pony—but no more. When it came to a narrow brush like this one, I was much worried. I could only hope that there were no blood horses in that crew behind me to sprint up to us. There *were* some fast nags, however. Three men began to draw up with me, but they were in no hurry to close. I sent one bullet blindly into the sky above their heads, and they drew back.

By the time they had rallied enough heart to decide to rush down on me again, their fast horses were beginning to be half winded, whereas Roanoke was running as easily

as ever. That extraordinary mule could not raise himself above a certain top speed, but he could maintain his top pitch for an uncanny length of time.

So it was now. He held them even for another mile, until we hit the foothills, and after that they were done.

What I wondered at, however, was the venom which had brought these fellows out humming after me. Still I could hear their angry shouts as I galloped Roanoke over the first hill crest. Then we sloped down into the dimness beyond, and I knew that I was safe.

However, I was not content with being safe. I wanted to know what lay at the bottom of this explosion. But I had to keep my impatience with me for a full three days before I learned what I wanted to know. Then I got it from the pages of the Sanburn newspaper.

They had spilled it across their whole front page. News was shy that week, I suppose, for they gave most of the issue to me and my unlucky career.

But they opened up with the following flare:

NEW OUTRAGE BY LEON PORFILO  
OUTLAW TURNS STAGE ROBBER  
SANBURN STAGE STOPPED  
THREE MEN BRUTALLY SHOT DOWN!

That was the opening. What followed was enough to bear out the headlines. The Sanburn stage had been stopped by a tall man riding a mouse-colored mule like Roanoke. He wore a mask and announced that he was Leon Porfilo and that he was tired of waiting for the governor's pardon, and had decided to fill his empty pockets.

Empty pockets, when I had more than four thousand in my wallet at that moment!

It appeared that my ghost had stopped the stage and ordered the passengers out. But these passengers had too much spot cash on them and too many guns and the courage to use them to submit calmly to such a summons. Someone paved the way by dropping to the dust of the road on his belly and blazing away at the sham Porfilo. There were two others who followed suit.

I gathered that if this imitator of mine were a grand liar, he was at least a great fighter, also. For he had dropped those three worthies one after another. Two were badly wounded. One was dangerously shot and might die.

That was the first item of this story. The rest was what might be expected. The governor not only refused to consider my pardon any longer, but he had issued a ringing declaration that he would see that the laws of this State were obeyed and that he would have Leon Porfilo, outlaw, robber, murderer, out of the mountains if he had to call up every man of the militia.

It made me sweat a little, but I could not help grinning when I thought of raw militia boys struggling through the mountains and broiling on the bleak mountains while I was tucked away securely watching the fun. I was not afraid that they would take me.

They had almost as much chance of taking an eagle with their bare hands, for I had been hunted over every inch of that range during the last three years, and I knew the whole country. I could take it to pieces in my mind and put it together again, you might say. Every bird's nest in the region above timberline was pretty familiarly known to me.

Besides, and above all, I had that king of mules, Roanoke, to float me over cliffs like a bird on wings.

So I was not particularly disturbed by the governor's threats. The last governor before him had made threats just as big and announcements just as cocksure. But there were other elements which were not so pleasant. In the first place, I had been robbed of my expected pardon. In the second place, there had been an instant response to this most recent Porfilo "outrage," and the price on my head was a full fifteen thousand dollars!

Now, out West, where a man will work like a dog all of every day and a share of every night for a beggarly fifty a month, fifteen thousand dollars in a lump is like the dream of a gold mine. I knew that I should have to pass through a period like that which had tormented me long before when a price was first put on my head and the mountaineers had not yet learned to have some fear of me.

But what moved me most of all was rage at the scoundrel who had dared to use my name in order to help him in the robbery of the coach.

For my part, I had never attempted a deed so terribly bold as such a holdup. In the second place, I had never dreamed of such a thing as shooting down three inoffensive men who were merely striving to protect their own rights. I thought of the matter in another light, also. When Mike O'Rourke heard the story, she would believe that I had left her determined upon mischief, and she would believe that this bloodthirsty thing was all my work!

What I determined upon was to corner the rascal at once and wring a signed confession from him—or at the least have the satisfaction of filling him full of lead. No, to shoot him down would be no satisfaction at all. It would merely remove my last chance of proving my innocence.

I sat down to figure out the trail of the robber. That may seem odd to you, but as I have said before, I knew those mountains more intimately than any student can know the pages of a book. I closed my eyes and summoned the picture. Then I opened them again and drew out the scene in the sand. I had no sooner done that than one fact jumped into my mind at once—this robber was a fellow who did not know the country at all!

He had selected for the holdup site a spot where the trail dipped, beside the Sanburn River, into a long and narrow valley on either side of which gorges cut away from the river. But the ends of all those gorges were impractical for any animal less adroit of foot than Roanoke, say.

All that an organized pursuit would have had to do would have been to sweep up and down that valley at once and the robber was fairly bottled. The only reason that they had not adopted that measure was that they were fairly certain that if the robber were indeed Leon Porfilo, he would never commit a robbery in such a difficult spot.

If this man had really been aware of the nature of the country, he would have selected a spot on the road where it wound through the badlands of the upper plateau. I could have sworn that this stranger selected the eventual site of the holdup simply because he was sure those side ravines were routes by which he could easily ascend to the upper mountains.

The upper mountains, then, were his goal.

It was a bewildering region, as I knew by many a bitter experience, until I mapped it for myself. Even old mountaineers did not like to cross that section of the hills without a good guide, because the face of the land was knifed across by an intricate crisscrossing of ravines. Men had been known to wander about for half a month before they drew clear of those entangled chasms and blind alleys among the mountains; and in the cold of the winter more than one poor fellow had lost his life in that region.

As for the fellow who had dared to take up my role and play stage robber under my name, I could not help wondering just how he had solved the problem of the ravines! What I felt was that he would probably work grimly and patiently north, guided by the crest of one of the taller mountains. If he was cool enough to shoot three men in one fight, he was cool enough to stick by one landmark.

So, with all these things in mind, I cut across the high country and made straight for Danny Chisholm's camp.

### 3

CHISHOLM'S was a strictly summer camp. Half the year it was buried in frightful snowdrifts that sagged through the gulch to the north of his place. Six months of the year there were anywhere from five to fifty feet of snow rolled on top of the Chisholm shack. When the first white weather began, Danny Chisholm cached everything in wrappings of oilcloth, put some heavy props under the roofs of his sheds, prayed that they would hold the weight of the snows until the next thaw, and then trekked down for the lowlands.

So the camp slept under sheeted ice and snow during six months of the year, but the remaining six months it was a sort of open-air hotel. It was a queer sort of crossroads that he had chosen for his camp. There were no main trails that passed up and down or across the ridges at this point, but trappers, hunters, botanists, and the bolder spirits among the tourists who loved the high places crossed and recrossed the site of the Chisholm camp.

Besides, there were certain other enforced travelers—as one might call them—who dropped in at Chisholm's. These were men who did not wish to give names, who did not wish to ask questions or answer them. Chisholm was famous for the absence of embarrassing conversation at his camp fire. Altogether, what with one class of traveler and another, Danny made a pretty penny during the warmer seasons of the year.

I came over the south shoulder of Mount Christmas and in the hollow beneath me was the glimmer of the Chisholm fire, made into a single thin ray of red light. I followed it like a star, until I was close to his clearing. Then, at a little distance, I put up Roanoke in an open space where he would find plenty of forage, and went on foot toward the fire. I had slung a pack across my back, so that I could fill the part of a foot traveler.

What I first saw from the shadows of the trees at the edge of the clearing was the active figure of Danny Chisholm. That little man never rested. He was forever cooking or cleaning up, or whirling about like a squirrel on a branch to ask one of his guests if they were comfortable.

Usually, as tonight, his guests slept in the open. In case of need, they could be lodged in very foul weather under one of his damp, tumbledown sheds. Now their blankets were spread in the outer rim of the firelight. In the air was the last tang of coffee which had been made for the latest comer. There was a rumbling of deep, contented voices; and when a puff of wind came, it never failed to raise a sharp tongue of flame that cast a bright wink of light over the clearing and made the nearest pine trees glisten.

I stood there for a moment, enjoying the scene, and the great upper peaks which walked up among the stars in the distance. I felt like a tiny Tom Thumb in the hollow

hand of a giant.

Then I noticed the other guests. There were only three of them—one young, and two big-shouldered mountaineers with beards of uncertain date shrouding their faces. As for me, I remained where I was, in the shadow.

For there was never any trace of me, even in a place like Danny Chisholm's, where ordinary strifes were forgotten. This was a court of last resource to which all men resorted when they were hard pressed by wind and weather. The lion and the lamb lay down together in actual fact, and if there were occasional quarrels here, they were the quarrels which originated in the camp itself, and which were not imported from the outside.

But even this atmosphere of truce I could not trust. No unwritten law was strong enough to protect a man with fifteen thousand dollars on his head! For a moment, a great bitterness went through me.

In the old days I was very often set up with a feeling of grandeur because of my very loneliness; but as time went on, that loneliness ate into my spirit, and often a convulsion of something like homesickness made me as weak as a child.

Danny Chisholm came to me at once. When he saw that I preferred the shadows, he did not urge me to come closer to the camp fire. I asked him if he had a cup of coffee left, and he went hastily for it and brought me back a great slab of pone, split open and layered with molasses inside. It tasted better than any cake I have ever touched, and the coffee of another man's making was nectar to me.

I sat with my back to the tree behind me and drank and ate. Danny Chisholm stood near by and talked—about a tenderfoot who had come up to his camp bent on shooting a mountain sheep, about Dad Riley coming in with a load of moonshine, about a new rifle which he had bought, and about the Sanburn holdup.

He chatted on in an easy monotone, never waiting for a reply, only pausing to puff in leisurely fashion at his pipe. But he knew that I was hungry to hear him, as any man who lives like a hermit against his will begins to hunger for the sound of a human voice. To me, that foolish babble was sweeter than wine and honey. It relaxed me, body and soul, and it made me almost sleepy with content. It filled me with an immense good will to fellow men.

Then voices began to be heard beside the camp fire, and Danny hastened back to it.

He stood, ridiculously small in the flare of the fire, gesticulating with both hands. Those three big fellows, each was almost as tall, sitting, as was Danny on his feet.

"I got only one thing to say," said Danny. "If you've come here for a fight, go off somewhere and fight where the loser'll roll into the river where he drops. I disremember what year it was when the Slocum boys come up here and got into a scrap with a couple of old sourdoughs. Two of 'em was killed; two more was laid up. I had to bury them that died—right here in these rocks.

"It was like breaking ground in quartzite. Besides, I had to nurse them two that was down. What did I get out of it? Nothing at all! They was all broke. The pickings in their pockets wasn't enough to feed a layin' hen through the summer season! So I say: If you



want to fight, go out where the mountains can see you. I'm too old to be interested in that sort of a show!"

Danny was really what one might call hard-boiled. He never pretended that he had any ultimate interest in his guests beyond getting their money. Everyone liked his frankness.

One of the bearded fellows took up the talk, and at the first word I pricked up my ears.

"Porfilo," said he. "That was what we was talking about. This kid—"

"Porfilo," put in Danny Chisholm, "is a poor thing to talk about day or night, in the valley or up here in the mountains. Because you never know what side folks is gunna take about him."

"Look here," said the bearded man, "there *used* to be two sides. The best side used to be the one that figgered he'd done nothin' that wasn't over-balanced by the good he's done. I was one of them that stood on that side. But along comes this here stage holdup—and that's different!"

"Why different?" put in the youth.

Now he sat up and squared his shoulders and turned his head a little. I saw that he was a whale of a man, boy, rather. For the firelight, streaking down his profile, showed me a fine-looking youngster of not more than eighteen, the sort of eighteen-year-old who has stepped into nearly his full strength.

I had been that sort of a boy. Three long years ago I had been as he was now. One sees such fellows fighting in the prize ring, from time to time, powerful as men but supple as children, recuperating swiftly after hard blows, full of zest and battle.

I, from the altitude of twenty-one, looked with an almost sad wisdom upon this boy. Not three years, but three decades stretched between us.

"There you are," said Chisholm. "You see that you got an argument pronto. Ain't I right about it?"

"This here—kid," said the first speaker, making a little pause of contempt before he named the boy, "is arguin' like a plumb fool. He don't see no difference between what Porfilo has done before and what he's done this time."

"He busted into a house and slammed three men, all on one night," said the boy.

"That was with his fists."

"Well, is guns any worse?"

"Worse by just a mite. Just the mite of difference between livin' and dyin'."

"Who did he kill when he stuck up the stage?"

"By luck he didn't kill none—but he shot three times to kill. One slug just missed the heart of one of the boys. Another plowed through the cheek and tore off the ear of another chap. Them bullets was aimed to kill, which is something that he never done before, except when his back was agin' the wall!"

The boy jerked back his head. "His back was agin' the wall when he held up the stage!"

“How come?”

“They stuck up their hands, and when he lowered his gun, one of ’em made a phony move and started shootin’. They deserved to die, all the three of ’em, for tryin’ a double cross!”

“Is that your way of lookin’ at it, kid?” said the burly fellow who carried on the brunt of the talk for the other side. “Well, then I got to say that you’re gunna make a fine sort of a citizen, one of these days.”

“I dunno that I like the way that you say that!” said the boy.

But the other two did not understand. What they heard in his voice was a tremor which was very pronounced and which was exactly like the tremor of fear. But I knew better.

Indeed, there was fear in that youngster, but it was the sort of fear which drives men into the deeds of most frantic heroism. It was the fear which a man feels when he is in doubt about himself. Fear that he will not do all that can be expected of a man.

The instant I heard that tremor in the throat of the boy, I gathered my feet under me and got ready to jump behind a tree out of the path of possible bullets, for I knew that trouble was coming.

Then the bearded rascal brought all to a climax by snorting:

“You don’t like it? Then what’ll you do about it?”

## 4

THERE was no delay. The boy leaped to his feet.

He was a glorious thing to look at. Opposite him two burly men rolled up and stood braced for action. They were not so tall, not so nimble—but they were as tough and as jagged as the rocks among which they had been moiling all their lives. Under those beards were jaws of iron, broad cheekbones. Under their clothes were muscles like slabs of India rubber. They had great arched breasts, and the strength of their arms made them carry their hands far from their sides.

“I’ll do this, to start with,” said the youngster, as he dashed his fist into a beard and reached the jawbone beneath and sent one foeman staggering.

I have no doubt, from his fine bearing, that he meant nothing but the best of fair play, for his part. But there was no sense for such matters in the other two. One of them lunged in instantly from the other side and, grappling the boy around the body, carried him to the earth by the shock of his rushing weight.

Neither did these cold-hearted devils mean to let him get to his feet. The first man, shaking the daze out of his head, came striding back.

“Hold him down, Pete!” he snarled. “We’ll give him something to think about!”

“You coyotes!” groaned the boy. “Lemme get up, and I’ll fight the two of you fair and square!”

He meant it, too. That was enough for me. I had promised myself that no matter how the fight went, I should not show my face. But this was too much for me. I came to my feet and joined that fracas with a rush. I sent a battle cry before me, and the first man wheeled to meet my charge. He put up his hands in good enough posture, but then the firelight struck bright into my eyes, and I heard him shout: “Porfilo!”

It seemed to drain all the strength out of him. It was not a man but a statue of putty that I put my fist into. He went down in a crumbling heap.

His shout released the boy, too. For when the second mountaineer heard my name, he leaped to his feet and sprinted for the woods.

“Porfilo!” said the boy, and sat up with a gasp. “It *is* Porfilo!” he breathed.

“Get back into the shadow,” I commanded him, and tugged him to his feet with a jerk. “Get back among the trees, before the pair of them try to pick us off from cover!”

We hurried back into the shadows, but there seemed little doubt about what the two men of the mountains would do. They were rushing off as fast as their legs would carry them; as though they had called on the devil—and raised him quite beyond their expectations! Far away, we heard the crashing of the brush as they sprinted on.

“Porfilo,” said the boy, “darned if I ain’t sorry that I got you mixed into this mess.”

He was not as sorry as I was, however. For, every time I had to step into such a fight, it meant that I made not two enemies, but two hundred. Every new story of violence that was repeated about me went up and down through the mountains and turned the minds of many honest, peace-loving men against me.

“What’s your name?” I asked him, very, very heavy with all of these reflections.

“Orton,” said he.

“Your first name?” said I.

“Dick.”

“Dick, you’re a young fool!”

I heard him gasp an indrawn breath. “Porfilo,” said he at last, in a voice as thin as the voice of a frightened child, “that’s a good deal to take from any man—even from you.”

“Is it?” said I, still very angry.

“Too much,” said he. “I can’t swaller it!”

Then I saw what was in his mind. I had been too sick at heart to understand, before.

“What do you want me to do?” said I.

“Apologize!” said Dick Orton. “Or I’ll—”

Yes, there he was ready for it already! His head was back and his body was trembling as much as his voice.

“Oh, the devil!” said I. “I’ll apologize, of course. I’m sorry I hurt your feelings, Dick!”

This was a great deal too much for him. There was not much light from the fire in the shadows where we stood, but there was enough for me to see the glassy rolling of Dick Orton’s eyes.

“You’re joking, Porfilo!” said he.

“Not a bit,” said I.

“You’re tryin’ to make a fool out of me,” said he.

“Not at all,” said I.

“Porfilo wouldn’t apologize to nobody but the devil himself!” said this silly boy.

“Who has been filling your head full of nonsense about me?” I asked him.

He stepped a little closer to me to study me. “You *are* Porfilo,” said he, as though there could ever be any doubt as to the identity of my ugly, prizefighter’s face.

“I’m Porfilo,” I repeated. “I’ve apologized for hurting your feelings. Is that apology enough?”

“Ah,” said Dick Orton, “I didn’t mean to ask you to—I mean that I was in the wrong—”

“Of course you were!” said I.

“Then why did you ask my pardon?”

“Because I didn’t want to fight.”

There was no way of handling that young fool without being in danger. He was worse than a bundle of nettles.

“I’m too small for you, maybe?” says he, lifting his head to his full height.

He was about half an inch taller than I.

“Or maybe,” said he, “you figger out that I’m just a kid and that I ought to be home helpin’ Ma with the supper dishes. Is that it?”

I had picked up my pack and now I flung it over my shoulders and turned my back on him and strode away as fast as I could. Because he had gone far enough to anger me in spite of all my efforts at self-control. In those days I felt that I was quite a world-weary man, but I can look back at myself and see that I was a good deal of a child. However, that young idiot would have irritated a saint.

I left him behind and made for my Roanoke with a very hearty wish that Chisholm’s place and everybody in it were in the hands of the devil. Just as I reached the clearing where I had left Roanoke, there was a crashing behind me, and that young giant blundered out into the open starlight. More than starlight. The moon was somewhere, sifting thin shadows of the trees across the ground and showing me the face of Dick Orton.

“I’m not good enough to get an answer?” said he.

He stood before me with his feet braced and his body bent a little; he was full of that same devil of fear that had made him fight the two at Chisholm’s camp a little before.

“Orton,” said I at last with a groan, “do you want me to get down on my knees and beg you not to shoot me?”

Because he had come to that point. One hand, shaking with passion, was fluttering at his right hip, touching the butt of his gun and hovering away from it again in little jerky movements.

He was staggered again by what I said. He could not understand. So I added: “Do you want me to breathe flame and eat iron? I’m a peaceable man, Orton, until fellows like you crowd my back to the wall. All I’m saying is: For Lord’s sake give me a chance to be friendly!”

Dick Orton gasped. Then his eyes rolled from side to side, as though, under the skin of a dragon, he had found a child.

Then, “There’s Roanoke!” he cried softly. “By jiminy, I’ve been wanting to see Roanoke—and there he is! You are Porfilo, no matter how you talk!”

Yes, in spite of what he had seen and heard, he had still been in doubt as to my identity. I was a thousand times too humble to fit in with his preconceived idea of me.

Then he blurted out: “Porfilo, I guess that I’ve been acting like a fool!”

“I’m afraid to say yes,” said I. “Or you’d have a gun out at me!”

“I was scared to death,” said he, “but I thought that you were talkin’ down to me.”

“I’d as soon talk down to a snowslide that was aimed straight at my head,” I said.

I mopped away the perspiration from my face. In fact, I had had a rather nerve-racking passage with this young fire-eater.

“Well,” he said, “I want to know if you’ll forgive me.”

“Sure,” said I. “Thank heaven that there’s no harm done—to either of us!”

“Will you do one thing more for me?”

“Yes,” said I, not pausing to think.

“Then let me ride along with you for a day.”

“What the devil are you asking for?” I growled at him. “Trouble?”

“You’ve given me your promise,” said he.

“Darn a promise!” said I. “If you ride with an outlawed man—”

“I’d rather ride with you than with a king, Porfilo!” says he.

I saw how the wind lay.

“I have your promise!” he cried, very exultant. “You can’t go back on that!”

“Well,” said I at last, “go get your horse!”

He was gone in a flash, and I, cursing steadily, put the saddle on Roanoke, because it was not wise to stay near Chisholm’s after that evening’s scene.

I turned from my work, a moment later, and saw Dick Orton ride into the clearing, and he was on the back of another mule!

I did not have to possess the wits of a detective to put two and two together now. It was perfectly plain to me that Richard Orton, like a dizzy-headed young idiot, had read of the adventures of Leon Porfilo and had started out to parallel them.

But the very first thing he had done was more foolhardy than all of my adventures put together and rolled into one. For it was he who had ridden a mule to hold up the stage, and who had posed as the possessor of my name.

Here was I, who had started out with a hot hatred to find the pretender and destroy him—here was I helpless and buried in gloom. I could not help liking this young idiot. I could not help it. Neither could I say a word to him about the frightful wrong that he had done me for fear he would do some equally insane and romantic act.

If I pointed out to him that this stage robbery had robbed me, at the same time, of my chance to get a State pardon, beyond a doubt he would scurry down to give himself up, confess his crime, and be promptly thrown into prison for the better half of his remaining life!

What was I to do?

I did not know. I wanted to be just to this madman; but I was also hungry to have justice for myself. I decided to go to get advice as quickly as I could.

My companion in the meantime jogged his mule at my side as contented as he could be. We came to a cliff as bare as the palm of my hand.

“Are you going down it?” said Dick, as serious as you please.

I turned and gaped at him. Even a mountain goat would have been dizzy for a month at the mere thought of that precipice.

“Where are my wings, Dick?” said I.

“Why,” he muttered in a rather complaining way, “I thought that nothing could stop Roanoke!”

“Roanoke is like me,” said I. “Overpraised! A darn sight overpraised!”

But Dick merely shook his head. His idea of me and of that tough-mouthed mule I rode was too deeply fixed in him to be changed by mere words!

I turned up along the edge of that cliff and hit for the higher ground because I had my plan for the night’s campaign firmly in mind. On the way, I drew him into talk. Although he seemed to be bubbling over with a desire to hear me chatter about myself, he was young enough to be willing to speak of himself.

“What started you for the high spots, Dick?” said I.

“Hearing about the good times you’ve been having for the last five or six years,” said he.

“Three years!” I corrected him. “Three years, Dick.”

“Is that all? Seems to me I can hardly remember when they were not talking about Leon Porfilo.”

“As for the good times—” But I could not continue in that strain. How could I tell him about the bitter loneliness of the mountains? How could I tell him of that weak yearning which went like water through my blood a thousand times—the yearning to have other men around me? No, I decided that words could never turn the trick. The more I talked, the more glamour he would feel in what I had to say.

So I changed the theme.

“But there was something more than what you had heard of me that made you go wild,” I declared. “What else lies behind it?”

“The old man,” said he.

“Explain that.”

“The old man,” said Dick, “started out selling newspapers in New York. He wound up on a ranch, with plenty of hosses and plenty of coin, but the things that he figgers count the most are the things that he got locked up inside his head while he was stamping his feet to keep the chilblains out of his toes, and shoving papers under the noses of gents on Broadway.

“Back yonder, the big guns are the doctors and the lawyers, and suchlike things. What he has mapped out for me is a lawyer’s desk. Me!”

He threw out his arms and laughed. The gesture startled his mule, and the foolish thing began to buck on the edge of the cliff. I was so thoroughly frightened that I could hardly look. But Dick Orton merely laughed and threw spurs and quirt into his nag to make it buck still harder—all of this with perdition six inches away.

Then the mule had enough, and jogged on its way again.

Certainly I had seen enough of this youngster to demonstrate to me that the man who tried to control him was rather thick in the head. I would as soon try to plan the

future of an avalanche. I wondered what sort of a brain was lodged above the eyes of Orton, the father.

“Go on,” I encouraged him.

“There’s nothing to it,” said he. “Same old lingo you’ve heard a thousand times before, I guess. He’s packed full of ambition for me. He herded me through high school, and he sure had his hands full doing it!”

I could imagine that. I pitied the school which had existed with a firebrand like this in its midst.

“Four years?” I asked.

“With a couple of breaks,” said he. “I busted away a couple of times, but each time the old man came out and nabbed me and got me back. I missed six months each time.

“All the while the old man was talking law at me,” went on Dick. “Yep, he never missed a chance. When he was starving back in the big town, he used to go to sleep dreaming about the lawyers that get to be presidents and senators, and the like! So he’s got it planned for me. I’m to step right out and get to where he wanted to be. Sure, I waded through the Latin and all that bunk.

“He used to think it was great. He’d sit back and listen to me conjugate a Latin verb like he was hearing soft music; and when I busted out with some French, you would have thought that I’d handed him a shot of redeye—he’s that far gone on education!”

“Good for him!” said I, thinking of Father McGuire and all of his patient hours spent to teach me the little that I had learned.

“Hey, Porfilo, are you kidding me?”

“Go on,” said I. “I’m listening.”

“It’s pretty silly. The grand bust came when I was shoved into the debating team because they couldn’t find anybody else to take the job in my last year at high school. The boys used to josh me quite a lot about being an orator. You see? It got my back up. I wrote up a line of lingo. I grabbed a-plenty of it out of books. Then I learned it by heart.

“When I was riding home at night, I used to spout out that stuff big and loud and talk so almighty fiery that I near scared my bronco to death. So when the time come for the debate itself, I wasn’t fazed much by the crowd in the assembly room. Back yonder in the rear row was my old man. I took a slant at him, sitting up there looking white and nervous, as if I was on trial for murder.

“He thinks that I’m gunna bust down,” says I to myself. ‘Here’s where he gets one big treat.’

“So, when my turn comes, I sashay out and let the boys and girls have it.

“The others on the teams, they had been talking sort of strained and nervous, as if they was apologizing for being up there pretending to try to talk sense. But I hit ’em from the hip. I pulled my punches right out of the ground and talked like the folks in that room was a measly crowd of mustangs, and I was trying to herd ’em into the only corral where they belonged.



“They liked it. Now and then, while I was roarin’ and ragin’ up and down the platform, I took a slant at the old man and seen him turn from white to pink, and then he begun to grin, and then he begun to laugh, and then he begun to rub his hands and rock around in his chair and nudge his friends in the ribs and point out to them what a smart and sassy kid his son was!

“I finished up in a blaze of glory and sat down sweating, and pretty near to laughing, because they give me quite a cheer, with the old man the leading voice.

“After that debate there wasn’t no doubt left in his head. He figgered it out that his son was one of the smartest men in the country, and was gunna walk right through a governorship to the Senate and out again to the president’s chair. All he seen was visions of me deliverin’ an inaugural oration. All that he prayed for was to live till the president could have him to lunch in the White House.

“After that, he begun sort of talkin’ up to me, like he was a little boy, and I was an old man. He didn’t give no more orders to me. He just sat around and suggested things, and when I didn’t do what he wanted, he looked sort of sick and sad. He’d come in and sit down and ask my advice about his business. Sure he did. It would of flabbergasted you to see what a difference that debate of mine made to him—a lot of lingo that I’d picked up out of the books and hung together with pins and paste, you might say.

“Well, I hadn’t minded it so much in the days when he said that I was to be a lawyer and I said I wasn’t, and then he roared out that he’d disinherit me, and give all of his money to charity—me being an only son! That wasn’t so bad. It was just a fight.

“But when it got so that I said I wouldn’t never be a lawyer, and he only turned white and bit his lip and looked down to his plate and stopped eatin’—why, then it sort of made me nervous. I felt that I was pretty near to doing what he wanted just because I pitied him.

“Finally things got pretty bad, and I seen that I’d have to bust loose.

“So I busted. The first thing that I done was to saddle a mule—because if a mule is good enough for Porfilo, it’s good enough for me. I started out to show the old man that I wasn’t the timber that they hacked lawyers out of. And here I am, Porfilo!”

## 5

I RODE along for a while just chewing my lip and thinking not of the kid, but of poor old Orton who was living to see his son president.

“What do you want to do?” said I.

“Anything but be a lawyer.”

“Want to be a rancher?”

“That’s better.”

“Interested in raising cows, eh?”

“Me? Not a bit.”

“But you like riding the range, and working with a rope, and tail-ending cows out of tanks where they got bogged down and—”

“The devil, no!” said Dick. “I hate that sort of life! I never wasted the time to learn how to swing rope. It isn’t cows that I want to play around with!”

“Just what *do* you want to be?”

“I figger on bein’ free, the way that you are! Up here in the mountains—nothing to do but to ride around and have a good time.”

“With what, Dick? You’re the first man that ever rode two steps beside me in the mountains!”

“Why, if you ain’t got men to play around with, you got the winds, ain’t you?” he asked almost angrily. “If you got nothin’ else, you got the danger of bein’ caught, any minute! That’s fun enough, by my way of thinking!”

I saw that I could not answer him immediately. But I knew that my heart bled for poor old Orton, somewhere in the hills of the cow-range country.

“How did your father get his start?” I asked.

“He got a little money together. He was sort of wild when he was a kid. That’s why he hates wildness in me, maybe. He made some money selling newspapers, although it seems hard to believe that anybody could save money doing that, and then he floats out West. He worked on the range for a couple of years, just drifting around and learning the business, and liking the folks out this way and the way that they live.

“After all of that, he put his money—it was only a few thousand—into cows, and he settled down and got married and began to have luck. He’s had luck ever since. He’s boomed that little farm into a man-sized ranch, and it keeps growing. He’s got a good head to be a rancher, the old man has! But why does everybody have to work?”

I remembered something Father McGuire said to me—that no man could be really happy except through work—but I was not so far gone that I would try salty maxims

like that on a young fire-eater like Dick.

But you've no idea how old it made me feel to listen to him. Older than the hills!

We reached a good camping ground, and there I decided to stop for the night. Dick pointed out that it was fairly close to the Chisholm camp, but I felt that I was not apt to be followed quickly—not until they had been able to organize a sizable posse. Perhaps you will think that was vanity on my part, but one has to keep an eye on psychology as well as other facts. People in the mountains were afraid of me. I had come to count on that fear.

I told Dick to go ahead and make camp, because I intended to strike across country to see a man. I would not be back until the morning, I said; but I hoped to return at close to daybreak.

He did not like to have me go, but I persuaded him at last by giving him my word that I would be back and by leaving one of my guns. I pretended that I wanted him to look over the mechanism because it was beginning to be hard on the trigger. As a matter of fact, it worked more easily than I thought!

However, he was flattered to be asked an opinion. He made a little fire, and I left him sitting cross-legged beside it, working away at that gun with all his might.

Then I headed across country, and I made Roanoke work like mad. Because there was a good deal of emotion in me, just then, connected with that crazy youngster. Besides, I was utterly baffled, and I wanted to get to a wiser head than mine was.

I drifted over a bare, flat summit of piled rocks. A dozen big shadows started up before me and pitched over the other side down the side of the mountain—mountain sheep. They were gone, and the noise of their going ended, and the silence was suddenly and strongly upon me again before one could turn around—so to speak!

I peered over the ragged edge. It was a descent so frightful that even Roanoke would not have ventured it even had I the heart for such a risk. But these big creatures had gone down as though on wings. Suddenly I knew what was in the heart of Dick Orton. He wanted to be like those great sheep—wild and free and totally unhampered.

Well, I had read books—mostly poetry—where there is a great deal of talk about untrammelled freedom, but I have to confess that I have always found freedom a pretty painful thing—and the greatest bore in the world! We're made to help one another—or disturb one another. Here and there is a bad man or a worse woman; but on the whole, are not people a pretty reasonable lot?

For my part, I have not much sympathy with the fellows who spend a great part of their time hating others. I can state offhand that I've never come to know anyone without finding a great deal worth liking. That goes for a lot whom I started by hating with all my heart—my bitterest enemies, in fact.

This night, I pushed Roanoke hard, as I said before. The ordinary route would have cost us twenty-five or thirty miles of hard travel. I took the air line route and landed where I wished to be in just half of that distance and about two hours of time. I left Roanoke grunting and mumbling to himself—a way he had when he felt that he had been worked too hard—and I waded through the forest and the undergrowth until I

came to the back wall of a house with just a glinting high light on one window where a star left its image as though in water.

I went up to that window. It was half open, and so low to the ground that I could lean in and smell the warmth of the house and hear the breath of the sleeping man.

“Lawton!” said I.

There was no start or exclamation. Manhunters learn to waken smoothly and noiselessly as they learn to pull their guns. An instant more and he was in front of the window.

“Porfilo,” I explained.

At that he grunted very loudly.

“You’ve come to tell me what a pretty party you’ve had, I suppose,” said the sheriff. “You’ve come to tell me what the papers left out, I guess. You’ve come to tell me what fun it was to stand up there and drop three gents one after another—”

“Sheriff—” I tried to break in.

But he was too angry to listen to reason. He went on in full flood: “I want to tell you how much fun it was to have people cracking jokes about me—a sheriff that went up to get a pardon for a man that he wasn’t able to catch.

“‘He’s swore that he’ll put his hands on Porfilo, and this is the only way that he can do it!’

“That’s what they said about me!

“Well, Porfilo, it was a lot of fun to go to meet the governor the next morning after you’d held up the stage. Did you know that he was a cowpuncher when he was a kid?”

I said that I did not know it.

“He was a mule skinner, too,” said the sheriff, “but the cussing that he done that morning laid over anything that I ever heard tell of from any mule skinner or cowpuncher that I ever seen! The cussing he done was worthy of a governor, I tell you—it was that rare. When he got through cussing, he turned around on me and Father McGuire and told us what he thought of us for having made a fool of him about a gent that had done what you had done.”

“Sheriff,” I protested, “I didn’t stick up that stage.”

He only snorted. “The holdup boy rode a mule and admitted to your name, you blockhead!”

“Lawton,” said I, “I have four thousand dollars in my pocket which I can prove didn’t come from that holdup. You know me. I ask you if I’d hold up a stage when I had that much cash in my wallet?”

It silenced him for a moment, but still he was not convinced. He had been so thoroughly humiliated at the governor’s office that he could not swallow his grudge against me all in a moment.

“Who else *could* do it?” he asked.

“A fool kid, eighteen years old, who got tired of a quiet life, had read a lot of bunk about me, and started out to make news.”

It struck the sheriff in a heap. It was so unexpected that he saw that I could not have invented it. Then I told him the story as I had heard it—briefly.

“What am I to do?” I asked.

“Shove a gun under his nose and bring him into town and collect the pardon of the governor the next day!” he declared.

“And send one of the best kids I ever met to prison for the best part of his life?”

The sheriff cursed most profanely.

“Well?” said I.

“Damnation!” said the sheriff. “Why d’you bring your soiled life around to me and ask me to launder it for you? Do your own dirty work!”

“I ask you, as a sheriff what would you do?”

He only groaned. Then, “You’re right, Leon,” said he.

“About what?” said I.

“You might have saved your long ride,” said he. “Of course I wouldn’t do nothing other than you’re gunna do—and that’s to give the kid a chance to make good! Now get out of here—I wish that I’d never heard your name, and never seen your face!”

I must add that there was another word from the sheriff as I disappeared—a final greeting which he leaned out the window to call after me as I hurried away through the night. I heard his voice—a little modified for fear lest some other person in the house might gather what he had to say:

“I’m on the warpath after you again, Lee! I’m coming hot-foot. The governor told me that I had to—or quit!”

I was sorry for Lawton. Of all the fine and fearless men who ever drew breath or buckled on guns, there was never a finer or a more fearless one than our sheriff. I loved him as I have rarely loved another man. All my association with him had been a strange one of friendship and of enmity, and I hardly knew what to say of him to myself, except that I had a lasting conviction that if the time ever came when he had me cornered and could put the irons on my wrists, he would wish heartily that it was another man besides himself who was doing it.

Yet it was his duty to hound me to the best of his ability. An ability which no one had dared to question until the long list of his failures to secure me after I had repeatedly broken the law in his own county!

However, I was rather downhearted after my interview with him. That he was right I did not doubt. It was what my own conscience told me. Though, perhaps, some fine quibblers might declare that the sheriff was wrong, and that he would encourage law-breaking by such advice as he had given to me on that night, yet I was sure that he was right. For if Dick Orton were to be sent to the penitentiary, it would surely be the making of a real bad man when he came out.

I knew where the Orton place was, though I had never seen the owner, or heard him described until Dick described him that evening. I calculated that I could get to the Orton ranch by midnight, and that I could round back to the place where I had left Dick by the time that the morning dawned.

So I pressed Roanoke ahead. He had covered a frightful distance and raised and lowered his strong body a prodigious number of yards in the past twenty-four hours, but still there was something in him which responded. I am sure that no horse could have lived with him over half of the journey which he had made. But when he swung into his long trot, he ambled along with as little friction as a wolf.

At that trot I took him down the next ravine which opened over the heads of the rolling hills, and then across the hills to the Orton ranch. It was a typically ugly place. A long, squat building under the brow of a low northern hill. There was not a tree near it. Summer must have burned that house until it was an oven inside, and winter must have frozen it.

I left Roanoke at a little distance, as usual, and took the extra chance of loosening the girths so that he might breathe. Then I went straight to the front door and knocked loudly. There was finally a faint groan and the squeak of a footfall in an upper room. Then a head and white-clad shoulders leaned out.

“Word from Dick,” I called softly.

There was an exclamation which did not form any words; the figure disappeared, and presently I saw a light flare behind that upper window. Voices muttered rapidly; then steps descended, and the door was thrown open. I saw a grizzly-headed man I knew must be Orton, and behind him the frightened face of a woman.

“Keep your light back!” I commanded, as he began to raise it above his head. “Send Mrs. Orton back. I’ll talk to you alone. Do you understand?”

Mrs. Orton made some sort of an incoherent protest, but her husband, after a moment of thought, waved her back, and she hurried down the hall.

“Will you come in?” he asked me.

He put the lamp down on a hall table and then started violently with a little groan of consternation when the light fell dimly over my face. I have said that it was not a handsome face nor a pleasant one, and my blunt features were too well-known through the mountains.

Too many posters had been published showing me and naming the reward upon my head—dead or alive! That was always the frightful part of it, to me. Dead or alive, as though I were already in part a corpse. At least, so far as the law cared for me!

“Porfilo!” breathed old Orton.

But his fear left him instantly. He was too full of a greater emotion than fear to let it control him for more than a moment.

“It’s you, eh?” he went on bitterly. “Ah, I might of knowed how it was. It was you that got my boy away at last, Porfilo? Him after talkin’ about you and dreamin’ about you for three years! Now what more d’you want out of me?”

“A little common sense, and a little patience to hear what I have to say,” said I.

He folded his arms and stared grimly at me. He was a big man, like his son, and he had his son’s straight eyes, though they were covered with a dense gray brush of bristling hair.

“I’ll hear you yap,” said he.

“Dick is with me in the hills,” said I.

“I guessed it.”

“I’ve come to tell you that I want to get him back to you if I can.”

“That’s likely—having got him there once!”

“He got *himself* there,” said I, growing a little hot.

“How, if you please?”

I was so angry that the words snapped out of their own accord.

“By holding up the Sanburn stage.”

The old man blinked at me for a moment, and then in a flush of rage, he lifted his fist as though he would strike me to the floor for blasphemy.

“You blackguard!” cried he. “When you and your mule were seen there—and when you named yourself to ’em?”

“Was it likely that I’d name myself?” said I. “Did you have all of your mules the day after the holdup?”

He had framed an answer to the first question with his lips, but the second question apparently struck a chord in him, for he started and then lowered his hand.

“Porfilo,” said he rather weakly, “what does it mean? Will you try to tell me?”

“He played the fool,” said I, “because you’ve talked him almost mad with this law stuff. He wanted to prove that he was fitted for something else—and he’s proved it, right enough. With three men in bed on account of the proof!”

Something in the way in which I said this—for truth sometimes is as piercing as the sound of a gong—dropped him weakly into a chair and opened his eyes at me.

“I don’t want to hurt you too much,” said I, “but I came here tonight to tell you where Dick is, because I know that you must be almost mad.”

“Aye,” said he in a broken voice. “Almost mad these last days. I thought—he was dead!”

“He’s very much alive. As I said before, I’m going to try to get him back here to you. When I send him, I’m going to try to have him in a mood to listen to reason. I’m going to try to have him in a mood to do whatever you want him to do. Even law school, if you can’t think of a better thing!”

“Porfilo,” said he, “you talk like a white man. Only, my head is sort of spinning. I don’t see—”

“He’s big and husky, and you’ve let him have an easy life,” said I, “so that he doesn’t like the idea of work. That’s the whole of it.”

“He’s had an easy life,” admitted Orton.

“He doesn’t want work of *any* kind. He thinks that outlawry is a sort of second heaven. He’s been envying me for the way in which I’ve lived in the mountains.”

“Aye, I know that.”

“Before I’m through with him, I want to teach him that it’s pretty far from a rosy dream. You understand? I want to send him back with his wings clipped. But that

leaves one thing more.”

“The stage robbery!” groaned Orton.

“Which is the one thing that stood between me and the governor’s pardon. Now, Orton, if I let your boy know what that freak of his cost me, do you know what he’d do?”

“Ride down and deliver himself up!”

“Exactly.”

The rancher gripped his hands together and bowed his head.

“The one way out, Orton, is to fix the people who were in that stagecoach so that they won’t testify against him when he *does* give himself up.”

“Fix them?”

“You could handle some of the men, I suppose, by simply telling them the truth about who did it and by paying back the money Dick took, and by paying their doctor bills. You could fix some of the cheap ones with a little money. A bit of persuasion of the same kind might smooth things over all around.”

“Is there a chance?”

“The only one to keep either Dick or me from jail. I’ll give him a fair chance. I’ll tell no stories out of school. I’ll see that when I send him back to you, he’ll have all the holdup money with him. I promise you I’ll not let him part with a cent of it. In the meantime, you work on your end of the deal—and remember that they’ve doubled the price on my head. So make it fast!”

The perspiration was fairly rolling down his face.

“Porfilo,” he said, “if I say that—”

“I don’t want thanks,” said I briskly. “I want results. So long, sir!”

I stepped back into the night and then hurried off to find Roanoke.



## 6

EVEN that giant of a mule—with a heart as strong as his body—had had enough. There was something uncertain about his gait when he struck the mountains again, and I got down from the saddle and jogged along beside him.

So we struck away as well as we could, but I was falling far behind my established schedule, so that I knew, before long, that I could not possibly reach the camp of Dick at dawn.

Indeed, I was still a good two miles of rough country away when the sun came up in the east. I pressed on with a growing anxiety. I was worried as to what he might do, left to himself in the daylight.

Then, like an answer to my thought, I heard three shots from the exact direction of the camp, which was still a good mile away from me. The distance made the explosions dull and small, and even at that distance I knew that a revolver was speaking, since there is a metal clanging in the sound of a rifle.

Those noises were made by my new friend, Dick Orton. Even that rash head of his would not permit him to shoot a revolver for the mere pleasure of target practice. No, perhaps even that folly would be possible in him, near though we still were to the camp of Chisholm.

At any rate, there was need for me to hurry. Roanoke had recovered something of his strength, due to my long run, and when I swung into the saddle he was able to take me up the slope at his long, swaying trot. We covered the next crest, and then we dipped through a lane of trees down the slope beyond.

We were about halfway down it and a scant half mile from Dick's camp where I had left him when Roanoke braced all four feet and slid to a halt. There he stood with his ugly head thrown high, sniffing danger. I, too, felt something like a shadow of apprehension pass over me. I snatched out a revolver and whirled in the saddle.

There, behind me, half hidden by a tree trunk, was the body of a man with an end of a flung rope in his hand. I saw, but I saw too late, for at the same instant, with a fatal whisper in my ear, the noose dropped over my head and then bit hard around my body and imprisoned both arms at the elbows against my ribs; then came the tug of the rope thrower's full weight, and I was dragged clumsily, helplessly, from the saddle and so, with a stunning thud, fell at full length upon the ground.

It has taken some time to tell of this. But my first glimpse of the thrower was the very instant that the rope dropped over my head and gripped my arms. From that moment I was helpless and lay bewildered, while the very trees around me turned into madmen!

Not two or three men, but a full score leaped out around me, shrieking their triumph at one another and beating backs, thumping shoulders—almost too delighted with themselves to go ahead with the simple task of securing my hands behind me.

They tied me as though my flesh were fire and would burn through ordinary bonds. They swathed me in thirty or forty pounds of rope, and still some of the older men seemed a little anxious. But I had no thought of attempting to escape.

I looked about me on the bedlam with a sort of detached interest. It did not seem possible that I, Leon Porfilo, of Mendez, the son of the town butcher, the pupil of Father McGuire, should have attained such a bad eminence that so many brave and strong men could go half hysterical at the thought of it.

The more serious portions were already making figures on the ground. There were twenty-one of them. How many times did twenty-one go into fifteen thousand?

About seven hundred bucks apiece!

“That ain’t bad for a day’s work,” said someone.

“Something extra for Lefty!” three or four chimed in.

Lefty came blushing forward, a long-shinned, gray-headed cowpuncher—the same who had caught me in the noose of the rope.

“Aw,” said Lefty, “I ain’t got a claim to two shares. Anybody could of—”

“Don’t believe it,” I put in here. “It took an expert to get that rope through the air without a swish that would have scared a whole herd of buffaloes. I congratulate you!”

Here all other voices ceased, and they stared at me. They had treated me before that moment as though I were a beast in ropes, or a demon in a bottle—a thing to be gaped at, but only with horror. They seemed to see something human in me after that.

“How did you manage to make your throw so quickly after Roanoke stopped?” I asked him.

“I seen him begin to slow a mite. So I started swayin’ the rope. Just as he got toward a halt, I let her go. About a fifth of a second more, and you’d of drilled me, Porfilo.”

He rubbed his chest as though he had a foretaste of where that bullet might have entered.

“I suppose I should,” I admitted. “Who’s in charge here?”

“Why, nobody,” said someone.

I could not believe it, but it was the entire truth. They were simply a random lot of cowpunchers and lumbermen and hunters who, hearing the news of my appearance at Chisholm’s camp, had gathered there to hear all that had happened. Then they had blundered up the mountainside the instant the sun rose in a vague hope that they might come on traces of me. Half of them were on foot!

Never was there such a blind and helpless beginning to a manhunt, and never a hunt that turned out more beautifully!

I had been riding in such a blind haste, with my eyes so fixed upon the higher side of the mountain, that I had not seen the telltale prints of the score of men and horses on

the ground over which I rode. Well, I have always felt that this was fate.

Although, perhaps, a better explanation may be that long success had made me careless. Just as a man feels that he is invincible—at that very moment the ground is sure to be jerked from under his feet.

I have often been asked just how I felt at the moment of my capture. What terror and horror and despair welled up in me like shadowy waves. But I have to confess that I felt no great amount of any of those three emotions. Neither did my whole life flash before me; neither did I see the yawning gates of the prison.

I was a little frightened and a good deal irritated because I had made such a clumsy end after a rather stirring career; but nothing disturbed me as much as the ache of my bones from my fall.

After that, I think I was rather more amused than anything else, and very busy watching the faces around me and listening to their voices, and getting a cheap pleasure, I confess, out of the joy they felt in capturing me.

On the whole, I don't think that the actual hand of danger is ever so terrible. What breaks the heart and shatters the nerve is the face of danger in the distance. To wait for her approach is a frightful thing. But when she actually strikes, it is not much. I have heard men say that people in the mouth of a lion, gashed and broken by the tremendous jaws, feel no pain whatever. And danger is like a lion. She is most frightful in the distance.

At least, I am certain that when they lifted me to the back of Roanoke and tied my feet beneath his belly, I was not at all enraged with my captors. They were a very good-natured lot, all jovial and smiling, of course, because of that good morning's work which meant a year's pay popped into their pocket for a single half-day's outing.

Lefty was placed beside me, as the post of honor. The rest of them grouped themselves in convenient array to guard against an attempt at escape or a possible rescue. Far before, behind, and to either side they distributed flank, van, and rear guards to take heed of coming danger.

Then there was an inner cordon of five men, including Lefty, who rode around me, each with a gun in his hand, while the remaining nine formed a larger circle beyond these.

In this fashion I was brought down the slopes and back to the Chisholm camp.

Lefty was a very amiable host. He seemed to be rather ashamed of the part which he had played in the affair, and he kept insisting as he rode along at my side that he had no bad feelings toward me—that he wished me well—that he hardly knew why he had ridden out with the posse—and that he earnestly hoped that I would come well out of my trouble.

I could not help smiling at Lefty, but I knew that he meant what he said.

"But," I said to him, "it's too bad that you weren't alone. You would have had the fifteen thousand all for yourself!"

It was too large a sum for Lefty to grasp in one sweep of the eye; another idea startled him.

“Porfilo,” said he, “d’you think that I’d of tackled you if I’d been alone? Not in a million years; I ain’t such a fool!”

If I had protested, he would have said a good deal more, but I made no answer to him. However, the truth is perfectly patent that, no matter how many there were around Lefty, it was he and he alone who captured me. When I looked at his simple, good-natured face, a great deal of the vanity left me.

So they brought me in to Sanburn, and they brought me in with a veritable army.

For the news had shot like magic across the mountains, and scores of hurrying riders were spurring to reach me; and in the midst of shouting and dust and snorting horses and jingling of bridle chains and spurs and thudding of hoofs, they escorted me into the town.

# 7

I HAD a sort of triumphal procession into the town, as one might say. That is, everyone came to windows and waved at me and shouted, and I smiled back at them. In fact, I felt no malice. I was only glad that the long fight was over and that I no longer had to freeze and starve on the mountains and live shut away from my fellows.

That is what I felt, I should say, as I passed through the streets of the town, but the moment the doors of the jail closed behind me and sent a long iron clangor through the big empty space within, my pleasure ended. I cast one side glance at Lefty, and Lefty, having met that look, fell suddenly into the background. From that day to this, I have never seen his face!

After that, I was prepared for what they did. First they tried me with questions, to which I refused all answers, except to admit that my name was Leon Porfilo. There was no use dodging that; but for the rest they got nothing from me. Then they dressed me for the cell.

They left me my clothes, but those clothes were wrecked before they were through. They searched every nook and cranny where so much as a needle could be hidden. They probed and reprobated my shoes, and even investigated the sections of which the heels were built, for fear lest I might have something concealed there—some tiny instrument with which I might unlock my bonds and escape.

In the same fashion they went over all my clothes. It took three men a patient hour of searching before they were sure that my clothes did not contain hidden secrets, and even when that search had ended, they did not appear entirely certain that all was well, and they watched me with extremely wistful eyes.

Next they led me to the cell and put on the irons. Heavy irons for the wrists, but with a mercifully long chain connecting the bracelets, and ponderous irons for the feet, hitched to a great ball. It was possible for me to move across the floor at a snail's pace, dragging that impediment behind me, but I made as much noise as a cavalry charge when I *did* move. They were shameful things, those irons, but they were very effective. I have often wondered why that old-fashioned stuff is not more often used. There would be fewer escapes, by far!

There I sat or lay or stood in Sanburn jail for ten mortal days. There I waited, and the crowds filed past the bars every day and pointed and whispered and laughed and gaped at me.

“There is Leon Porfilo!”

They were never weary of filing by. At first I could not endure their glances and my sense of shame, but afterward I schooled myself, and I used to sit back and smoke a cigarette and watch them, and meet every eye in turn. It was very odd.

There is a weight in a steady glance that some people cannot endure. Most of those who went by those bars could not endure my stare. The men, particularly. Their eagerness went out; more than one of them would actually look the other way, with a shudder. I think that they felt I was trying to jot down their faces for future reference, so that I could take revenge upon them for my shame! The women were bolder, strange to say.

Western women do not fear men. These girls and ladies looked at me with horror, sometimes, but more often with pity, and still more often with a sort of smiling good fellowship, for all the world as though they understood exactly what had brought me there, and it was no fault with which they could not sympathize.

But it was a bitter grind—to endure those straining eyes day by day. Yet the days were heaven compared with the frightful, black, hopeless nights. No, not black, either, for from a far corner of the cell room a single lamp cast a vague glimmer, and there was never a time when I could not make out the faintly gleaming parallel bars which confined me, and beyond them more dim lines of light—a forest of steel.

Sometimes I felt like running at those bars and tearing at them with my hands. I fought that feeling back—always with a horrible thought that someday the temptation might be too great for me. If I slipped into madness once, where would I end?

For I had lived for three years and a half on the mountains as free as a bird, and the cold and the wretchedness which had been driving me back toward other men were now forgotten. All I could remember was that to be free is to be glorious. I yearned for the regions above timberline—and for Roanoke! The ugly head of that mule drifted across my dreams like the symbolic eagle of my country.

It was not always a drifting line of people who paused, and gaped, and went on—men, women, and children who were lifted to gaze at me and learn that bad men came to such an end as this. For now and then the line ended. It was restricted to calling hours, you might say. In between people of importance were allowed to come to visit me. The newspaper reporters were always considered people of importance!

Well, I tried to tell myself that such fellows were beneath my attention. But they weren't. No one is beneath the opinion of any man. What the beggar in the street thinks, troubles the mind of the king. There's no doubt of that. I smile at the rugged people who damn all the world except a few friends. Margaret O'Rourke came to me, too, and I dragged my iron ball across the floor, making a small thunder behind me, and took her small hand through the bars. She did not speak half a dozen words, and those were incoherent. She came in trying to be brisk and cheerful, like her old self. But she began to cry at once, and clung to the bars and buried her face in her arm and wept like a child.

Then I saw, all at once, that I had treated her not as a man should treat the woman he loves, but like a sulky fool. I despised myself. I saw in Mike the truth of her, which was all womanly and gentle.

Her visit and one other were the only ones that did me good.

The other visit was from Father McGuire. I had not seen him for years. But he looked the same. A little older and more tired, but not much. He was full of impatience and could hardly pause to shake my hand.

Then he wagged a lean forefinger at me. “Leon Porfilo,” said he, “you did not hold up that stage!”

“Of course not,” I said.

“There is not much careless brutality in you. Besides—you would not tell your name—and more than that, if you had been there, really, I don’t think that any guns would have been pulled against you! Now I’m going back to see that governor—although I’ve tantalized him about you until he hates my face. Only this much before I go:

“Keep your head high and your hands clean—as clean as you’ve kept them up to this time, my boy! I know what you are; and a few others guess what you are. We need you back on our sides. Good-by!”

The world is not large enough to hold two like Father McGuire!

That same day, a little withered man stood in front of the bars and smoked a cigarette and looked me up and down. It was Tex Cummins, who had freed me from the jail in Mendez three years before—freed me because he thought he could use me afterward.

“Well, well, Leon,” said he, “I see that you’re back to your old tricks again—popping yourself into free lodgings!”

I did not answer him. I knew that I had not sufficient subtlety of tongue to talk with such a man as Cummins.

“But in the meantime,” said he, “I wonder if it is not just as well that you are in here instead of out there!” He waved his hand to indicate the outer world. “Because out there, I was coming close on your trail, my lad, and if I ever catch you—you will wish that you had taken a shorter cut to purgatory, Porfilo.”

I had to make an answer to that. So I dipped up a little of the bitterness and the scorn that was in me and I said to him: “I’ve beaten you and your crowd before, Cummins, and I’ll beat you again. I’ll tell you why: A crook has no real chance against an honest man!”

He laughed in an ugly way.

“Well, honest man,” said he, “here’s your reward. But if you’d worked with me, you fool, you’d be rich and happy now, Porfilo.”

That was the way he left me. But I am glad to say that he did not make me regret.

Now I come to that tenth day of my stay in the prison, which was one of the strange days of my life. I had felt that I was almost at the end of my nerve strength, and I said so to Sheriff Lawton, who came in for the first time.

He told me that the string of visitors who came to gape at me would be shut out from that time forward, and he heartily damned the keepers who had allowed them to

come in to me up to that time.

When he questioned me about the stage holdup, I had to admit that I did not care to talk of that affair, and my reluctance angered him a great deal.

“I believe you,” he said. “I believe that you didn’t do that job. It doesn’t ring like Porfilo to me. Stage stick-ups are a little too spectacular for your particular kind of nerve. But, Leon, how the devil am I to base my belief on anything more than a mere hunch? What the devil will a jury say?”

“Juries will give me no sort of a show anyway,” said I. “How can they give a show to a man with fifteen thousand on his head?”

Lawton grinned sourly at me. “They’ve collected their reward,” said he. “Well, I’m glad that I didn’t have a share in it, boy!”

I thanked him for that, and he talked cheerfully, but about other things, until he left me.

After that, a long, long day followed. From one small, high-placed window on the wall, a spot of sunlight was cast upon the floor. Far slower than the movement of the hour hand of a clock, it seemed to me, that spot of sun crept to my cell. When it reached me, I kneeled and held out my hands to it until my fingers were yellowed and warmed by it. It was more than washing in liquid gold to me, at that moment!

But, after the spot of sun had left the floor of the cell nest, the long evening began. It was an age while the soft light of the end of the day deepened from yellow to rose, and then to violet outside the window. I stared at the window frame as though it were my last hope of life.

Through it there seeped in a faint tang of the alkali dust which was raised by playing children and by passing riders in the street. Never was such a sweet perfume! Through the window, also, came fragments and rhythms of pleasant voices. Oh, who has not noticed that all voices are pleasant so long as they come from human lips and from the distance?

I felt myself growing weaker. I had a queer choking in my throat and a lightness in my head. I knew that my nerve was breaking down. But then the sorrow of the day turned into the black bitterness of the night!

I thought of the pure, cold winds that comb the upper mountains where I had lived so long, and the last bird voices in the wind, and the bell tones of lowing cattle out of the valleys—the deepening dark and the sudden nearness of the stars above my head.

Yes, I was weakening fast. If someone had entered the door of my cell at that moment and exclaimed: “Porfilo, what are the sins and shameful actions of your life?” I should have confessed them all swiftly, almost eagerly!

Western towns fall asleep early, just as they rise early. Now all of Sanburn was lost in silence. Not perfect silence, but that deeper stillness through which occasional noises burst on the ear with a sudden violence—a dog barking, a sharp break of laughter, an oath from a passing man. But even these sounds grew less frequent. Sanburn slept.

But I did not sleep. For two days and nights I had not slept, and I lay on my cot with a thudding heartbeat, telling myself that another night of torture was about to



begin, and that when the morning came, if I had not slept, I should be close to hysterical weakness—close to a tearful breakdown. I—Leon Porfilo!

I had always looked upon myself as a creature made out of some stubborn material, as different from the stuff that composes other men as iron and rock are from wood. But now I had a brief inner glance, and what I saw astonished me.

That night wore past its first few ages, and then I heard the guard, who had been rustling a newspaper in the outer office, begin to walk up and down the floor. There was a wooden floor out there—a concrete floor in the cell nest, to embed the lower end of the bars. Every creak of the floor was very audible to me. Once he opened the door and came in to me.

“Hello, Porfilo!”

I did not speak.

“Sulky still!” snarled the guard.

I think he had been drinking a bit. There was a thick, numb articulation in his speech. For that matter, it is no cheerful task to be night guard in a jail.

“Good night,” said I.

“It ain’t no easier on me than it is on you,” he declared. “Why not loosen up a bit and act sort of human? I ain’t a wolf, Porfilo. We could help each other waste a little time.”

I did not reply. It made me sick at heart to even think of chatting with my prison keeper. So he turned on his heel with an oath, and was off again. The door closed heavily on him; his pacing up and down the office floor began once more.

Then his striding paused. I heard the opening of a door and then, distinctly, a gasping noise, a scuffle—after which the outer door of the jail closed heavily.

Another pause—a muffled voice—and the office door was flung open. I saw the guard come hurrying, the lantern in his hand. Behind him stalked a tall fellow. A sway of the lantern and the upfling of the light struck across a masked face.

“A lynching party!” I thought, and my stomach cleaved to my backbone.

But there was no murmur outside. Lynching parties do not gather so soundlessly. After all, my crimes were not of the variety which induce lynching.

The keeper paused at my door, unlocked it, and stepped in.

“Take your time,” said the masked man. “There’s no hurry.”

It was a deepened, roughened voice, but I knew it—Dick Orton! Suddenly a great spring of joy opened in my heart. A wine of happiness rushed through me. I loved Dick Orton. I loved the whole human race for his sake!

The keeper had seen or heard enough to throw him into a panic. His hands were trembling, but he managed to find the locks and to turn the key in them. The shackles fell from my hands. I clasped my numbed wrists and chafed them. The weights fell from my legs—I stretched myself on tiptoe, turned suddenly lighter and stronger than ever I had been before.

“You,” said Orton to the keeper, “stand back in that corner. If you yap, I’ll come back and blow your brains out.”

He drew me out of the cell and closed the self-locking door on the guard. Then he thrust a pair of guns into my hands. I slipped them in my pockets, however.

“Why?” Dick paused to ask me.

“It’s never worth a killing,” said I.

He merely grunted, and then he led the way through the cell room. At the office door he paused. Behind us there was a muffled sound—the groan of the guard in shame and in despair!

We stepped into the office.

“There’s a rifle,” said Dick. “Do you want it?”

I took it from the wall. There is nothing much better than a rifle by way of a club. Then I followed Dick calmly through the front door, first cramming on my head the sheriff’s own old sombrero which hung from a nail.

Two horses were tethered at the hitching rack. I saw that they were tall and well made. We untied them and swung into the saddle just as half a dozen punchers came rollicking around the bend in the street and swept by us.

One of them drew rein. The others slowed.

“Where you two been?”

“Trying to see Porfilo. They turned us down!” I laughed.

It was easy to laugh. Now that I was so close to freedom, I felt that a hundred giants could not have recaptured me.

The six laughed, also.

“We tried the same thing today. Lawton has shut down. The tightwad!”

Here a raging voice from the jail cried: “Help!”

“What the devil!” cried I. “What’s up in the jail?”

“Help! He’s gone!”

“An escape—Porfilo!” I yelled. I pretended to start for the jail door.

All the six were before me. With Indian yells they lunged from their horses and sprinted for the front doors of the jail. Orton and I snapped into our saddles and turned the corner of the street.

Behind us was a confusion of sounds. In the street around us, and staring out from their doors and their verandas were men roused by the shouting from the jail—everyone with a gun. But they did not heed us, jogging slowly along. Oh, it was easy to be calm out of the cursed shadow of the jail!

We turned another corner and now the nerves of Dick Orton could stand the strain no longer. He gave his horse the spurs and we flew out of Sanburn at a raging gallop.

We flew out onto the dark hills beyond, with the wind of our gallop in our teeth and the clear, pure stars above us, reaching down to us, and the great, free mountains

looming up into the sky on every side. I threw out my arms to it and thanked heaven for such a man as Dick Orton and for liberty.

Then we rode on. The confusion in Sanburn died behind us. We drew rein of one accord, without any spoken word. I reached for Dick's hand and found and crushed it.

That is the true story of the jail delivery at Sanburn about which the newspapers stormed and fought for so many days. Everyone said "Bribery!" and the jail guard left that section of the country, a disgraced man. But there was no bribery.

The thing had succeeded so simply because everyone expected that the attempt to escape would come from within, not from without. It was believed that I had no friend in the world except a sheriff and a priest. Sheriffs and priests do not break into jails!

## 8

“AND ROANOKE?” said Dick, after we had ridden for some time.

“Ah! If only I were on the back of Roanoke,” said I. “Then the ride to freedom would be perfect. But perhaps it is enough that I am free, Dick. Free, free, free! I never knew what was in that word before!”

“It was easy,” said Dick Orton rather thoughtfully. “Mighty easy.”

“Easy for the man with the right amount of nerve, Orton. But I should have hesitated a good deal, even for my best friend.”

“Would you?” said Dick, childishly pleased by that compliment. “But now you’re just talkin’. Well, Porfilo, leastways we’re on the move, and we’re together!”

He said it grimly, as one who has accomplished a great thing. I really believe that to that foolish youngster it was a bit of heaven to be riding with me, simply because the law had proscribed me, and men were hunting me for a great price.

“It’ll be twenty thousand after this,” chuckled Dick, and I knew that I was reading his thoughts correctly.

He could do nothing but chatter and sing, after that. He told me how he had conceived the idea. After ten days, he felt that they would begin to relax their precautions. Sanburn would be used to the sensation of having such a prisoner in its midst. The guards would be used to him, also.

So, that very evening, Dick had descended to his father’s ranch and in the corral he had selected two of the best horses—well-known and tried by him. These he saddled from the harness shed and brought all safely away.

But, before he went, he slipped up to the house in order to play the spy and see what was going on there. He had looked through the window of the living room and seen enough to satisfy him—his mother and father, each screened behind a newspaper.

“The same as ever,” said Dick, with a little of childish chagrin. “I thought that they’d do a little grieving about me!”

“You young fathead!” said I. “D’you think that they’re going to sit around and hold their hands and cry about you for two whole weeks? Besides, maybe they’ve found out that they don’t need you as much as they thought they did. The doctors cut out meat, and they find that they can still get fat on vegetables!”

He did not take my banter in a very light manner. He mused for some time, heavily, on this subject, and muttered a few words to himself, but I was rather glad to see that he was impressed. He had been an only child and a favored child all his life—and even the most manly fellow is apt to begin to take things for granted after a time.

I headed toward a house which I knew well. I had stopped there half a dozen times two years before, and I had been able to pay the squatter well for his trouble. He was a dark-faced Spaniard or Frenchman—I don't know which! But he had a foreign accent in his lingo that made me know that he was an outsider. You understand that I'm saying all of these things colloquially.

Well, I suppose that Joe Loveng was what generally went by the name of a "dago." Out West that means some fellow with a bit of Latin blood and black eyes and a swarthy skin and a language which leaves a taint in his English. That was the way with Joe Loveng.

Other punchers had little use for him. He was hard-headed. He ran sheep. His fist was tight. And—he talked queer. That is to say, he did not speak the particular sort of ungrammatical slang which was chattered in that part of the range.

He made his living, as I have said, by running a few sheep on his land. It was not very good land, but he made the best of it. He lost practically no sheep because he tended them as if they were his children, and he always had mutton that weighed twenty or thirty pounds more on the hoof than any other mutton on the range. When other sheep began to get pot-bellied and thin-backed, Joe's flock was as round as butterballs.

Besides, he had a little apple orchard which was in a hollow of rich ground, and he made cider from these and peddled the stuff when it was hard. He had a vineyard, too, rambling over a few hillsides where the soil was gravelly. Those vines gave him grapes enough to make several fine casks of wine every year, and that wine was famous all over the range. Even with these sources of income, Joe was never too prosperous—or at least he never showed his prosperity.

For one thing, whatever he produced, he had eight mouths to maintain. His own, his wife's, and six children, of whom the oldest was a fifteen-year-old girl when I last saw her. Since that time, two years before, I understood that Mary and several of her brothers had grown enough to be worked in the fields, and Joe Loveng was growing prosperous on account of the extra hands which he did not have to hire.

That was the family to which I was taking Dick Orton, and I told him about the place and the people as we went along.

It was a great game for Dick. He had never stayed in the company of an outlaw at such a house.

"But," said I, "there's one danger. If Joe should take it into his head to let it be known that you were seen at his house in my company—"

"He'd be pinched for taking in an outlaw—no matter who was with you!"

"Not a bit," said I. "He'd just explain that he was afraid of being killed if he did not entertain us."

"The coward!" said Dick.

"However," said I, "I think that Joe knows what side his bread is buttered on too well for that. He used to make good money out of me."

"No dago has a thought bigger than a dollar," declared Dick.

I was half inclined to agree with him, which shows that my education in the world was almost as limited as his!

We hove in sight of the twinkling lights of the house of Joe Loveng. It was eleven o'clock or later. We had ridden a full two hours from Sanburn, and I felt that by this time we had gone far enough to avoid pursuit.

Besides, after the first great rapture of freedom and the taste of the night air was out of my throat, I began to ache with weariness. This was the third night in which I had not closed my eyes, and for ten days every nerve in my body had been under a terrible strain.

My plan was to remain at Joe Loveng's and have a fine sleep until just before the break of day. Joe was one who never allowed the sun to see him in his bed, and therefore he would be able to waken us in time. After that, we could have a bite of cold breakfast, and then we would wing away into the gray of the dawn with very little probability that any of the scouts of Sanburn might come in sight of us. Even if we did, as a matter of fact, take a glimpse of them, we and our horses would be fresh and they would be fagged from a night of hard riding.

I confided all of this plan to my companion, and he agreed with it heartily.

Then he burst out into a great tirade of self-denunciation.

"Porfilo," said he, "if it hadn't been for me, you'd be a free man with the governor's pardon in your pocket, able to sass back every sheriff on the range, and as it is, you've got to run like a scared coyote and take to the hills!"

It made me rather gloomy to hear him talk in this manner. I had not realized that he would think the thing over so logically, and come to such a conclusion.

So we hove up to the door of Joe Loveng's house, and I leaned from the saddle and through the window pointed out the scene to Dick. There sat Joe Loveng, with his feet in slippers and his fat legs spread out to the warmth of the stove, and around him sat his flock of seven with their brown faces and their bright, black eyes which were never still. It was a pleasant sight.

But, "Holy smoke!" breathed Dick. "Look at that girl! Is that the reason why you want to come here?"

I looked again. It was Mary, sitting facing us. Between fifteen and seventeen she had turned from a child into a woman, and a lovely woman at that!

## 9

IF I had had doubts as to whether or not Joe Loveng would remember me, they disappeared the instant that I met him at his door. He put out both hands and pulled me by the shoulders into the house. He kept one hand upon my arm; with the other he reached Dick Orton and pulled him in after me. And all the time he kept saying: “Meester Porfilo!”

But I cannot imitate his lingo. His words came up with a bubbling sound in the throat. He talked like a man who has just eaten some oily thing. He sent two of his oldest boys scurrying out to put up our horses. I wondered if it were the kind memory of me that caused this enthusiasm of Joe’s, or the kinder memory of the last twenty dollars which I had left with him.

“Food—wine, Mary!” he snapped at his girl.

She was already at the kitchen door and whirled to smile back at us. I saw the flash of her white teeth, and her black eyes go through and through Dick Orton.

We sat down by the fire. Dick was very quiet, thoughtful, and kept observing all in the room with a reflective eye. He looked upon Joe Loveng’s younger children, sitting in a bright-eyed, silent semicircle in the corner of the room. Dick Orton smiled upon them.

After that I began to worry.

In the meantime, Joe Loveng was hoping that the reason I was out of jail was because I had the governor’s pardon. I could not help telling him that it was because I had something better than a governor’s pardon—a friend. At this, Joe nodded and smiled at Dick, and Dick smiled back rather complacently. Then Mary came in with fried eggs and bacon and coffee and a pitcher of wine.

We marched through those provisions like lightning. I was busy eating and talking to Joe Loveng. Dick Orton said not a word, but he used his eyes very busily still, and when I announced that it was bedtime, and we got up from the table, I saw Mary Loveng blushing in the corner of the room.

There were two little attic rooms, and Loveng had his youngsters roll down our blankets there; I said good night to Dick and, drugged and sick with weariness, I blew out my light and turned in. All that I noted, through the window as the darkness flowed in around me, was the white face of a half moon which was riding in the eastern sky. Then I was asleep as suddenly as though I had been struck heavily over the head.

It seemed only an instant later that a hand seized upon my shoulder and the excited voice of Joe Loveng was barking at my ear:

“Meester Porfilo!”

I gathered my senses and both my guns and sat up with a jerk.

“Meester Orton, he has raised the devil!”

I blundered downstairs behind Joe Loveng and in the living room beneath, I found Mary cowering in a corner while Dick Orton marched magnificently up and down before her, like a lion before a lamb.

Loveng told the story with much heat. He had wakened at his usual early hour and struck the door of Mary, expecting her to start down at once to cook breakfast. But there was no answer. He opened her door and looked into her empty room!

Then, bewildered, he had gone to the window, and, looking down, he had seen them seated on a rustic bench beneath an apple tree, and each in the arms of the other. He had rushed down upon them, but when he appeared, Dick Orton had risen and declared that he would step upon Joe Loveng and make him pop with a loud noise—or something to that effect.

Here Dick put in simply that Loveng had drawn a knife on him, and then he had threatened to wring Mr. Loveng’s neck if he did not get out of the way. As for the picture upon which Loveng had looked—why, it was very simple. Dick had not been sleepy.

He had lain in his blankets for a time—thinking! Then he had got up and slipped downstairs. When he stepped from the front door of the house, he heard a rustle of a figure disappearing around the corner of the house.

He, Dick, had gone out merely to smoke a cigarette, but now he saw that he might have the pleasure of apprehending thieves about to plunder the house of his host. He turned that corner and in a single bound he had apprehended—Mary Loveng herself!

Dick was very intense and serious about it. He paid no heed to the fury of Joe, but kept his eyes fixed upon me so gravely that I knew that he was telling the truth, and all the truth. Yet it was so foolish that I could hardly keep from smiling—which would have ruined everything.

It seemed that Mary Loveng, like Dick, for some mysterious reason, had not been able to sleep. She, too, had thought of a walk under the stars as a sedative before she tried to close her eyes. Therefore she had gone down—and been terribly frightened at the appearance of a man, suddenly.

However, when they discovered one another, they were rather glad of company. They simply sat down to have a chat. The air of that summer night was warm. It was very pleasant out under the stars to watch the way of the moon, diving through the silver clouds and putting them aside as the bow of a ship puts waves away.

They had remained there—simply in a friendly chat, talking about everything and nothing. Time had suddenly disappeared like a secret thief, and if they had still been sitting and talking when the morning broke—for yonder in the east there was now a thin penciling of gray—they really had no idea how so many hours could have jumped into a pocket. It was quite startling really!

I had not had a great deal of experience in such affairs, but one doesn’t need experience. In certain important matters one is born with an instinct which is worth every whit as much as educated brains—no more! These two young idiots—their



combined ages would not have added up to the age of good sense—had simply been thrown into a whirl at the sight of one another.

He was spectacular enough to have turned the head of almost any girl, and certainly she was a flashing pretty thing. So they had sat there all night, with never a wrong thought in their heads; and even now they were sick and white with love.

I never could understand why it is that love affects people in that way. Nothing gives folks a more distressed look—unless it is seasickness.

It was perfectly patent to me that Dick had spoken the entire truth. I asked him point-blank with a single stern glance, and his reply was a look as steady as iron. By that I knew, as well as though he had sworn it.

It was far other with Joe Loveng. He had listened to the story with a raging impatience. Half a dozen times I had been forced to put a hand on his shoulder to keep him from breaking in. But, when he had his chance, he broke into a violent explosion of foreign language that rattled out as fast as cobblestones rattle under the iron rim of a cart wheel.

What he said, of course, I had not the slightest idea. But suddenly Mary leaped up with a little cry and ran and clung to Dick. He, like a stalwart young jackass, put his arm around her and threw back his head—a very fine attitude and good enough to be tried in front of any camera. But it almost got him stabbed.

Joe Loveng whipped out a nasty-looking knife, almost long enough to have spitted them both, and I really think that he would have cut the throats of the pair of them if he had had his way. As for Dick, his gun hand was frozen around the girl; I was barely in time to get the wrist of Loveng and put a grip on it that made him drop the knife with a groan. I jammed my heel on the blade and sent it to splinters of flying steel. I was angry, too.

For I hate a knife. I think I like poison more than I like a knife. In the old days in Mendez I had learned to use one. A boy will practice any art of murder because he feels it brings him closer to the possibilities of manhood.

But, since my boyhood, I had come to detest bare steel. The very thought of it, to this day, edges my nerves and runs a sharp bit of ice down my backbone.

I said to Joe: “You’re within an ace of getting your neck twisted off, you fool! What d’you mean by pulling a knife?”

Joe cowered for an instant and gave me an ugly side glance. Then his rage and his sorrow came hot in him again.

He declared that Orton had not told the truth—not half the truth. Dick swore that he had.

“Ah!” cried Joe Loveng. “Did you not kees her?”

“Say no!” whispered the white lips of Mary to her lover.

But he had become very grand and stately. “I did kiss her. Besides, she’s gunna be my wife. Now, what’ve you got to say to that?”

What Joe had to say was a great deal. Part of it was in his own tongue, whatever that was, and the small moiety was in broken English. There was no difficulty in

understanding, however. All that he had to offer was that if Mary attempted to marry such a man, he, Joe Loveng, would hang her with his own hands to the limb of the apple tree under which she had sat with her American lover.

That was rather rough talk, and I saw Dick Orton grow wild. I tried to catch his eye, but it couldn't be done. He stormed up to Joe Loveng and told him with a good deal of emphasis, helped out by a few curses which came right off the range, that if so much as a tip of her finger were hurt, if her feelings were in the slightest degree injured, he, Dick Orton, would return and take Joe Loveng by the nape of the neck and whittle him to the right size and put him into a frying pan and roast him, slowly.

This, or something to this general effect, was what Dick Orton managed to say through his teeth, fairly trembling with fury. But you cannot control such people as Joe Loveng with threats. I think that if I had been left alone with him, I could have smoothed out everything beautifully, but as it was, there was red blood in the eyes of Loveng before Dick had ended.

He ordered us out of the house, and I told Dick that we had better go hopping as fast as we could.

Nothing would do for Dick, however, but a finish in the grand manner. He had to sweep Mary into his arms and kiss her good-by in the presence of all of us. It was very silly, but it was rather touching, too. I didn't care a rap about Dick and his emotions. I knew that they would change quickly enough, and he would be well over his insanity.

But Mary was another matter. She clung to Dick and kissed him again and again, and vowed that she would die if he did not come back for her.

Well, they would have made a pretty picture if it had not been for the face of Joe in the background. He was a fire-breathing dragon, and no mistake!

I had to pry the lovers apart. Then I took Dick on one arm and with the other hand I gave Joe a twenty-dollar bill. He merely crumpled it in his palm and threw it in my face!

It was a pretty fair indication of how peevish he was. By this time I had worked up enough of a reputation—nine tenths of it totally undeserved—to keep most men from troubling me if they could avoid it, possibly. It was a bit of a shock to have that money thrown back in my face, but I let the matter drop. After all, I felt that we were too deeply in the wrong.

We went out to our horses and saddled them in a silence which lasted until we were well up the trail. Then Dick broke into song.

I am a fairly patient fellow, but that was too much. I drew rein and damned him heartily, from his hair to the tips of his toes, but Dick merely sang on, and raised his voice to drown me out.

“You have raised the devil!” I told him at last.

“It was a lark!” cried Dick Orton.

“May you burn for it!” muttered I. “You will if you dare go back to that girl.”

“Dare to go back?” said Dick. “How can I dare to stay away—after I've promised her?”

That was the way with him. A worse thing to make a bad thing better. But after that I didn't attempt to argue with him. I would as soon have tried logic on a range bull.

# 10

My chief fear was concerning the wicked tongue of Joe Loveng, which could do Dick irreparable harm by publishing the fact that he was my companion in my flight and probably my rescuer. I had given Joe only one warning as I left, and that concerned silence.

Besides, no matter what Dick had done in the way of indiscretion, he had been guilty of no real crime. I determined that if Joe Loveng peached on Dick, I would make Joe an example never to be forgotten among mountain folks.

That was all for the future, however. For the present, I began as soon as the sun was high and warm to persuade Dick that he must turn back and leave me. He was as obstinate as Roanoke on a cold morning—than which I cannot imagine greater stubbornness. He insisted that he should accompany me—unless I really felt that he hampered me!

Hampered me? After he had dragged me from a prison and while I was half mad for the lack of human company? I told him as much, but I begged him to go back to his home. I gathered together every reason on which I could lay my mind, and there were plenty of them, and all good enough to have convinced even a headstrong child. But Dick was worse than that. He was a headstrong man!

A dozen times I wished with all my heart that he had had my training under Father McGuire. It takes iron to break iron, and Father McGuire was finest steel. He had beaten me into shape of some sort when I was rather unmalleable stuff; he would have changed Dick even at his age.

However, the mischief having been done, there was nothing but to make the best of it, and that I determined to do. First of all, I wanted to drift my wild man away from the vicinity of Loveng's house. I succeeded very well in doing it. It was a full week later, and by keeping to the highlands—most of the time above timberline—I had been able to keep out of touch with trouble.

But then fate stepped into the ring and knocked my plans and my hopes galley west with a single punch.

I had to get word to the father of Dick—though he seemed to have forgotten that there was such a thing as a father and a mother grieving about him. So I decided that I must write a letter and get down to a town to slip it into a mailbox. Dick, of course, went with me. I could not take a step without having him along with me.

We got into a little crossroads town, and I found the box and I mailed my letter which told Mr. Orton that his son was still with me and that I was doing what I could to send him back, but that he was still obstinate. It was not much of a letter, but when I assured Orton that I was trying to keep Dick out of further mischief, I was rather

assured that something good might come from it in the way of peace of mind for the old couple.

In the meantime, the pair of us were very keen to get news of the outer world. Seven days of wandering had been nothing to me, but they had made up seven years to Dick. It was he who got the paper—how, I don't know. It was an old paper—too old to suit me! For it was published five days before, and it bore in it in a first-page flare the very tidings which I most dreaded and had most hoped would not arrive.

For, on that page, there was printed a statement by Joe Loveng, which narrated how “the celebrated outlaw,” Leon Porfilo, had come to his house and demanded his hospitality and received it—because he was afraid to refuse such a desperate character. Also, in the company of this man was none other than the son of the much respected rancher, Orton!

Dick Orton was furious at such duplicity on the part of Loveng, and I, myself, had a great desire to get at the man. But I needed only a moment of reflection to understand that Loveng had been hard tried by that experience with Dick.

“How far is it from here to Loveng's, do you think?” Dick asked me.

I saw what he was driving at at once.

“You'll not go back there, Dick,” said I.

“And let Loveng have the run of me?” said Dick. “Nobody can stop me from going after him!”

I told him that I couldn't let him go, and I begged him to listen to reason. If he returned, it was very probable that the house of Loveng was being watched.

“What of that?” said Dick.

“You've thrown in your luck with me, and the world knows,” I told him.

“What have I done, so far as they know? Why can't I go back to see Mary Loveng if I wish?”

“Go back to find her and all you'll see will be the inside of a jail!”

He was furious. He had taken the whole affair in such a casual way that he still could see no reason why the law should be at outs with him.

“This life of mine that you think so wonderful—well, Dick, you're seeing the true face of it now,” I told him. “You can't go back to Loveng's place.”

“I've got to,” said he. “I've given my word.”

“To whom?”

“To Mary.”

“She'll be the last to want you to run into danger for her sake.”

He was entirely bullheaded. Finally he turned his horse back on the trail and asked me if I would go with him or remain where I was.

At that, I rode in front of him and took hold of his bridle rein.

“Dick,” said I, “I can't let you go. It's a crazy thing to do.”

I should have known better than to take his rein. He was already so excited and so hot that it did not need much to put him quite off balance.

“Drop the rein, will you?” said he.

I did that at once and wished I had not touched it.

“Clear your horse from in front of me!” said Dick savagely.

I begged him to be reasonable.

“I’m not a kid!” thundered Dick. “I have a mind of my own, and I know how to use it! I’m going back to Loveng’s. Keep clear of me, Porfilo!”

“You blockhead!” said I, getting a little too heated in my turn. “You shall not stir a foot that way.”

“Who’ll stop me?” asked Dick.

“I’ll stop you if I have to!”

He was so angry that he sat on his horse trembling, for a moment.

“Porfilo,” said he, “if you love your life, keep clean back from me!”

He tried to press forward. I kept my horse before him.

“Then, curse you, get your gun!” screamed Dick, and tore out his own Colt.

I was barely in reaching distance, and I was barely in time. I got his wrist just as the weapon came clear of the leather. The bullet went smashing at random against the face of a rock, and I threw my weight in at him.

The very first shock told me that I should have my hands full. He was a shade taller than I, but not quite so heavy. He had confessed that he had never done much work. But he was full of a natural strength.

The shock of our meeting tumbled both of us out of the saddles. We rolled under the bellies of the horses and then twisted apart for fear of their trampling hoofs. The moment I was away from him, I wanted the thing over.

“I’ve got enough, Dick,” I yelled to him. “I don’t want to fight!”

But he was entirely blinded with rage by this time. He came at me with a panther spring that I was barely able to dodge.

“Dick,” I shouted to him, “I give up! I quit! I don’t want to fight!”

I might as well have talked to a whirlwind. He came lunging again and got home a grazing blow on my temple that half dazed me and, worse than that, brought a flush of fighting heat into my own blood. It was a long time since I had had the joy of a personal struggle with another man, hand to hand. I jammed my left under the chin of Dick and hit him away from me.

There was enough force in that blow to make him gasp, but he was game to the core, and started back at me, smashing with both hands. He had some training, and he had a blinding turn of natural speed. But he had not yet stepped into his full power. Perhaps I felt as Andrew Chase felt, six years before, when he struck me to the ground.

“Take it, then!” I said to Dick, and slid my right over his shoulder until the knuckles fitted snugly along his jaw.

It pitched Dick squarely back upon his shoulders, and he did not rise again. It was a wicked blow; the jar of it had sent a tingle to my shoulder, and I was afraid that I might have broken the bone. But when I started to pick him up, he was already grunting and struggling.

He forced himself to his feet and began striking blindly toward me, quite out. There was no more force in his hands than in the hands of a child. I held his arms and begged him to steady up. He waved, and staggered for another instant. Then he shook his head violently, and his eyes were clear.

Through a very long moment we watched one another. I with my heart in my throat, for I was certain that I had lost one of the few friends I had ever made in the world. But, though there was rage in the eye of Dick, there was thought, also.

“You’re too strong for me,” he said huskily, at last.

“Dick—” I began.

But he broke in on me suddenly: “It was coming to me. It was coming to me, Porfilo. I see that, now. I’m glad that it came from *you*. I couldn’t have taken it from any other man!”

“You slipped as you came in at me—” I tried to explain.

But he only grinned at me, a wry, mirthless sort of a grin.

“I understand all about it,” said Dick, “I’ve had my licking. Well, maybe it will do me good!”

There are punishments of all kinds, but none that go much harder on a young man than the necessity of admitting that he has been beaten. When I heard my new friend Orton confess that he had been licked, I suddenly knew that he was twice the man that I had thought him before. I liked him twice as much.

He did not lose a penny’s worth of pride, either. Altogether, it was an astonishing thing to me. For, when I had been licked the first and the greatest time in my life, I had blundered on until I was covered with bumps and blood. A priest had done the trick for me!

“Sit down over here, and let’s think things over,” said Dick.

We let our nags graze, and we sat down in the shade of a scrub oak—for we were in the lowlands at that time. He began to rub the crimson place where my knuckles had ground halfway to the jawbone.

“This is better than ten years of law,” said Dick.

I said nothing. I was afraid that whatever I said would be too raw—too *much* to the point. Also, I was so astonished by the way in which he had taken the thing that I was fairly made mute by it. Can you think of striking a lion in the face and then seeing the brute lick your hand? There was a good deal of the lion in Dick.

I was only sure of one thing—that from that moment he was saved. The selfish boy would begin to die in him; he was a man. All in one stroke!

“I didn’t think that anyone in the world could do it,” he told me. “Not even Leon Porfilo.”

“A lucky punch—” I tried to begin.

He merely smiled. “I knew it the minute you got your grip on me. It was like having a ten-tined Jackson fork stuck in my flesh. I couldn’t do a thing. I was like a kid in your hands. But now, Porfilo, the main thing is to make out what I should do next. I can’t go blundering around trying to clean up the whole range. Somebody else will sap me in the same place—and not let me up when I go down!”

He laughed a little bitterly. “I thought I was a sort of a Hercules!” he said.

I let the poison work in him, because I saw that it was doing him a lot of good; but it was a pretty unpleasant thing to watch the pride and the good sense in him struggle together.

“There’s only one right thing,” I said at last.

“Tell me what that is?”

“Go back home, and face the music. See your father. Tell him that you’ve been playing the fool and that you want to do what he thinks is really best for you.”

He answered me very indirectly.

“Why didn’t you send a slug of lead through me, Porfilo, when I pulled my gun?”

I made no answer.

“Do you know what I would have done if I’d had the chance?” he went on. “I would of shot you down. That was how much temper was in me. I would of shot *you* down, Porfilo! Well, that’s what makes me pretty sober now. Not the punch that knocked me out. That was nothing. But the stuff that was in my head just before you hit me. That’s what makes me think!”

“Take it easy,” I suggested.

“I am. I got only a quarter of what I deserved to get. You should be riding off, and I should be lying in the dirt, there, and looking at the sun, and never seeing it!”

He shuddered.

“Well,” he said, “I’m going to do what you want!”

I found his hand and gripped it. “You’re a fine kid, Dick,” said I with all my heart in my voice.

He shook his head.

“But what about Mary Loveng—” said he.

“Well?” I asked, a little anxious.

“She had my promise to come back.”

“She’ll forget that.”

He shrugged his big shoulders.

“I don’t think so,” said he. “I don’t know. But we were pretty serious.”

“Are you serious now?” said I.

“Me? That’s not what counts. It’s what might be inside of her head. That’s what really counts, Porfilo!”



He could not have found a better way to silence me. Certainly this was a very different fellow from the Dick Orton of five minutes before.

“Think it out for yourself, Dick,” I told him. “I can’t help you now. Because you’re not a kid anymore. You’ve turned into a man.”

“I think I have. I want to forget the thing that I’ve been up to this time.”

“Only remember that if you go to Loveng’s house, you’ll be running your head into a lot of trouble. Remember that Loveng will be waiting for you—and he won’t be trusting to his own pair of hands. He’ll have help, and plenty of it.”

“I ought not to worry about the danger,” he decided thoughtfully.

“Not for yourself. You have your father and your mother to think about,” I suggested.

He shuddered a little at that. I think that for a moment he was about to give up the entire idea, but it came back on him.

“I agree to that,” said Dick Orton. “I’ve got to think about them, and I shall—from this minute on! But before I go back to them, I have to have clean hands. My hands aren’t clean until I’ve talked to Mary once more.”

“Do you think,” said I, “that one talk has been enough to fix her for life?”

“I thought so before,” said he. “But I’m not quite so fat-headed now. Maybe she’s forgotten all about me.”

“What do you hope?”

“God knows that I hope she has!”

“I’m glad of that! I thought your head was pretty well turned, for a while.”

“It was. But since you knocked some sense into me—well, I’ve been seeing only one thing when I think of her, and what I’ve been seeing is not her pretty face.”

He paused again and frowned at the ground. It was a sad thing to watch the boy die out of him and the man take its place.

“Only her hands, Porfilo,” he murmured. “That’s what I’m seeing now. Big, broad, stumpy, calloused hands—like the hands of a man. Confound it, I know that she got those hands by doing good, honest work in the fields, and yet—”

“Good, honest work—and she’s a good, honest girl,” I reminded him.

“I’m thinking of that,” he declared. “Yet—it makes a mighty lot of difference, Porfilo. You understand, don’t you?”

“I’m keeping out of it. It’s up to you and your conscience, Dick.”

At this, he sighed. “Conscience is the devil!” exclaimed he. “Particularly when it’s a stranger to you!”

“You’ve never seen its face before?” I chuckled.

“Never!” grinned Dick Orton. “But, conscience or no conscience, I can’t help thinking about her hands, and—”

“Well?”

“Why the devil do people have to eat garlic, Porfilo?”

I couldn't help breaking into a roar of laughter, and he looked at me in a hurt way.

"However," said he, "that won't keep me from going back to face the music. I told her that I loved her and that I wanted to marry her. Well, she said that she loved me and that she wanted to marry me, too. It was the infernal night and the moon, I suppose. I had chills and fevers twisting up and down inside of me, you might say. I hardly knew what I was doing. I've never felt this way about a girl before!"

"I believe that!" said I heartily.

"So I've got to go back and see her once more."

"What can you say to her?"

"I don't know! But I'll manage to find out, after a minute or two of talk, whether she's changed about me as much as I've changed about her!"

I felt that there was nothing that I could say to the point in a case like this. He was his own master, and a better master for himself, at that moment, than I could be to him. If he felt that he had to clear his mind on the subject of that girl, it was best for him to go ahead and do it. That was as far as I could carry my thinking.

So I simply said: "We've gone about eighty miles, air line from the Loveng house. We'll need two days to ride back. We'll be starting right now!"

"*We?*" said he.

"I'm going to see you through this mess," I assured him.

He pondered this for a time.

"I drag *you* back into the mess as well as myself?" he suggested.

"Not a bit! My own conscience is a pretty sleepy thing, but it's beginning to wake up a little about this. I have to go back with you. It was I that brought you to Loveng, and it was I that let him get hold of your name. Come along, Dick!"

He protested no more. We climbed into our saddles and jogged steadily along the back trail.

I think that two or three hours passed before a word was spoken, but at a time like that, one does not need words. I know that the mind of Dick Orton was filled with the same thought that was in *my* mind. What was in my mind was that I had saved a friend and gained a brother. There was a wonderful feeling of closeness. I felt as though my strength had been multiplied by twenty. In fact, I have never lost that feeling!

# 11

WHEN we reached the house of Loveng, two days later, we paused in a screen of trees two hundred yards away. That delay was partly because we judged that it would be best to pause there until the dusk, at least, and in part because we wished to talk matters over. The chief discussion was as to whether or not we should go to the house together—as I proposed—or Dick should go alone.

The second view was the one which he maintained, and he upheld his idea with such vehemence that I had to give in to him. Because he declared that, if I would not let him go by himself, he would wait there until I changed my mind—if both of us had to starve in the meantime.

There was nothing to be done with such a state of mind in him. I kept struggling with him until after the darkness was complete, however, and even well after that. When I saw that I could do nothing whatever to change his determination, I let him. First I cautioned him to approach that house with care and to keep to cover constantly.

When he was as near to the house as cover would bring him, I advised him to wait until, by sight, or by the sound of voices, he tried to learn whether or not there was only Loveng and his family in the house, or several other men as well. In the latter case, I begged him not to continue.

After that, I had done all that I could. I let him pass on toward the house, but it was with a heavy heart that I saw him go. Loveng meant mischief. There was no doubt of that, or he would never have issued such a direct challenge to me as his statement in the paper had been.

However, I was glad to see that Dick Orton was willing to use caution in his approach to the house, no matter what might happen when the house itself was actually reached. I waited for fifteen or twenty minutes in the place where he had left me. Then I could endure it no longer, and I started out, creeping along as stealthily as I could manage it in the direction of the house and using what small cover lay before me.

I cannot tell you how peaceful and happy that scene was: The yellow flare of two lighted windows of the house of Loveng before me, and the shadowy outline of the house itself, roughened at the edges like an etching by the masses of climbing vines which tumbled over it. Even at that distance, I could smell the rank odor of the vegetable garden which the thrifty Loveng kept in cultivation on a large scale.

Or, when the wind changed a little, there was the fragrance of Mary's rose garden just ahead. Well, there was a real aroma of home about that place. Hard as I felt toward Loveng at that moment, I could not help admitting that he was the sort of stuff out of which good nations and prosperous communities are built.

It was simply that Dick Orton had touched him in the wrong place. Loveng was partly insane on the subject. He felt that he had been wronged, and that his honor demanded that he try for satisfaction. Well, it was a nasty affair to be mixed in.

My chief regard was simply for Dick, however. I had thought of Dick at first as a rather selfish, highstrung, excited, foolish boy; but I felt that he had turned into a man, and I was willing to do a great deal for him.

I pushed on toward the house until I was about sixty or seventy paces away, and directly in front of it. There I flattened myself in the wet dew behind a small shrub, and I loosened my guns in their holsters. There I waited. It seemed a long time.

To him who waits, time always drags slowly. But in the end I was glad that I had come as close as that to the house—I wished that I had come twice as far, indeed!

For, from the left—the orchard—I heard a sudden, challenging shout, followed by a sharp and rattling babel of voices, and after that a shot. Then a dozen guns, or so it seemed, roaring at once. I was on my feet, stooping low, and running as fast as my long legs could carry me over the ground.

I saw a tall form, which I had no doubt was that of Dick Orton, emerge from the shadows of the orchard and plunge across the open toward the next group of trees not thirty paces away. Behind him rushed three men—and then a fourth, all firing, but missing the dodging form of Dick until, in the very shelter of the trees, he seemed to stumble, and plunged to the ground.

I saw that part of it with the tail of my eye, so to speak. Before that I had both guns in my hands, and I was shooting hip high—or between knee and hip to be exact. There's a target almost as big as the body, and a wound there will disable almost as much as a wound through the body itself—unless the other fellow be an absolutely desperate man who fights to the last gasp.

But now I shot with both guns, and I shot at human flesh. At the very instant that Dick was falling, two of those rascals who thought nothing of taking such odds into their favor, dropped to the ground with yells that must have echoed a mile away. Certainly they were echoed from the house of Loveng by the voices of screaming women.

At the same time I shouted: "Loveng! Loveng! If you want action, look this way!"

Loveng was one of the pair I had not hit. But when he heard my voice, I saw the glint of his gun as it dropped to the ground. He threw up his hands and whirled around toward me without the slightest belly for a fight.

"Don't shoot, Meester Porfilo!" he screamed at me. "Do not shoot old man like Joe Loveng!"

There was a frightened yap out of his friend, too. His gun joined that of Joe upon the ground. At that moment, I can tell you that I blessed the storytellers who had given me a false reputation equal to twice what I was really worth. For the ridiculous name which I had been given was what won that fight for me.

Perhaps, too, it was the screaming of the tortured fellows on the ground. That was enough to unnerve most people, and besides, I had come to them from the side, and totally by surprise.

I walked up to Joe and his friend and made them keep their arms stiff above their heads while I searched them. I took away a perfect armory from each of them, and there was no doubt at all that they had been armed for a particular purpose—the dropping of my poor Dick, who lay yonder, terribly still, and terribly silent.

I said calmly to Joe: “If Orton is alive and has a chance to recover, you have a chance, too. But if he’s dead—I tell you, Loveng, that you’re mortally wounded already!” I meant it, just then.

Joe Loveng and his companion wanted to look at their own wounded friends who were shrieking and begging on the ground—both of them apparently very badly hurt, though I couldn’t help despising them for their noise. But I marched Joe and the other toward Dick and made them stand back to back a little distance while I examined Dick as well as I could.

He answered the first touch of my hand and voice with a groan, and then, to my exquisite satisfaction, he heaved himself to his feet.

“Dick!” I shouted at him. “Are you all right?”

“They winged me in the shoulder,” he said with beautiful calm. “That knocked me on my face in this rough ground. Stunned a mite. That was all.”

“Your shoulder?”

“Nothing broken,” said he, as cool as you please. “I can work it a little. Painful, though, and bleeding pretty fast!”

“We’ll have you in the house and tie you up in a minute,” said I.

“I never want to see the inside of that house again!” said Dick in disgust.

I promised him that this would be our last visit. Then I congratulated Joe Loveng and told him that he was going to be allowed to live—as a special favor. I assure you that there was a groan of relief from Joe when he heard me speak.

In the meantime, we started back to the pair I had winged. Joe and his companion took their heads. I took a pair of knees under each arm, and though they yelled at the pain and begged us to put them down again, we carried them into the house.

Well, there was a pretty mess to look at. One big, hard-faced fellow had a bullet in his leg which had twisted around the thighbone and, entering at the hip, came down by the knee on the opposite side of the limb. When you consider that that wound was made by a .45 caliber slug, and that it was whirling as it tore through the flesh, you have an idea, faintly, of the amount of the damage that had been done to that unlucky chap.

The second of the pair was a handsome boy of about nineteen or twenty who lay grinning with pain at the ceiling and making the sign of the cross over himself from time to time as though he were trying to save his soul from devils. The slug had gone through both his legs just below the hip, and he was bleeding at a frightful rate.

As for Dick, he had a nasty cut, and no more. A bullet had glanced from the shoulder blade and across his shoulder, knocking him down. A little more off the angle, and that bullet would have driven through his heart.

He knew what he had escaped, and he was wonderfully calm about the thing. I left Loveng and his unwounded comrade to tie up the hurt legs. I gave my own attention to

the shoulder of Dick, and I sang out to Mary, as she passed by with a bucket of hot water, and asked her if she wished to help.

She did not seem to hear me and went straight on to where the goodlooking boy lay on the floor, making a red pool around him. There she dropped on her knees and began to work fast and hard to help her father, who would bark out at her from time to time:

“Devil of a woman! This is your work! She-devil!”

Well, in a way you have to admit that it *was* her work.

“But what does it mean?” I asked Dick. “Has she lost her hearing?”

“She has tonight,” said Dick. “She met up with that bird on the floor. I’m glad you winged him! I found the pair of them on the same bench where she and *I* had sat together. But that was nine days ago, and so I suppose that she had a right to forget me.

“It peeved me, though, and I couldn’t help introducing myself. That was what started trouble. Bullets began to drop like acorns, and then you jumped down out of the sky and got a little silence. Thanks, old man!”

You see by this that a big change had come over my friend, Dick Orton. He took his punishment—about the girl, which cut his pride a bit deep, I suppose; and about the wound itself—with perfect good nature.

I kept him in that house for five or six long days and nights, lying on his face, while I washed the wound and saw it began to heal after Joe Loveng, who knew something about surgery, it appeared, had sewed up the big cut. He made a good job of it too!

The wound healed with astonishing speed. The perfect quiet, and the perfect health of Dick worked in a wonderful combination. In the meantime, the other pair of wounded men recovered very slowly.

There was not much sign of improvement in either of them, but as they did not develop high temperatures, we knew at the end of that time that neither of the wounds had become infected.

In the meantime, we lived a rather odd life in that house. They looked on the pair of us as two sticks of dynamite, at first, and I think that the entire household was convinced that, as soon as Dick was well enough to move about, I’d murder the lot of them and then leave.

However, I had only one sharp talk with my friend, Joe Loveng. I assured him that if he sent for a sheriff or a deputy, I’d kill everyone in the house before the man of the law got to me. But if I were left alone, all would be well with everyone. He swore, with a gray face, that he would treat me like an angel newly descended from heaven.

I assured him, furthermore, that while I wished him nothing but well, if he did not instantly make a trip to town and retract the statement he had made against Dick Orton, I would guarantee him a short stay on earth. He vowed that he would go in at once and tell them that he had made a mistake in the name and that it was a Dick Norton that had been with me and had assisted me to escape. Since I knew of no Dick Norton on the range, I readily decided that would do very, very well.

Joe went in, as he had promised, and had been soundly cursed by the sheriff for his first report.

After that, we got on increasingly well. Joe gradually discovered that I bore him no grudge. As for Dick, he astonished the entire household by cheerfully stating that he felt he was cheaply out of the mess. It was not very consoling for the girl, but it had a ring of truth about it that delighted Joe Loveng. From that moment he began to take care of us rather as if we had been dear friends than dreadful enemies.

There was nothing but good feeling on all sides when, at last, we left the house.

Dick's shoulder was still too bad to stand much traveling. We simply moved off into the mountains a little distance and then we camped until he was in good shape. Then we started for the Orton ranch and gauged our arrival for the dark of the evening.

It was a warm night, and we found two figures sitting in rocking chairs on the Orton veranda. Somebody in the bunkhouse was tormenting a guitar, and a cow lately robbed of a calf, I suppose, was bawling in the distance. But there is so much space in a Western night that two such sounds as these could not ruin the peace of the evening.

We rode up close to the veranda, and Dick muttered to me: "There they are together. Now, do I get the devil?"

"Not a bit of it," I told him.

"But I deserve it," he said gloomily. "They ought to kick me out for a tramp!"

He swung down from the saddle and began to approach.

"Hello!" sang out old man Orton. "Who's there?"

Dick made no answer, but went on a little more quickly. At this, his father jumped up in apparent alarm.

"Who's that?" he called sharply.

"Dick!"

What a cry from the pair of them! I reined my horse back a bit, but still I could not help remaining to eavesdrop on them for a moment. I saw them standing side by side. I saw them reach out their arms to their big son as he leaped up the steps of the porch. Then they were all tied together in one knot, and I could hear Mrs. Orton weeping hysterically.

That was all I saw as I turned my horse and jogged away.

Then I heard the voice of Dick shouting: "Leon! Oh, Lee!"

I put my horse to a canter, and the noise of the hoofs drowned his voice.

I was afraid that he would be foolish enough to pursue me to bring me into that happy gathering, but he had more sense than that. No horse started after me, and I was allowed to pass over the hills unmolested and journey on into the night alone.

But not as much alone as I had been in the years before. When a man has found a friend, he cannot leave him, really, for it is my conviction that we carry something of the souls of our friends with us around the world.

Well, in a way, Dick had a heavy burden of debt to me, because that matter of the stage robbery was as yet unsolved, but I had an infinite trust in what the influence and money and honesty of old Orton would accomplish in that respect. In the meantime, with the ghosts of Father McGuire and Lawton and Mike O'Rourke, I had the new

thought of Dick Orton to keep me company. I felt, as I galloped through the black of the night, that I was more to be envied than to be pitied.



## 12

I HADN'T seen Mike for three months. You see, it was right after the Sam Dugan murder which some fools hung on me. Of course, Lawton hadn't the least idea in the world that I could have done such a rotten, treacherous thing. But they stirred up such a fuss that I didn't dare to try to slip in to see Mike. Because everyone had known for years that I loved Mike and got down to see her once in a while, and when things were pretty hot, they used to watch her house.

So when I finally went down to see her, Sheriff Lawton crossed my way with three hard-riding man-getters. Every man-jack of them was on a faster nag than my mule, but I kept Roanoke in the rough going, and Dick Lawton was foolish enough to follow right on my heels instead of throwing a fast man out on my course. For he knew what that course was, but it was a sort of unwritten law between us that if I got into the mouth of the little valley where the O'Rourke house stood, I was free.

That may sound specially generous on his side. But it wasn't—altogether. Twice he had pushed his posse up that ravine after me, and it almost cost him his next election. Because that ravine twisted like a snake, back and forth, and it was set out with shrubs and trees as thick as a garden.

I simply laid up in a comfortably shady spot, and when the boys came rushing around the bend, I let them have it. So easy that I didn't have to shoot close to a dangerous spot. I could pick my targets. However, I think that there were half a dozen bad wounds in arms and legs. Also, I pulled too far to the left on one boy and drilled him through the body. So, as I say, the sheriff nearly lost his election after that because it was said that he had ridden his men into a mantrap.

So far as Dick Lawton was concerned, I knew that that valley was forbidden as a hunting ground to him. Of course, I could trust Dick as far as he could trust me—that is to say, to the absolute limit. Because, except when we were shooting at each other, we were the best friends in the world. I know that Dick never shot extra straight at me, and I know that I never shot straight at him. My guns simply wobbled off the mark when I caught him in the sights.

Well, as I was saying, I kept old Roanoke in the rough where he could run four feet to the three of any horse that ever lived—for the simple reason that a mule's feet and skin are a lot tougher than a horse's. By the time I got across the valley, there was a clean furlong between me and Dick Lawton's boys.

So I took off my hat and said good-by to them with a wave that was nearly my last act in life. Because just as I put that hat back on my head a .32-caliber Winchester slug drilled a clean little hole through the brim a quarter of an inch from my forehead.

I've noticed that when a fellow stops to make a grandstand play of that sort, he generally gets into pretty hot trouble. I sent Roanoke into the brush with a dig of the

spurs, but the minute I was out of sight, I knew that there was no trouble left.

But I didn't slow up Roanoke. I didn't even stop to roll a cigarette, for I was eager to see Mike. I slithered up the ravine until I got a chance to squint at the ridge, and there I found a little green flag, jerking up and down and in and out in the wind, on top of the O'Rourke house. I knew that was the work of Mike's father. I think that every day of his life the old man went snooping through the woods to see if the land lay quiet. If it was, he tagged the house with that little green flag—green for Ireland, of course!—and then when someone was laying for me near the house, he would hang up a white flag.

When I saw the green I dug into Roanoke and sent that mule hopping straight to the house. As I hit the ground, I heard old man O'Rourke singing out inside the screen door of the porch: "Hey, Chet! Here's Roanoke to put up, and sling a feed of barley into him. Hey, Mother, come and look at that doggone mule! Hey, Mike, there's that Roanoke mule wanderin' around loose in the yard!"

Chet O'Rourke came first, and his old mother at his shoulder, and then the old man came next. I grabbed all their hands. It was like stepping into a shower of happiness, I tell you, to get among people where the feel of their eyes was not like so many knives pointed at you!

But I brushed through them pretty quick. I wanted Mike.

"Hey, Mike!" yelled old O'Rourke. "Ain't you comin' to see Roanoke?"

He laughed. I suppose that he was old enough to enjoy a foolish joke like that. I heard Mike sing out from the stairs beyond the front parlor. I reached the bottom of those stairs the same minute she did and caught her.

She said: "Chester O'Rourke, will you take this man away from me?"

I kicked the door shut in Chet's face and sat Mike on the window sill where the honeysuckle showered down behind her like green water, if you follow my drift. It would have done you good to stand there where I was standing and see her smile until the dimple was drilled into one cheek. She began to smooth her dress and pat her hair.

"My Lord," said I, "I'm glad to see you."

"You've unironed me," said Mike. "Just when I was all crisped up for the afternoon!"

"Have they nailed the right man for the Dugan murder?" said I. Because I was as keen about that as I was about Mike.

"They've got the right man, and he's confessed," said she.

I lowered myself into a chair and took a deep breath.

"*That's* fixed, then," said I.

"*That's* fixed," said she.

"Why do you say it that way?" said I.

"How old are you, Leon?" said she.

"I'm twenty-five."

"How old does that make me?" said Mike.

“Twenty-three.”

“That’s right too. How long have you been asking me to marry you?” said Mike.

“Seven years,” said I.

“Well,” said she, “the next time you ask me, I’m going to do it!”

“Law or no law?” said I.

“Law or no law,” said she.

It made my head spin, of course, when I thought of marrying Mike and trying to make a home for her while a hundred or so cowpunchers and sheriffs and deputies, et cetera, were spending their vacation trying to grab me and the twenty thousand dollars that rested on top of my head as a reward. I moistened my lips and tried to speak. I couldn’t make a sound.

“You know that I’ve done what I could,” said I.

“I do,” said she. “But now things are different.”

“What do you mean?”

“William Purchass Shay is the governor, now,” said she.

“What difference does that make?”

“He’s a gentleman,” said she.

“Well?”

“I think he’d listen to reason,” said Mike.

“You want me to go to see him?”

“Just that.”

“I see myself handing in my name at his office,” said I. “I guess he’s not too much of a gentleman to want to make twenty thousand dollars.”

“Money has spoiled you, Lee,” said Mike.

“Money? How come?”

“You’re so used to thinking about how much you’ll be worth when somebody drills a rifle ball through you—that it’s turned your head.”

“Are you talking serious?”

“Dead serious,” said she. “Besides, you’re not the only one that folks have to talk about now.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Jeffrey Dinsmore is the other one.”

Of course, I had heard about Dinsmore. He was the Texas man whose father left him about a million dollars in cattle and real estate, besides a talent for shooting straight and a habit of using that talent. Finally he killed a man where “self-defense” wouldn’t work, because it was proved that Dinsmore had been layin’ for him. The last heard, Dinsmore was drifting for the mountains.

“Is Dinsmore in these parts?” I asked Mike.

“He showed up in town last week and sat down in the restaurant—”

“Disguised?”

“Yes, disguised with a gun that he put on the table in front of his plate. They didn’t ask any questions, but just served him as fast as they could.”

“Nobody went to raise a crowd?”

“The dishwasher did, and a crowd gathered at the front door and the back.”

“What happened?”

“Dinsmore finished eating and then put on his hat and walked out.”

“Good Lord, what nerve! Did he bluff out the whole crowd?”

“He did.”

“What’s on him?”

“Just the same that’s on you. Twenty thousand iron men.”

“Twenty thousand dollars!” said I.

“You look sort of sad, Lee.”

You’ll think me a good deal of a fool, but I confess that I was staggered to find that there was another crook in the mountains worth as much to the law as I was. Between you and me, I *was* proud because I had that little fortune on my head.

“Twenty thousand!” said I.

“Dead or alive,” said Mike, with a queer, strained look on her face.

“Why do you say it that way?” said I, in a whisper.

“Don’t you understand?” said Mike.

Then I *did* understand, and I stood up, feeling pretty sick. But I saw that she was right. Something had to be done.

“I start for the governor today!” said I.

Mike simply hid her face in her hands, and I didn’t wait for her to break out crying.

I saw the rest of the family for an hour or so before Mike came in to us. She was as clear-eyed as ever, when she came, but there was something in her face which was a spur to me. I did not wait for the night. I judged that no pursuers would be lingering for me in the valley at this late day, so I slipped out of the house finding Roanoke refreshed by his rest and a feed of grain. I went away without leaving any farewells behind me.

I cut across country, straight over the ridge of the eastern mountains. Just below timberline I camped that night—a cold, wet night—and I rode on gloomily the next morning until I was over the crest of the ridge and had a good view of the land that lay beneath me.

It was a great, smooth-sweeping valley, most of it, the ground rolling now and then into little hills—but with hardly the shadow of a tree—and so on and on to piles of blue mountains which leaned against the farther horizon. They were a good hundred miles away. Between me and that range lay the city that I had to reach.

You will agree with me that it was not a very pleasant undertaking. I had to get myself over seventy miles of open country to the capital of the State. Then I had to get seventy miles back into the mountains once more.

However, there was nothing else for it. That day I went down to the edge of the trees and the foothills, and there I rested until the verge of dusk. When that time came, I sent Roanoke out into the open and headed straight away toward the big town. He could have made the distance before daylight, but there was no point in that.

I sent Roanoke over sixty-five miles that night, however, and he was a tired mule when I dropped off his back on the lee side of a haystack. I could see the lights of the town five miles off. Not a big place, you will think, but there were thirty-five thousand people there, and that made it just about five times as large as any city I had ever seen in my life. It was simply a metropolis to me!

The dawn was only a moment away. So I walked away from the stack to a wreck of a shack in a hollow. There I turned in and slept solidly until afternoon.

I was thirsty and tired and hungry when I wakened. Besides that, I had a jumpy heart, and the strain of the work ahead of me was telling pretty fast! The worst part of the trip was wasting that afternoon and waiting for the night. But as a matter of fact, I didn't wait for the night.

The edge of the sun was barely down before I was streaking across open country, and there was still plenty of daylight when I cut down a bridle path near the edge of the town and met an old fellow coming up. He was riding bareback, and I shall never forget how his white beard was parted by the wind.

He gave me a very cheerful "howd'ye," and I waved back to him.

"Well, stranger," said that old man, "where are you aimin' for, if I might ask?"

"Work," said I.

"Come right along with me."

"What kind?"

He had one tooth in the right-hand corner of his upper gum. He fixed this in a wedge of chewing tobacco and worked a long time at it until he got it loose. All the while he was looking me over with popping, pale-blue eyes. I never before had noticed how close an old man can be to a child.

"Well, partner," said he, "young fellers is picky and choosy; I used to be that way myself. But when I come to get a little age behind me, why, then I seen that it didn't make so much difference what a man done. All kinds of work that ever I see gives you the same sort of an ache in the shoulders and an ache in the calves of your legs and in your brain. Ain't you noticed that?"

I told him that I had.

He said: "Same way about chuck. I used to be mighty finicky about grub. It don't make no difference to me now. Once a mite of grub is swallowed, what difference whether it was a mouthful of dry bread or a mouthful of ice cream? Can you tell me that?"

I could see that he had branched out on his special kind of information. Most old men are that way. They've got a couple of sets of ideas oiled up in their old noodles and whenever they get a chance, they'll blaze away on them. If they're interested in oil wells, you can start talking about lace and they'll get over to oil wells just as easy as if

you started with derricks. I saw that this was one of that brand. However, if he would talk, I saw that he might be of some sort of use to me.

So I said: "I've been back country for a long time. I want to have a try working in town!"

He shook his head, very sad at that.

"Son," said he, "I live only two mile out, but I been to town only once this summer. That time I come home with my feet all blistered up and my head aching from the glare of the pavements. I give the town up. If I was you, I'd give it up, too."

I said nothing, but I couldn't help smiling. The old chap began to nod and smile, too. He was a fine fellow, no doubt of that.

"Well," said he, "you can't expect folks to learn by their elders. If they did, people'd get wiser and wiser, instead of the other way. What you want to do in town?"

"Drive an ice wagon, maybe. I don't care. I never seen the town before."

"You don't say!"

"I guess that's the capitol?"

"Yes, sir. There she be. That white dome. I guess you seen it in your schoolbooks when you was a kid? There she be. Look here, ain't you been raised right around near here?"

He had sagged a little closer to me while we were looking at the town, and now I caught him batting his bleary old eyes at me behind his glasses. I knew there was danger ahead.

"No," said I. "I've never been in the big town before."

"Oh, it ain't so big. Me, I've been far as St. Louis. Now, there's a real city for you. It lays over this a mighty lot!"

"I suppose it does. But it hasn't many things finer than the capitol building, I guess!"

"Well, I dunno. It's got a lot of banks and things pretty grand with white stone posts around them. It makes a heap of noise, too. You can hear it for miles. But you can't hear nothin' here."

"Well," said I, "I suppose there are fine big houses there. The governor's house must be mighty fine!"

"Him? No, sir. William P. Shay ain't the man to live big and grand. He's livin' in his ma's old house out on Hooker Avenue—which has got so fashionable, lately, what with the park right opposite with the benches to set on. I passed that way once, and I never forget the smell of the lilacs passin' by Mrs. Shay's house! It was sure a sweet thing."

"I suppose that they're still there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Other folks got 'em, too?"

“Nary a one. Young feller, I can’t get out of my head that I’ve seen you sure, somewheres, sometime!”

I knew very well where he’d seen me. It was in some roadside bulletin board or perhaps just a handbill nailed against a post, showing my face with big letters under it. I knew very well where he had seen me. I decided I had better start along; so I told him that I would go right on into town and get lodgings before it was too dark.

But after I had gone a little way, I leaned down as if to fix a stirrup leather and I had a chance to glance back. Old white beard was already over the hill.

I didn’t suspect that he had seen too much of me. But when a man has been a fugitive from the law with a price on his head for seven years, it makes him overlook no bets. I recalled, too, that I was riding a mule, and that in itself was enough to make any man suspicious.

So I snapped back to the top of the hill and through the hollow beneath I could see the old man scooting along. He looked back over his shoulder, just then, and when he saw me, he doubled up like a jockey putting up a fast finish down the stretch and began to burn his whip into that old horse he was riding.

I shouldn’t have done it, of course. But I couldn’t help wanting to make his fun worthwhile. So I fired a shot straight into the air.

I heard his yell come quavering back to me; and after that the horse seemed to take as much interest in the running as his rider did. He hunched himself like a loafer wolf trying to shove himself between his front legs while he beats for cover.

It was a mighty funny thing to watch. I laughed till I was crying. By that time the old man had disappeared in the night and the distance. Then I turned around and saw that I had a big job to do and to do fast, because as soon as that old fogy got to a house with a telephone in it, he would plaster the news all over town that Leon Porfilo, on his mule, was heading straight for them, ready to make trouble, and lots of it!

How many scores of men and boys would clean up their old guns and start hunting for me, I could only guess.

But right there I made up my mind that I couldn’t enter that town on a mule. I put old Roanoke away in a little hollow where there were trees enough to shelter him and a brook in the center to give him water and plenty of long, coarse grass among the trees for provender.

Then I shoved my guns into my clothes and started hiking for the town. It was mighty risky, of course, because if trouble started I was a goner. But I decided that I’d be a lot less looked for on foot. You’ll wonder, perhaps, why I didn’t wait a few days under cover before I went in. But I knew that the next morning a hundred search parties would be out for me, unless I was already in jail.

# 13

It was not so bad as I had expected. A city of that size, I thought, would be so filled with people that my only good refuge would be in the very density of the crowd, but when I reached the outskirts, I found only unpaved streets and hardly anyone on the sidewalks saving the few workingmen who were hurrying home late to their suppers. And what a jumble of suppers! One acquires an acute nose in the mountains or on the desert, and I picked out at least fifty different articles of cookery before I had covered the first block.

I started on the second with a confused impression of onions, garlic, frying steak, stew, boiled tomatoes, cabbage, bacon, coffee, tea, and too many other things to mention. Nasally speaking, that first block of the capital town was like the first crash of a symphony orchestra. I went on very much more at ease through block after block with almost no one in sight, until I came to broad paved streets where there was less dust flying in the air—and where the front yards were not simply hard-beaten dirt with a plant or two at the corners of the houses.

For here there were houses set farther back. Some had hedges at the sidewalk—but all had gardens, and most of the way one could look over blocks and blocks of neatly cropped lawns, with flower borders near the houses, and flowering shrubs set out on the lawns. There were scores and scores of watering spouts whirling the spray into the air with a soft, delightful whispering.

They all had a different note. Some of them rattled around slowly and methodically like so many dray wheels, throwing out a spray in which you could distinguish each ray of water all the way round. There were some singing and spinning and making a solid flash like the wheel of a bright-painted buggy when a horse is doing a mile in better than three minutes.

Once in a while a breeze dipped out of the sky and stirred the heavy, hot air of the street, and blew little mists of the sprinklers to me and gave me quick scents of flowers. But always there was that wonderful odor of the ground drinking, and drinking.

I felt very happy, I'll tell you. I felt very expansive and kindly to the whole human race. Now and then I'd see a man run down the steps of his house and go out in his shirt sleeves, and take hold of the hose, and curse softly when the spray hit him, and then give the sprinkler a jerk that moved the little machine to another place. Like as not, he jerked the sprinkler straight toward him.

Then he would duck for the sidewalk and stand there wiping his face and hands with a handkerchief and stamping the water from his shoes and “phewing” and “damning” to himself as though he were ashamed.

But before they went back into the house, each man would stop a minute and look at the grass and the shrubs, each beaded with water and pearly with the light of the



nearest street lamps—and then up to the trees—and then up to the stars—and then go slowly into the house, singing, most like, and stepping light. When those men lifted their heads and looked up into the sky like that, I knew that they saw heaven.

When one young fellow ran out from his front door, I saw a girl come to the window and look after him, and hurry him with: “The soup will be stone cold, Archie.”

I couldn’t help it. I stopped short and leaned a hand against a tree and watched him move the sprinkler. Then, humming under his breath, he ran for the house. There were springs under that boy’s toes, I tell you. From what I could see of the girl, I didn’t wonder. But at his front door he turned and saw me still standing under the tree, watching and aching and groaning to myself:

“Mike and me—when do we get our chance—when do we get our chance!”

He called out: “Hey, you—what you want?”

A mighty snappy voice—like the home dog growling at a stranger pup. He was being defensive.

“Nothing,” said I.

“Then hump yourself—move along!” said he.

Perhaps you’ll think that I might have been angered by that. But I wasn’t. I was only pretty well sickened and saddened. If ever I were caught—and this night there was a grand chance that the law would take me—the dozen men in the jury box would be no better than this fellow—a clean-living fellow, with his heart in the right place—but snarling when he saw a strange dog near his house! Human nature—I knew it—and I didn’t blame him.

“All right. I’ll move along,” said I.

I only shifted one tree down and stopped again. You see, I wanted to watch that fellow go striding into his house and into that dining room and watch his wife smile at him.

Sentimental bunk? I know that as well as you do, but when a man has lived alone for seven years with mountains, and above timberline most of the time—seven winters, you know—well, it makes him either a murderer or a softy. I hardly know which is worse! But I was not a murderer, no matter what the world might say of me.

The householder had a glimpse of me again as he swung open his front door, and he came flaring back at me with the running stride of an athlete. I saw that he was big, and big in the right places.

He was in front of me in another moment.

“I’m going!” said I, and I turned and started shambling away.

He caught me by the shoulder and whirled me around.

“Look here!” said he. “I don’t like the looks of you—and the way you hang around—who are you?”

I shrank back from him against a tree. “A poor bum, mister,” said I. “I don’t want no trouble. But I was lookin’ through the window. It looked sort of homelike in there.”

“You’re lying!” said he. “By heaven, I’ll wager you’re some second-story crook. I’ve a mind—”

He put his hand on me again.

You’ll admit that I’d taken a good deal from him. But it’s easy for a big man to take things from other people. I don’t know why that is. Little fellows always have a chip on their shoulders.

But big fellows learn when they’re young that they’re not to fight—because they’re always too big for the other boys! But still, I was a bit angry when this young husband began to force his case at my expense. There were two hundred and twenty pounds of me, but down to the very last pound of me, I was hot.

Just then the girl’s voice sang out: “Archie! Archie! What are you doing—oh!”

There was a little squeal at the end as she sighted me.

“You see?” said I. “Let me go. I won’t trouble you any. You’re scaring your wife to death, you fool!”

“What? You impudent rat—”

He started a first-rate punch from the hip, but I caught his wrist and doubled his arm around behind him in a way which must have been new to him. He was a strong chap. But he hadn’t my incentive, and he hadn’t my training.

We stood with our faces inches apart. Suddenly he wilted.

“Porfilo!” said he through his teeth.

“Do you think I’m going to sink a slug in you?” I asked.

I saw by the look of his eyes that he did, and it made me a pretty sick man, I can tell you! I dropped his arm, and I went off down that street not caring a great deal whether I lived or died.

I went down that street until it carried me bang up against the capitol building in the middle of the great big square. Off to the right was the beginning of the park. I went off down the street that faced on it.

I think I must have passed five hundred people in that square, but I’m certain that not one of them guessed me. It would have been too queer to find Leon Porfilo *walking* through a street. They passed me by one after another—which shows that we see only what we expect to see.

In the street opposite the park it was easy going again. It was a fairly dark street, because there were no lamps except at the corner, and the blocks were long. Lamps on only one side of the street, too—because the park was on the other side and that was a thrifty town!

I walked about half a mile, I suppose, from the central square and then I found the house without looking for it. It was simply a great outwelling fragrance of the lilacs, just as the old man had told me. There was the yard filled with big shrubs—almost trees of ’em, and in the pool of darkness around the trees were rows and spottings of milk-white lilies.

It was a good thing to see, that yard. It was so filled with beauty—I don't know exactly how to say it. It was filled with hominess, too. I felt as though I had opened that squeaking gate a hundred times before and stepped down onto the brick path where the grass that grew between the bricks crunched under my heels.

Then I sidestepped from the path and among the trees. I went to the side of the house. I climbed up to the window in time to see the ceremony begin. About a dozen people piled into the room—and when the seating was over, a grim-faced, middle-aged man sat at the head of the table and a pretty-faced girl of twenty-one or so at the other.

Then I remembered that the governor's wife was not half his age.

I thought I understood one reason for the tired look in his face! In the meantime, there was nothing for me to do for a time. So I found a bench among the trees and lay down on it to watch the stars.

I waited until the smell of food went through me, and I tugged up my belt two notches. I waited until the humming voices and the laughter that always begin a meal—even a mountain dinner—died off into a broken talking—noise of dishes. Then music, somewhere. Well, I was never educated up to appreciating the squeaking of a violin!

A long time after that, somebody was making a speech. I could hear the steady voice. I could almost hear the yawns.

Somehow, I pitied the pretty girl at the far end of the table!

# 14

I WAITED a full hour after that. Then people began to leave the house, and finally, when the front door opened and closed no more, I began my rounds of the house. I found what I wanted soon enough. It was not in the second story, but a lighted window in the first, and I had a step up, only, to get a view of the inside of the room, and a broad-gauge window sill to hang to while I watched.

The window was open, which made everything easier. There was not much chance for me to be betrayed by the noise I might make in stirring about, for the wind was dipping and rustling among the trees.

I was looking into a high, narrow room with walls covered with books, and queer, old-looking framed photographs above the bookcases. There was a desk that looked as solid as rock. In front of the desk was the governor. I could have told that it was the governor even if I'd never seen him before, because he had that gone look about the eyes and those wrinkles of too much smiling that come to men who have offices of state. A man like that, when his face is at rest, is simply giving up thanks that he's not offending anyone.

The governor had a man sitting beside his desk—a man who looked only less tired than the governor himself. He was scribbling shorthand while the governor turned over and fiddled at a pile of papers on his desk and kept talking softly and steadily. All sorts of letters.

Well, he had to dictate so many letters, and make them all so different, that I wondered what fellow's brain could be big enough to hold so much stuff, and so many different kinds. I suppose that in that hour he dictated more letters than I'd ever written in my life. I could see new reasons every minute for that tired look. I began to think that he must know everyone in the State.

I heard the secretary ask him if he needed him any longer. I saw the governor look up quickly at him and then stand up and clap him on the shoulder and say:

“Go home to sleep! I've not been paying enough attention to you, but forgive me!”

I saw the secretary fairly stagger out of the room. Then there was the governor sitting over the typewriter and reading his correspondence on the one hand and picking at the machine with one finger on the other, and swearing in between in a style that would have tickled the ears of any cowpuncher on the hardest bit of the range.

I didn't hear anyone tap at the door. But pretty soon he jumped up with the look of a man about to accept ten million dollars. He opened the door and the pretty, young wife stood there wrapped up to the chin in a dressing gown. She looked him up and down in a way that smeared the smile off his face and left a sick look that I had seen there before.

It was an old-fashioned house, and there was a transom over the door. She pointed at the open transom and said half a dozen words out of stiff lips. She didn't say much. Just enough. A bullet isn't very big, either, but if it's planted in the right place it will tear the heart out of a man.

She jerked about on her heel and flounced away, and the governor leaned against the wall for a minute with all the sap run out of him. Then he closed the door and the transom and went back to the typewriter.

He was pretty badly jarred, though, and he sat there for a moment all loose, like a fellow with the strength run out of him. Then he shook his head and set his jaw and began to batter that typewriter again. I could see that he was a game sort of a man. Mighty game and proud and clean; I liked him all the way through; and yet I felt a mite sorry for the girl wife, too, when I thought of the way the governor's language must have been sliding out through that transom and percolating through the house. I suppose that a real respectable house would take a couple of generations to work language like that out of the grain of it!

I slid a leg inside the window, and made just enough noise for the governor to stop work and sit with his head up; and his right hand went back to his hip pocket—and came away again.

I stepped inside the room and was standing there pretty easy when he turned around.

He didn't jump up or start yapping for help or doing anything else that was foolish. He just sat and looked me over.

"Well, Porfilo," said he at last, "I suppose that you've tried to work out the most popular spectacular job in the State and decided that the governor's house was the best place for it. Is that it?"

I merely grinned. I knew that he would take it something like that, but it was mighty good to hear him talk up. It sent a tingle through all the right places in me. I just took off my hat and made myself easy.

"What do you want?" said he, frowning as I smiled. "My wallet?"

He tossed it to me. I caught it and threw it back. I had both my hands. Somehow, I hated to show a gun to that man.

"Something bigger than that?" said he, sneering. "I suppose that you'll want the papers to know how you held up the governor without even showing a gun?"

I got hot at that; in the face, I mean.

"No, sir," said I. "I'm not a rat."

"Tell me what you want," said he through his teeth. "There was a time when I served as a sheriff in this State, young man. There was a time when I carried guns. Now the fewer moments I spend with you, the better."

"Governor," said I, "do you think I'm a plain skunk?"

"No," said he, very brisk, and with his eyes snapping. "I should call you whatever you please—a purple, spotted, striped, or garden variety of skunk. Never the common

sort! Now what do you want with me, young man, if you don't want money? Is it a pardon?"

There was so much honest scorn in the governor's face, to say nothing of his voice, that all the starch went out of me. I could only mumble, "Yes, sir, that's what I want."

He threw up both his hands—such a quick gesture that it made a gun jump out of my pocket as quick as a snake's head out of a hole. I couldn't help it! But he saw the movement and he sneered again.

"Porfilo," said he, "I suppose you are going to threaten to shoot me unless I turn over a signed pardon to you?"

I shoved that gun away in my clothes. I was beginning to get angry in turn.

"I've come to talk, not to shoot," said I. "I've come to play your own dirty game with you!"

"Is my game dirty?" said he through his teeth.

Oh, yes, he was a fighting man, that governor! I wished that his young wife could have seen him then.

"Isn't it," said I, "a lot dirtier than mine? You beg people for their votes."

"Entirely false," said he. "But I enjoy a moral lecture from a murderer."

"I never murdered a man in my life," said I.

It made him blink a little.

"But you," said I, and I jabbed a finger into the air at him, "you get up and talk pretty sweet to a lot of swine that you hate."

He parted his lips to answer me, but then he changed his mind and sat back in his chair and watched me.

"About the murders," I went on. "I never shot a man unless he tackled me to kill me."

He parted his lips again to speak, but again he changed his mind and smiled.

"You are an extraordinarily simple liar," said he.

It's a good deal to be called a liar and swallow it. I didn't swallow this very well.

I snapped back at him: "Governor, I came here to see you because I was told that you're a gentleman."

"Well, well, Porfilo," said he, a little red. "Who told you that?"

"A girl," said I.

"*The* girl?" said he.

"Yes," said I.

"Good heavens, Porfilo," said he, "are you going to try to hide behind a woman who loves you?"

"I don't hide," said I. "What I ask you to do, is to go down the record against me and figure out where I've sunk lead into anybody that wasn't gunning for me. Was

there ever a man I sank that wasn't a gun fighter and a crook before he ever started after me? There never was!

"I've ridden a hundred miles to get out of the way of trouble, when trouble was showing up in the shape of a clean, decent man. But when a thug came after me, I didn't budge. Why should I?"

"Well," said he, "I'll tell you what you've done. You've made me listen to you. But just the other day Sheriff Lawton had two fine citizens shot by you."

"Leg and arm," said I.

"Yes, they were lucky."

"Lucky?" said I. "Do you think it was lucky, governor? If I've practiced hard at shooting every day of my life for the last ten years, at least, do you think that I'm so bad that I miss at forty yards? No, governor, you don't think that. Nor do you think that I've stood up to so few men that I get buck fever when I have a sight of 'em. No, sir, you don't think that, either!"

The governor scratched his chin and blinked at me. But I was pretty pleased, because I could see that he was getting more reasonable every minute.

"I don't mind admitting," said he, "that I'm inclined to believe the nonsense that you're talking." He grinned very frankly at me. However, I saw that I still had a long way to go.

"Are you armed?" said I.

"No," said he, "because very often in my official life I have a desire to use a gun. And I'm past the age when pleasures like that are becoming."

"Are you taking me serious?" said I.

"More than any judge would," said he.

"I believe you!" said I, and I couldn't help a quaver in my voice.

I saw that that put back my cause several lengths and would make the rest of the running pretty hard for me.

He said in that stiff way of his: "Have no sentimental nonsense, Porfilo!"

"I'm sorry," said I. Then I burst out with the truth at him, because I could see that there was no use trying to bamboozle him.

"A man can't help feeling sorry for himself when he gets a chance," said I.

The governor twisted up his mouth, and then he laughed. It did me a lot of good to hear him laugh, just then.

"As a matter of fact," said he, "not so long ago I was pitying myself! Now, young man, I think I can say that I like you. But that won't keep me for an instant from trying to have you hanged by the neck until you're dead."

"Do you mean that?" said I.

"I'm too tired to talk foolishness that I don't mean," said he. "I'll tell you what, Porfilo. If a petition for your pardon were signed by a thousand of the finest citizens in this State, that petition would have no more chance than a snowball in hell!"

He meant it, well enough, and I could see that he did. It made me within a shade of as sick as I'd ever been in my life.

"Well?" said he.

"I'm studying," said I, "because I know that I've got something more to say, but I can't figure out what it is!"

The governor laughed. He said: "I come closer to liking you every minute. But why is it that you think that you have something more to say?"

"Because," said I, "I know that I'm an honest man and a peaceable man!"

He laughed again, and I didn't like his laughter so well, this time.

"Well," said he, "I won't interrupt you!"

"You *know* that I'm a crook?" I asked him.

"About as well as any man could know anything."

"Have you looked up my whole life?"

"A few chunks of it have been served up to me—such as the Sam Dugan murder."

"The rest of your information is about as sound as that!" I snapped back at him, thanking heaven for the chance. "The murderer of Dugan has confessed and is in jail now!"

The governor blinked at me. "I didn't know that," muttered he.

"Of course you didn't," I cried to him. "Every time they have a chance to hang a crime on the corner of my head, that makes first-page news. Every time they don't know who fired the shot that killed, they say: 'Porfilo!' But when they find out the facts a couple of days later, it makes poor reading. So they stick the notice back among the advertisements—"

The governor nodded. I could see him accepting my idea and confessing that there was something in it.

"Well," said I, "I ask you to start in and look up my life. It won't be hard to do. One of your secretaries can unload the whole yarn for you in about half a day's work. Then sift out the proved things from the unproved. Give me the benefit of a doubt!"

"That sort of benefit will never win you a pardon from me," said he.

"I don't want a charity pardon," said I.

"What kind do you expect?"

"An earned one!"

"Confound it," said the governor, rubbing his hands together, "I like your style. Now tell me how under heaven you are going to win a pardon from *me*."

"You've heard of Jeffrey Dinsmore," said I.

"I have," said he.

"Is he as bad as I am—according to reputation?"

"Dinsmore is a—" he began. Then he shut his teeth carefully, and breathed a couple of times. "I should say that he's as bad as you are," said he between his teeth.



“All right,” said I. “Here’s my grand idea that brought me as close to the rope as the capital city, here!”

“Blaze away,” said he.

“Dinsmore has twenty thousand dollars on his head, same as me.”

“I understand that.”

“We’re an even bet, then?”

“I suppose so, if you want to make a sporting thing out of it.”

“All right,” said I. “What’s better than two bad men—”

“One, I suppose,” said the governor. “But I wish you wouldn’t be so darned Socratic.”

I didn’t quite understand what he meant, so I drilled away.

“The catching of me has been a pretty hard job,” said I. “It’s cost the State seven years—and they haven’t got me yet. But it’s cost them a lot for the amount of money that they’ve spent hunting me.”

“Besides your living expenses,” said the governor with a twisted grin that hadn’t much fun in it.

I caught him up on that.

“My living expenses have come out of the pockets of other crooks. I’ve never taken a penny from an honest man. Look up my record!” said I.

At this, he seemed really interested, and sat up and rubbed his fine square chin and scowled at me—not in anger, but as if he were trying to search my character.

“Well,” said he, “you are the darndest crook I’ve ever heard of—with twenty thousand on your head and pretending to live like an honest man!”

“For seven years!” I said, rubbing the facts in on him.

“Aye,” said he, “but will you insist that you’ve been honest all the time?”

“I helped in one robbery, and then I returned the money to the bank. You can get the facts on that, pretty easy. I had about a quarter of a million in my hands.”

“If you have a record like that, why hasn’t something been done for you?”

“I was waiting,” said I, “for a governor that was a gentleman; and here I am.”

“Ah, well,” said he, “of course I’ll have to look into this. It can’t be right. Yet I can’t help believing you. But what is this about earning your pardon?”

“I was saying that the State had spent a good many tens of thousands on me, and there doesn’t seem to be much chance of it letting up on the expenses right away!”

He nodded.

“This Jeffrey Dinsmore is a fellow with lots of friends and with a family with money behind him. It will surely cost a lot to get at him!”

“It will!” said the governor with a blacker face than ever.

“I want to show you the shortest way out.”

“I’m ready to listen, now. What’s in your head, young man?”

“Let Dinsmore know the proposition. I say, let it be a secret agreement between you and me—and Dinsmore—that if he brings me in—dead or alive—you’ll see that he gets a pardon, and the reverse goes for me.”

The governor stared at me with his eyes enlarged. He began by shaking his head.

I cut in very softly—hardly loud enough to interrupt his thoughts.

“I can promise you that there’ll be no living man brought in. One of us will have to die. There’s no doubt about that!”

“I know that,” said William Purchass Shay. “I believe you, Porfilo. By the way, are you Mexican?”

“My mother was Irish,” said I. “Away back yonder, there was a dash of Mexican Indian in my father’s blood.”

It seemed to me that his smile was a lot easier when he heard that! Then he got up and took my hand.

“After all,” he said, “one gets good laws in operation by hard common sense.” He paused. “Is there anything that you need, Porfilo?”

“Wings to get out of this town!” said I.

He nodded very gravely. “I don’t see how the devil you got into it.”

“Walked,” said I.

“While they were looking for a man on a mule! That was the alarm that came in—from the old man you shot at! Did you shoot at him, Porfilo?”

“The old scamp was burning up the country to get to a telephone and blow the news about me. So I thought I’d give him a real thrill and I fired into the air. That’s all there was to it!”

“There’s seventy miles between you and the mountains where you are so safe,” said he.

“Open country!” I nodded. “Seventy miles to Mr. Dinsmore, too!”

“Are you sure of that?” asked the governor, with a start.

“Why, that’s where the report located him.”

“The report lied, then! It lied like the devil!”

He said it in such a way that I could not answer him. I held my tongue until he reached out a sudden hand and wrung mine, and his eyes were fixed on the floor.

“Good luck to you—the best of luck to you, Porfilo!” said he.

I slid through the window, and when I looked back, I saw him standing just as I had left him, with his eyes fixed upon the floor.

Well, I couldn’t make it out at the time, but I figured pretty close, and I was reasonably sure that something I had brought into his mind connected with the idea of his wife, and that was what had taken the starch out of him.

However, I was not thinking about the governor ten seconds later. For, as I dropped from the window for the ground beneath, I saw a glint like that of a star through thin

clouds. But this glimmer was among the leaves of some shrubbery, and I knew that it was a touch of starlight on the polished barrel of a gun!

# 15

WELL, when you hear people speak of lightning thinking, I suppose that you smile and call it “talk”—but between the time I saw that glimmer of a gun in the brush and the instant my heels hit the ground beneath, I can give you my word that I had figured everything out.

If I were caught, people would want to know what Leon Porfilo had been doing in the governor’s office. Even if I were not caught, it would be bad enough. Because there would be no end of chatter all over the State. But, as a matter of fact, if I wanted to help the reputation of a man who had given me a mighty square deal, the best way for it was to cut out of those premises without using a gun or even drawing one.

I say that I thought of these things while I was dropping from the window to the ground, and I hadn’t much time besides that, for as I hit the ground and flopped over on my hands to ease the shock, I saw a big fellow with two more behind him step out of the brush and the lilacs about five paces away. Five paces—fifteen feet!

Well, you look across the room you are in and it seems quite a distance, at that. Besides, I had the night in my favor. But I give you my word that when I looked at those three silhouettes cut out against the starlit lilac bloom behind them, and when I saw the big pair of gats in the hands of the leader—and the gun apiece in the hands of the men behind—well, I knew in the first place that if I tried to run either side, they’d have me against the white background of the house and fill me with lead before I had taken two steps. I turned that idea over in the fifth part of a second while the leader was growling in a professionally ugly way—if you’ve ever heard a detective make an arrest, you’ll know what I mean.

“You—straighten up and tuck your hands over your head pronto!”

“All right!” muttered I.

He could not have distinguished the first part of my movement from an honest surrender. For I simply began to straighten as he had told me to do. The difference was in my right hand—a five-pound stone. As my hands flew up, that stone jumped straight into the stomach of the leader.

Both his guns went off, and there was a silvery clashing of broken window glass behind me. One of those bullets was in a big scrub oak. The other had broken the window of the governor’s office and broken the nose of the photograph of Shay’s grand-dad—and drilled through the wall itself.

But the holder of the two guns threw out his hands to keep from falling, and in doing that he backhanded his two assistants. One of them started shooting blindly. The other dropped his gun, but he had enough sand and wit to make a dive for me. I clubbed him over the head with my fist, as though it were a hammer, and very much as though a

hammer had struck him, he curled up. I almost tripped over him. By the time I had disentangled my feet, the chief was shooting from the ground.

But he was a long distance from doing me any real harm. The nerves of those three were a good deal upset. I suppose, in fact, that they had not had much experience in trying to arrest men who can't afford to go behind the bars and be tried for their lives.

At any rate, I was lost among those lilacs in a twinkling. At the same time, a considerable ruckus broke out in the house. Windows began to be thrown up, and voices were shouting, and the three detectives themselves were making enough noise to satisfy fifty.

Under cover of that racket, I didn't bolt out onto the street in the direction for which I was headed. Instead, I whirled around and under the shelter of those God-blessed lilacs, I tore back down the length of the yard.

I cleared the house—and still all the noise was in the rear and out toward the street. When I got into the back yard, I saw one discouraging thing—a tall fence about nine feet high and a man just in the act of climbing over. He had jumped up on a box; and the box had crumpled to nothing under him as he leaped. However, he had made the top of the fence.

I had to make the same height, without a box to jump from.

In the meantime, who was the man who was trying to make his getaway even before me?

I didn't stop to ask. I went at that fence with a flying leap and got my hands fixed on the top of it. With the same movement, I let my body swing like a pendulum. So I shot myself over the top a good deal like a pole vaulter.

When I let go with my hands, and while I was pendent in the air, falling, I saw that the man who had gone over ahead had stumbled just beneath me, and, like a snarling dog, he was growling at me. He fired while I was still hanging in the air, and the bullet clipped my upper lip and let me taste my own blood.

It's very bad to let an Irishman taste his own blood. It's bad enough to let one who's half Irish do the thing. At any rate, I went half mad with anger. Then I landed on him.

He wasn't big, and my weight seemed to flatten him out.

It was an alley cutting through behind the grounds of the governor's house, and there was a dull street lamp in a corner of the alley. It shed not very much light, but enough to show me a handsome-faced young fellow—not made big, but delicately like a watch, you know. A sensitive face, I called it.

He was too small for hitting. I just picked him up while he was winded, and then I dropped him on the pavement, which I thought might be pretty bad for that pretty face of his.

Then I started on. One thing I was glad of, and that was that there was a neat-looking horse tethered at the end of the alley, and from the length of the stirrups—as I made the saddle in a flying leap—I sort of thought that it might have belonged to the fellow I had just left behind me.

I cut the tethering rope from the saddle with my sheath knife, and then I scooted that horse across the street and down another alley.

I pulled him up walking into the next street beyond and jogged along as though nothing particularly concerning me were happening that night. A very good way to get through with trouble. But the trouble was that there was still hell popping at the governor's house. I could hear their voices—and more than that, I could hear their guns, and so could half of the rest of the town.

People were piling out of every house, and more than one man who was legging in the danger direction yelped at me as I went past and asked where I was going. But that was not so bad. I didn't mind questions. What I wanted to avoid was personal contact!

Here half a dozen fellows on fine horses took the corner ahead of me on one wheel, so to speak, spilling out all across the street as they raced the turn. When they saw me, one of them shouted: "What are you riding *that* way for?"

I knew that they would be halfway down the block before they could stop, and besides, I hoped that they wouldn't be too curious if I didn't answer.

So I just trotted the horse around the same corner by which they had come. But one question unanswered wasn't enough for them. They were like hungry dogs, ready to follow any trail.

"Hello?" yelled the sharp, biting voice of that same leader, to whom I began to wish bad luck. "No answer from that gent. Let's have a look at his face!"

I could hear the scraping and the scratching of the hoofs of the horses as the riders turned them in the middle of the block with cowpuncher yells that took down my temperature at least a dozen degrees.

In the meantime, I was not marking time. I scooted my mount down the next block. The minute he took his first stride I knew that the race would be a hot one, no matter how well they were fixed with horses. Because that little horse was a wonder! I never put eyes on him after that night, but he ran with me like a jack rabbit—a long-winded jack rabbit, at that!

My weight was such a puzzler for him, that he grunted with every stride, but he whipped me down that street so fast that I had nearly turned west on the next corner before the pursuit sighted me. But I failed by the stretched-out tail of that little Trojan; and by the yell behind me I knew that they were riding hard and riding for blood.

I turned again at the next corner, and as I turned, I saw that two men were riding even with me. They had even gained half a length in the running of that block!

I made up my mind right away. If they had speed, they could show it in a straightway run, because it kills a little horse to dodge corners with a heavy man on his back. So I put my pony straight west up that street, running him on the gutter of the street where dust and leaves had gathered and made easier padding for his hoofbeats.

In a mile we were out of the town, but those six scoundrels were still hanging on my rear, and raising the country with their yells and their whoops.

I could hear others falling in behind me. There were twenty now, shoving their horses along my path. Every moment they were increasing in numbers. Besides, after

the first half mile, my weight began to kill that game little horse. He ran just as fast, nearly, as he had before. But the spring was going out of his gallop. Then I was saying to him—just hold out over the hill and into the hollow—just over the hill and into the hollow.

Well, they were snapshooting at me as I went up that hill, and the hill and my weight together slowed my little horse frightfully. However, he got to the top of it at last, and my whistle was a blast between my fingers. Fifty yards of running down that hillside—with my poor little horse staggering and almost dying under me. My heart stood in my mouth, for if Roanoke were gone, I was a lost man with a halter around my neck.

But no—there he was, sloping out of the brush and heading full tilt toward me. As I came closer, he wheeled around and began to shamble away at his wonderful trot in the same direction I was riding. So I made a flying jump from the saddle of the little horse and onto the rocklike strength of the back of Roanoke.

# 16

THERE was not a great deal to the race after that. I suppose that there were a half a dozen horses in the lot that could have nabbed Roanoke in an early sprint. But the little gamester I rode out of town had taken the sap out of the running legs of the entire outfit.

When I left him for Roanoke, that old mule carried me up the course of the hollow—where water must have stood half the year, by the tree growth—and after he had run full speed for a few minutes, they began to drop back behind me into the night.

The moment I noticed that, I dropped Roanoke back to his trot. Galloping was not to his taste, but he could swing on at close to full speed with that shambling trot of his and keep it up forever. It did not take long. The hunt faded behind me. The yelling began to grow musical with the distance; and finally it died away—first to an occasional obscure murmur in the wind, and then to nothing.

I think we did thirty miles before the morning was on us. Then I put up and spent another hungry day in a clump of trees. But food for Roanoke, not for me, was the main thing at that time. When the day ended, I sent that old veteran out to travel again, and we were soon in the mountains, soon climbing slowly, soon winding and weaving ourselves up to cloud level.

Until I got to that height, back in my own country, I did not realize how frightened I had been. But now that the mischief was behind me, I felt fairly groggy. I sent one bullet through a pair of fool jack rabbits sitting side by side, the next morning, behind a rock. They barely made a meal for me. I could have eaten a hindquarter of an ox, I was so hungry. I kept poor Roanoke drudging away until about noon. Then I made camp and spent thirty-six hours without moving.

I always do that after a hard march, if I can. It is always best to work hard while there's the least hint of trouble in the offing, but when the wind lets up, I don't know of a better way to insure long life and happiness than by resting a lot. I was like a sponge. I could work for a hundred hours without closing my eyes; but at the end of that time, I could sleep two days, solid, with just enough waking time to cook and eat one meal on each of those days.

Roanoke was a good deal the same way. We spent a day and a half in a sort of stupor, but the result was that when we *did* start on, I had under me an animal that wasn't half fagged and ready to be beaten, but a mule with his ears up and quivering; and my own head was rested and prepared for trouble.

I hit for my old camping ground—not any particular section, though I knew every inch of the high range, by this time—the whole wide region above timberline—a bitter, naked, cheerless country, in lots of ways, but a safe one. For seven years, safety had to take the place of home and friends for me.



An infernal north wind began to shriek among the peaks as soon as I got up there among them. But I didn't budge for ten wretched days or more. I spent a shuddering, miserable existence. There is nothing on earth that comes so close to above timberline for real hell!

I've heard naturalists talk about the beauties of insects and birds and whatnot above the place where the trees stop growing. Well, I can't agree with them. Perhaps I haven't a soul. But those high places make me pretty sick! When I see the long, dark line of trees end, that cuts in and out among the mountains like the mark of high water, it sends a chill through me.

But for seven years I had spent the bulk of my life in that horrible part of the world. Seven years—eighteen to twenty-five! Every year before twenty-five is twice as long as every year after that time.

Well, I stayed in the old safe level, as I have said, about ten days. Then I dropped Roanoke five thousand feet nearer to civilization and stopped, one day, on the edge of a little town—right out between two hills where there was a little shack of a cabin standing. I knew that cabin, and I knew that the man inside it ought to know me.

I had stayed over with him half a dozen nights, and every time I used his house as a hotel, he got ten or twenty dollars out of me. Because that was one of the rules of the game. If a long rider struck up an acquaintanceship with one of the mountaineers, he always had to pay for it through the nose in the end.

However, I couldn't be sure that the old man Sargent hadn't changed his mind about me. I left Roanoke fidgeting among the trees on the hillside, for he could smell the sweet hay from the barn at that distance, and his mouth was watering. Then I slid down the hill and peeked through the windows. Everything seemed as cheerful and dirty and careless as ever.

Sargent had two grown-up sons. The three of them put in their time on a place where there wasn't work enough to keep one respectable two-handed man busy. There wasn't more than enough money for one man, if he wanted to be civilized. But civilization didn't harmonize with the Sargents. They wanted to live easy, even if they had to live low.

When I saw that there wasn't any change in them, I took Roanoke to the barn and put him up where he could eat all the hay he wanted. Because you can trust a mule to stop before the danger mark—which is a trust that you can't put in a horse.

Then I went to the house, and the three of them gave me a pretty snug welcome. Old man Sargent insisted that I take the best chair—his own chair. He insisted, too, that I have something to eat. I had had enough for breakfast to last a couple of days, but I let out a link and laid into some mighty good corn bread and molasses that he dished up to me along with some coffee so strong that it would of taken the bristles off of pigskin.

I said: "How long ago did you make this coffee, Sargent?"

"I dunno," said he.

"He swabs out the pot once a month," said one of the boys, grinning, "and the rest of the time, he just keeps changing the brew a little! A little more water—a little more coffee!"

Well, it tasted like that, sort of generally bad and strong—mighty strong.

I put away half a cup, just enough to moisten the corn bread that I swallowed.

“Have you come down to get Dinsmore?” said Bert Sargent.

The name hit the button, of course, and I turned around and stared at him.

“Why, Dinsmore has been setting waiting down in Elmira for three days!” said old man Sargent.

“Waiting for what?” said I. “I’ve been up in the mountains, and I haven’t heard.”

Of course, they were glad enough to tell. Bad news for anyone else was good news for those rascals. It seems that Dinsmore had appeared, suddenly, in the streets of Elmira. At noonday. That was his way of doing things—with a high hand—acting as though there were no reason in the world why he should expect trouble from anyone. He went to the bulletin board beside the post office and there he posted up a big notice. He had the roll of paper under his arm, and he tacked it up with plenty of nails, not caring what other signs he covered.

Well, sir, the reading of that sign was something like this:

Attention, Leon Porfilo! I want you, not the twenty thousand. If you want *me*, you can expect that I’ll be ready for you any day between three and four if you’ll ride through Main Street. I’ll let you know which way to shoot!

Jeffrey Dinsmore

I don’t mean to say that the Sargent family told me this story with so little detail. What they did do, however, was to give me all the facts, among the three of them. When I had sifted those facts over in my mind, I stood up. I was so worried that I didn’t care if they saw the trouble in my face.

“You don’t like this news so well as you might, partner?” says old Sargent very smooth and swallowing a grin.

I looked down at that wicked old loafer and hated him with all my heart.

“I don’t like that news at all,” I admitted.

The three of them exclaimed all in a breath with delight. They couldn’t help it. Then I told them that I was tired, and they showed me to a mattress on the floor of the next room. I lay there for a time trying to think out what I should do, and all the time I could hear the malicious whispers of the three in the kitchen. They were discussing with vile pleasure the shock that had appeared in my face when I had been told the news. They were like vultures, that trio.

Well, I was tired enough to go to sleep anyway, after a time. Then I wakened with a start and found that it was daylight. That was what you might call a real hundred-percent sleep. I felt better, of course, when I got up in the morning, and in the kitchen I found old man Sargent with his greasy hair tumbling down over his face and his face as lined and shadowed as though he had been drinking whisky all the night. I suppose that really low thoughts tear up a man’s body as much as the booze.

He gave a side look as sharp as a bird’s to see if there was still any trouble in my eyes, but I put on a mask for him and came out into the kitchen singing. All at once, a

sort of horror at that old man and at the life I had been leading came over me.

I hurried out of the house and down to the creek. Of course it was ice cold, but I needed a bath, inside and out, I felt. I stripped and dived and climbed back onto the creek bank with enough shivers running up and down my spine to have done for a whole school of minnows.

But I felt better. A lot better.

When I went back to the house for breakfast, I saw that one of the two boys was not on hand, and I asked where he was. His father said that he had gone off to try to get a deer, but that sounded like a queer excuse to me. I couldn't imagine a Sargent doing such a thing as this, at this hour in the morning! I began to grow a little uneasy—I didn't exactly know why!

After breakfast, as I left, I offered the old rat a twenty-dollar bill, and he took it and spread it out with a real gulp of joy. Cash came very seldom into his life.

“But,” said he at last, peering at me hopefully and making his voice a wheedling drawl, “ain't I give you extra important news, this trip? Ain't it worth a mite more?”

I was too disgusted to answer. I turned on my heel and left, and as I went out, I could hear him snarling covertly behind me.

HOWEVER, I didn't like to fall out with the Sargents. I knew that they were swine, but, after all, I might need their help pretty early and pretty often in the next few years of my life.

I went out to Roanoke and sat in the manger in front of him, thinking, or trying to think, while the old rascal started biting at me as though he were going to make breakfast off me. I decided, finally, that the only thing for me was to head straight for Elmira and take my chances there, because if I didn't meet Dinsmore right away, my name would be pretty worthless through the mountains. Besides, it was the very thing I had wanted.

But I had never dreamed of a fight in a town—and a big town like Elmira, that had a four-story hotel, and a regular business section, and four streets going north and south and four streets going east and west. There were as many as fifteen hundred people in Elmira, I suppose.

It was a regular city, and it seemed a good deal like craziness to try to stage a fight in such a place. As well start a chicken fight in the midst of a gang of rattlesnakes. No matter which of us won, he was sure to be nabbed by the local police right after the fight.

I wondered what could be in the head of Dinsmore, unless he had an arrangement with the sheriff of that county to turn him loose, in case he were the man who won the fight. I decided that this must be the fact, and that worried me more than ever. However, there wasn't much that I could do except to ride in and take my chance with Dinsmore. But one of the bad features was that I had never seen Dinsmore, whereas everyone had had a thousand looks at me in the posters which offered a reward for my capture.

Well, I saddled Roanoke and started down the Elmira trail. The first cross trail I came to, there I saw a board nailed on the side of a fence post and on the board there was all spread out a pretty good poster which said:

DINSMORE—TWENTY THOUSAND DOLLARS'  
REWARD

I made Roanoke jump for the sign to see the face in detail. It was rather a small photograph, but it was a very clear one, and I was fairly staggered when I leaned over and found myself looking into the eyes of the very same fellow who had climbed the back fence of the governor's house a second before me on that rousing night in the capital city.

So that was Dinsmore!

It wasn't a very hot day, but I jumped out of the saddle and sat down under a tree and smoked a cigarette and fanned myself and did some very tall damning.

It was all a confusing and nasty mess, of course. A *mighty* nasty mess! I hardly dared to think out all of the ideas that jumped into my mind. There had been the anger of the governor when I mentioned the name of Dinsmore. There had been a sort of savage satisfaction when I suggested that the other outlaw and I shoot it out for the pardon. That, together with the unknown presence of Dinsmore at the house—and the pretty face of the governor's wife—well, I was fairly done up at the thought, you may be sure.

I could remember, too, that Dinsmore, though he had always been a fighting man, had never been a complete devil until about a year before—which was about the date of the governor's marriage.

I don't mean to say that I immediately jumped to a lot of nasty conclusions. But a great many doubts and suspicions were floating through the back of my brain. I didn't want to believe a single one of them. But what could I do?

The first thing was to throw myself on the back of Roanoke and go down that hillside like a snowslide well underway. Blindly as a slide, too, and the result was that as I dipped out of the trees and came into the sunny little open valley below, I got two rifle shots squarely at my face. I didn't try to turn Roanoke aside. I just jammed him across that clearing with the spurs hanging in his flanks, and I opened fire with both revolvers as I went, firing as fast as I could and just in a general direction, of course!

Well, I got results. Snapshooting is always a good deal of a chance. This snapshooting into the blind brush got me a yelp of pain that meant a hit and was followed by a groan that meant a *bad* hit.

After that, there was a considerable crashing through the brush, and I made out at least three horses smearing their way off through the underbrush. But what mostly interested me was that the groaning remained just as near and just as heavy as before. So I went in search of it, and when I came to the place, I found a long fellow in ragged clothes lying on his face behind a shrub. I turned him over and with one look at his yellow face I knew that he was dying.

It was young Marcus Sargent.

Of course I knew at once why he had been missing at the breakfast table. They guessed that I would head straight for Elmira now that I had the news. So young Marcus thought of the twenty thousand dollars and decided that there was no reason why he should not dip his hands into the reward!

He wasn't a coward. He was in such pain that it changed his color, but it didn't keep him from sneering at me in hate. When you wrong a man, hate always comes out of it—on your side.

But I didn't hate him, in turn. I merely thanked heaven that he had missed; and I didn't see how he had, because I'd watched him ring down a squirrel out of a treetop many a time.

"How did you happen to miss?" I asked him. "Hand shake, Mark?"

The first thing he answered was: "Am I done for?"

I answered him brutally enough: “You’re done for. You can’t live two minutes, I suppose; that slug went through you in the spot where it would do me the most good!”

“You’re a lucky swine!” said Marcus. “Well, anyway, I dunno that life is so sweet that I hate the leavin’ of it. But over in Elmira—if you should happen to run across Sue Hunter, hand her my watch, will you? Tell her it’s from me. You’ll know her by her picture inside the cover.”

I hated nothing in the world more than touching that watch. But I did it, at last, and dropped it into my pocket.

He didn’t want to die before he had done as much harm as he could. He turned on his own family, saying: “It wasn’t me alone. The whole three of us talked it over last night!”

“Look here, Mark,” said I, getting a little sick as I watched his color change, “is there anything I can do to make you more comfortable?”

“Sure,” said he. “Lend me a chaw, will you?”

I didn’t chew tobacco, and I told him that I had none for him.

“Well,” said he, “then fetch me my own plug out of my hip pocket, will you?”

But before I could get it for him, he was dead.

I didn’t like this affair for a lot of reasons. In the first place, I’ve never sunk lead in a man without hating the job. Though I’ve had the necessity or the bad luck of having to kill ten times my share of men, there was never a time when I didn’t loathe it, and loathe the thought of it afterward.

But that was only half of the reason that I disliked this ugly little adventure in the hollow. I had a fair idea that the two or three curs who had ambushed me with young Sargent would now ride for Elmira full tilt and tell the sheriff of what they had tried to do and of where they had last seen me. So, in two or three hours, the sheriff might be setting a fine trap for me in the town.

Of course, I only needed a moment of thought to see that that was a foolish idea. No matter how little the people esteemed me, they would not think me such a perfect idiot as to ride on toward the town after I knew that a warning was speeding toward it in the form of three messengers.

No, the sheriff was really not very apt to lay a plot for me in the town. Rather, he was pretty sure to come foaming down to the place I had been seen and try to follow my trail from that point.

Well, I decided that if that were the case, he could pick up my trail if he cared to and follow it right back to his own home town.

In short, my idea was that when people heard I had appeared so close to Elmira, every gun-wearing citizen would take a turn on his fastest horse and treat himself to a holiday hunting down twenty thousand dollars’ worth of “critter.”

I believed that that town would be well cleaned out and that the best thing I could do was to drive straight for Elmira itself, simply swinging a little wide off the main trail. Perhaps nine tenths of the fighting men would be out hunting me when I reached Elmira, hunting Jeffrey Dinsmore!

Jeffrey Dinsmore, slender and delicately made, and as handsome for a man as the governor's wife was lovely for a girl! Thinking of her and of Dinsmore, I could understand why it was that Mike O'Rourke was only pretty and not truly beautiful. Molly might grow plain enough in the face in another ten years, but the governor's wife was another matter. She would simply become charming in new ways as time passed over her head.

There was something magnificent and removed and different about her. She was the sort of a person I wondered any man could ever have the courage to love—she seemed so mighty superior to me! Well, you can guess from all of this that I wasn't in the most cheerful frame of mind in the world until, about two hours afterward, I looked through a gap in the trees and the brush, and I saw about a hundred men piling down the hillside in just the opposite direction and knew that I had guessed right!

# 18

ELMIRA had turned out its best and bravest to swarm out to the place where my trail had been found and lost by those three heroes who accompanied young Mark Sargent. They had a long ride before them, and no matter how fast they spurred back toward Elmira, they were not apt to arrive there until many hours after I had passed through. My chief concern now was simply lest there still remained too many fighting men in the town. But I was not greatly worried about that.

I felt that I had reduced the dangers of Elmira to a very small point. The danger which remained was from Dinsmore alone.

How great that danger was I could not really guess. It was true that he established a great reputation for himself in Texas, but before this I had met with men of a great repute in distant sections of the country, and they had proved not so deadly on a closer knowing.

Furthermore, when one has picked up another man and dropped him on the pavement, one is not apt to respect his prowess greatly. Which may explain fairly thoroughly why I thought that I could handle Mr. Dinsmore with ease.

I did not think, however, that he would be prepared for me in Elmira. I thought that I probably would be permitted to canter down the street unobserved by Mr. Dinsmore; because if the entire town was so busy hunting me, it seemed illogical that I should drop into Elmira.

I expected to canter easily through the town, with only the danger of some belated storekeeper or some old man seeing and knowing me, for the rest of the town seemed to be out in the saddle.

Of course, I hoped that Dinsmore would not be on hand, because after I had answered his first invitation and he failed to appear, it would be my turn to lead, and I could request him to appear at a place of my own selection. The advantage would then be all on my side.

Outside of the town I stopped for a time. I let the mule rest, and I took it easy myself. I had a few hours on my hands before the appointed time to show myself to little Dinsmore in the town.

However, though Roanoke rested well enough, I cannot say that my nerves were very easy. The time was coming closer, faster than any express train I ever watched in my life. The waiting was the strain. Whereas Dinsmore, knowing that the fight might come any day, paid no heed, but could maintain a leisurely lookout—or none at all!

A pair of eternities went by at last, however. Then I swung onto Roanoke and started him into the town. Everything went on about as I had expected it. The town was



emptied of men. The first I saw was an old octogenarian with his trousers patched with a piece of old sack.

The poor old man looked more than half dead, and probably was. He didn't lift his head from his hobble as I rattled by. The first bit of danger that came into my way was signaled by the screaming voice of a woman.

"There goes Leon Porfilo! There'll be a murder in this town today!"

It wasn't a very cheerful reception, take it all in all. But I pulled Roanoke back to an easy trot, and then I took him down to a walk, because I saw that I was coming pretty close to the place of the rendezvous. When I passed that place—though I wanted most terribly to pass it fast!—still I had to be at a gait from which a man can shoot straight—and I've never yet seen anyone but a liar that could come near to accuracy from a trot or a gallop. Try it yourself—especially with a revolver—and see what happens. Even a walking horse is bad enough. It's hard when the target is moving; it's a lot harder when the shooter is in motion.

So I steeled myself as well as I could and reached a sort of mental bucket down into the innards of myself and drew up all the champagne that there was in me. I mustered a smile. Smiling helps a fellow, somehow. I don't mean in any fool way like they have it in ragtime songs and old proverbs. But smiling makes your gun hand steady.

Pretty soon I was right in the midst of the place where danger was to come at me, according to the warning that Dinsmore had sent out. I began to think that the whole thing was just a great bluff and that nothing would come out of it! It was a big play on the part of Dinsmore, and he hadn't the least idea of living up to his promise.

Just as this thought struck me, I heard a calm, smooth voice call out behind me: "Well, Porfilo?"

It was the sort of a voice that comes from a man who doesn't want to call any public attention to himself. He aims to reach just the ear of the man to whom he is speaking. But, at the same time, I knew that that was the voice of Dinsmore, and I knew that Dinsmore was mighty bad medicine; and I knew that the fight of my life was on my hands.

I spun about in the saddle with the gun in my hand—and I saw that he had not even drawn his weapon!

The shock of it sickened me. I couldn't keep from shooting—I was so thoroughly set for that pull of the trigger—but I did manage to shoot wide of the mark. Just as the gun exploded, I saw my new friend Dinsmore make as pretty a draw as I have ever had the pleasure of witnessing. One of those snap movements that jump a gun out of the leather and shoot it from the hip.

In the meantime, I jerked my own gun back and fired again, but my hand was mighty uncertain. The whole affair was so infernally unnerving that I was not myself. The idea that any man in the world would dare to stand up to me and give me the first chance at a draw was too much for me!

I got in my second shot before he fired his first, but all I did with that second bullet was to break a grocery-store window! Then a thunderbolt clipped me along the head and knocked me back in the saddle.

I was completely out—as perfectly out as though a hammer had landed on me—but it happened that in falling, my weight was thrown squarely forward, and my arms dangled around the neck of Roanoke. He started the same instant, I suppose, with that shambling, ridiculously smooth trot of his; so that I was able to stick to his back.

I think that the wild yelling of old men, and women, and children was what brought me back to my senses. Or partially back to them, for my head was spinning and crimson was running over my eyes. However, I was able to sit straighter in the saddle and put Roanoke into a gallop.

I was a dead man, of course. I learned afterward about the miracle that saved me. For the gun of that great expert, that famous Dinsmore, failed to work. The cylinder stuck on the next shot, and before he could get the other gun out to blow me out of this life and into limbo, that wise-headed mule of mine had put a buckboard at the side of the street between himself and that gunman.

Dinsmore had to run out into the middle of the street to get the next shot. But when he saw me again, I suppose that the distance was getting too great for accurate work even for him, and besides, Roanoke was shooting me along under the shadow of the trees.

At any rate, there he stood in a raging passion and emptied that second gun of his without putting a mark upon either the mule or the mule's rider. I suppose there is no doubt that the fury of that little man was what saved me more than anything else.

But presently I was blinking at the sun like a person wakened out of a dream, and behind me lay Elmira in a hollow; and up and down my head ran a pain like the agony of a cutting knife through tender flesh; and down in Elmira was a man who was telling the world that the "coward had run away from him!"

I should like to be able to say that, halting only to tie a sleeve of my shirt around my head, I turned and whirled back into Elmira to find him again. But I have to confess that nothing could have induced me to face that calm little devil of a mankiller on that day. For the moment, I felt that I could *never* have the courage to fight or face him again! I felt that I would take water sooner.

First of all, I found a little hollow about ten miles back among the hills, and there I made myself comfortable, heated some water, washed out my wound, and bound it up. Then I rode straight on to the next little village. On the way, I had to duck three or four parties of manhunters. I didn't have to ask who they were hunting for. I simply wanted to dodge them and get on, for I knew that they wanted either Dinsmore or me.

The next town had not much more than an ugly look, a hotel, and half a dozen shacks. But in one of these shacks was an old doctor, and that was what I wanted. The new-fangled ideas had taken his trade away from him. But he was good enough for me, on that day.

I left Roanoke behind his house and went to the back window and saw the poor old man sitting there in a kitchen that was blackened with the shadows of the trees that hung over the place—blackened with time, too, if you can understand what I mean by that. I pitied him, suddenly, so much that I almost forgot the pain in my head. Young men are like that.

They pity almost everyone except themselves. I never ride through a village without wondering how people can live in it. Yet I suppose that every one of them is prettier than my home town of Mendez.

I went in, and the doctor looked sidewise from his whittling of a stick and then back to it.

“Well, Porfilo,” said he, “I been hearin’ that you got licked, at last! And a little feller did it! Well, for some things bigness ain’t needed.”

He stood up—about five feet in his total height. I hung above him, ducking my head to keep from scraping the cobwebs off the rafters.

“I’ve got my head sliced open. Sew me up, pop,” said I.

“Set down and rest yourself, son,” said he. “I see you got sense enough to let little men fix you *up*, anyway!”

# 19

I LISTENED to him mumbling and muttering to himself, while I set my teeth and snarled at the pain, until the job was done and my head washed and bandage arranged around it. He gave me a lot of extra bandage, and a salve, and he asked me if I had a good mirror so that I could watch the wound every day. I told him that I had, and asked him what the price would be.

“If you’re flat busted, the way most of your kind always are,” said he, “there ain’t no charge, except for your good will. Besides, any young feller has got a reward comin’ to him when he listens to an old goat like me chatterin’ for a while. But if you’re flush, well, for bandagin’ the head of an outlaw and a mankiller like you—well, it’s worth about—thirty dollars, I reckon!”

I sifted a hundred dollars out of my wallet and put it in his hand.

I was out of the door before he had counted it over and he shouted: “Hey, you—”

I was on Roanoke, with that fine old fellow standing in the doorway and shouting: “Come back here! You give me too much.”

I sent Roanoke on his way, and the last I saw of him, that poor old man was running and stumbling and staggering after me, waving his glasses in one hand and his money in the other hand and telling me to come back. But I only saw him for a moment. Then I was away among the trees, with Roanoke climbing steadily.

I kept him south through the highlands. When I was far enough away from the last trouble, I made small marches every day, because I knew that a wound won’t heal quickly so long as a man is running about too much. While I was lazying around, I worked until both wrists ached over my guns. Because there was fear in me—real fear in me! I had gone for seven years from one fight to another, never beaten, always the conqueror. Now a little fellow had blown me off my pedestal!

I had to get ready to fight him again. I knew that, and I can’t tell you that I didn’t relish the knowing. In the meantime I had to get in touch with Mike. For she would think, as probably everyone in the mountains thought, that I had either been killed by the aftereffects of that wound in the head received from Jeffrey Dinsmore, or else that I had been so thoroughly broken in spirit as a result of that first defeat that I had shrunk away to a new land and dared not show myself in my old haunts.

Well, I thought of a letter, first of all; but then I decided that it would be better to see her, because it might be the very last time that I should ever see her in this world. For, having once witnessed the gun play of Jeffrey Dinsmore, I knew that at the best I would need a touch of good fortune in order to beat him in a fair gunfight. What with my bulk and my experience, how could I challenge him with any other weapon?

So I drifted farther south through the mountains until I came one midnight to the O'Rourke house and stood underneath the black front of the house—all black, except for a single light in the window of Mike.

I called her with a whistle which was a seven-year-old signal between us. She did not open the door and first look down at me, but she came flying down the stairs and then out the front door and down the steps and into my arms. But, when she had made sure that it was I, she stood back from me and laughed and nodded with her happiness. She told me that she had been sure that I was dead, in spite of other rumors.

“What sort of talk has been going around about me, then?” I asked her.

She shook her head. But I told her that I would have to have it.

“They are fools,” said she, but there was a strain in her voice. “They say that you are afraid to go back and face Dinsmore!”

Well, I *was* afraid. So I blurted out: “I *am* afraid, Mike.”

I saw it take her breath, and I saw her flinch from me. Then she answered very calmly: “However, you’ll go back and fight him again!”

I was mighty proud of her. You don’t find women who will talk like that very often. But Mike was the truest mountain-bred kind—thoroughbred, in her own way. I spent a single hour with her there in the garden. Then I told her that I was starting back.

“North?” asked Mike.

“North, of course,” said I. “You don’t think that I’ll try to dodge a second meeting?”

“Of *course* I didn’t think so!” said she. However, I could feel the relief in her voice. She began to pat the neck of old Roanoke.

“Roanoke,” said she, “bring him back safe to me!”

So I left Mike and rode north again.

It was a hard journey. I had gone for seven years more or less paying no attention to decent precautions, because they had not been so necessary to me. In fact, I had not appreciated the change in my affairs until I started that northward journey again.

It began in the first house where I put up for a night. Old Marshall’s house was a pretty frequent stopping place for me. His family had taken a good deal of money out of my hand, and more than that, his nephew, who ran the little bit of cattle land the old man owned, seemed to respect me and to like me, because he was always trying to find a better chance to talk to me.

But when I came to the house this night, everyone merely stared at me, at first, and then I could hear them whispering and even chuckling behind their hands. People had not done that to me since I was a little boy in school. It made my heart cold, and then it made my heart hot.

But I waited until something came out. With people like that, nothing could be left to silence very long. They had to bring out what they thought and put it into words.

So big Dick Marshall, the nephew, came and lounged against the wall near my chair.

“We hear that you been having your own sorts of trouble?” said he.

I lifted the bandage which I still wore, and showed him the scar.

“I was nipped,” said I.

He laughed in my face. “You didn’t go back for any more of *that* medicine, I guess?” said he.

I wanted to knock him down. But after a moment I decided that there was no use in doing that. Because he was not a bad fellow. Just a clod. No more cruel than a bull in a herd—and no less.

That, and the mischievous, contemptuous smile with which he watched me out of sight the next morning, as I rode away, should have convinced me, I suppose, that there was worse trouble ahead. But when I really found it out, it was merely because four young fellows came bang—over a hilltop behind me and tried to ride me down in the next hollow. When they saw that I was making time away from them to the tree line, they opened fire at me.

When I got to the trees, I told myself that I was all right, but to my real astonishment, just as I drew up on the rein and brought Roanoke back to a walk, I heard the whole four of them crashing through the underbrush!

I sent Roanoke ahead again, full steam. He was as smooth a worker as a snake through the shrubbery, and the four began to fall behind. I could hear them yelling with rage as they judged, by the noise, that they were losing ground behind me. But all the time I was thinking hard and fast. It wasn’t right. Four youngsters like these, not one of whom had probably ever pulled a gun on another man, should not be riding behind Leon Porfilo. By no means!

Well, I decided to find out what the reason was. So I cut back through the forest. The trees were pretty dense, and so I was able to get right in behind the party. I sighted them and found them just as I wanted to find them. They were strung out by the heat of the work, and one fellow was lagging far behind with a lame horse.

He had no eyes for the back trail, and he could hear no sound behind him, he was so eager to get ahead. It was easy enough to slip along in a dark hollow and stick a gun in the small of his back. I clapped my hand over his mouth so that I stifled his yell. Then I turned him around and looked him over. He was just a baby. About eighteen or nineteen, with big, pale-blue eyes, and a foolish sort of a smile trembling on his mouth.

He was afraid. But he was not afraid as much as he should have been at meeting Leon Porfilo. This may sound pretty fat-headed, but you have to understand that I had been the pet dragon around those parts for the past seven years, and I wasn’t in the habit of having infants like this boy on my trail!

I said to him: “Son, do you know who I am?”

“You’re Porfilo!” said he.

“Then what in the devil do you mean by riding so hard down my trail?”

He looked straight back at me. “There’s twenty thousand dollars’ worth of reasons,” said he, as bold as you please.

“Is it a very safe business?” said I.

He wouldn't answer, but those big pale eyes of his didn't waver.

"You can do what you want," said he. "I didn't have no fair chance—with you sneakin' up behind like that. No matter what happens, my brother'll get you after I'm dead!"

"Am I to murder you?" said I.

"You don't dare to leave me on your trail!" said he.

Well, it sickened me, and that was all there was to it! He actually wanted to fight the thing out with me, I think.

"You're loose!" said I, and dropped my gun back in the holster.

He jerked his horse back and grabbed for his own gun. Then he saw that I was making no move toward mine, and so he began to gape at me as though he were seeing double. Finally he disappeared in the trees. But it's a fact that I couldn't have fired a shot at that little fool.

This thing, and the talk of young Marshall, showed me how far I had dropped in the estimation of the mountain men since they had heard that little Dinsmore beat me in a fair fight. I knew that I would be in frightful danger from that moment on.

## 20

I KNEW that there was danger because my cloak of invincibility was quite thrown away. For seven years I had paraded up and down through the mountains, and men had not dared to go out to hunt me except when they had celebrated leaders to show them the way, and when they had prepared carefully organized bands of hard fighters and straight shooters.

It had been easy enough to get out of the reach of these large parties. But when the hills were beginning to buzz with the doings of little groups of from three to five manhunters—well, then my danger was multiplied by a thousand. Multiplied most of all, however, by the mental attitude of the people who rode out against me.

For there's only one reason that so many straight-shooting frontiersmen fail when they come to take a shot at a so-called desperado. That reason is that their nerve fails them. They are not sure of themselves. So their rifles miss, and the desperado who has all the confidence that they lack does prodigious things. One hears, here and there, of terrible warriors who have dropped half a dozen men, and gotten off unhurt!

Of course, I was never on a par with these. In fact, my principle was not to shoot to kill unless I had a known scoundrel up against me. But now I felt that my back was against the wall.

There was only one solution for me, and that was to get at Dinsmore as soon as possible and fight it out with him, and by his death put an end to the carelessness of the fools who were hounding me through the hills. But in the meantime, how was I to get at Dinsmore himself?

I decided that I must try the very scheme which he had tried on me. I must send him a message and a challenge in the message to meet me at a place and a time of my own choosing. Two days later chance threw a messenger into my path.

I was in a tangle of shrubs on the shoulder of a mountain with Roanoke on the other side, his saddle off, rolling to freshen himself, and playing like a colt, as only a mule, among grown animals, likes to play. While I sat on a rock at the edge of the brush, I saw a pair of horsemen and then a third working up the trail straight toward me.

I was in no hurry. This was rough country of my own choosing, and Roanoke could step away from any horse in the world, in that sort of going, like a mountain sheep! I simply got out my glasses and studied the three. As they came closer, rising deeper into the field of the glass, I thought that I could guess what they were—three headhunters, and mine was the head that they wanted.

For they were too well mounted to be just casual cowpunchers. Every man was literally armed to the teeth. I saw sheathed rifles under their right knees. I saw a pair of



revolvers at their hips. One fellow had another pair of six-shooters in his saddle holsters. They looked as though they were a detail from an army!

I went across the knob of the shoulder of that mountain and I saddled Roanoke. But I didn't like to leave that place. I was irritated again. Four youngsters had been out hunting me the last time. Now it was three grown men! Three!

You might say that my pride was offended, because that was exactly the case!

I ended by dropping the reins of Roanoke, and the wise old mule stood as still as death in the shadow of the trees, flopping his ears back and forth at me, but not so much as switching his tail to knock away the flies that were settling on his flanks and biting deep as only mountain flies know how to bite!

I have always thought that Roanoke knew when there was trouble coming, and that he enjoyed the prospect of it with all his heart. There was faith and strength and courage in the nature of that brute, but I am sure that there was a good deal of the devil in him, too!

I left him behind and started down among the rocks until I found exactly the sort of a place that I wanted, a regular nest, with plenty of chances to look out from it with a rifle. I had a fine rifle with me, and ready for action. As for my humor, it was nearer to killing than it had ever been in my life.

The three came up with surprising speed, and I knew by that that they were well mounted. As they came, I could hear their voices rising up to me like echoes up a well shaft. These voices, and that laughter, was sometimes dim, sometimes loud and crackling in my ear. Because in the mountains, where the air is very thin, sound travels not so freshly and easily. The least blow of wind may turn a shout into a whisper.

Have you never noticed that mountaineers, when they come down toward sea level, are a noisy lot?

I could hear all the talk of the three, and by their very talk I could judge that they were in the best of spirits.

Then: "Will you keep that darn bay from joggin' around and tryin' to turn around in the trail, Baldy?"

"It ain't me. It's the hoss. It wants to get back to that stable—"

"A hired hoss," said a third voice, "is something that I ain't never rode."

They came suddenly around the next bend of the trail, and I barely had the time to duck down in my nest of rocks. I had thought them at least fifty yards farther away from that bend!

I was not quite in time, at that.

"Hey!" yelled the first man—he of the bay horse.

"Well?" growled one of the others.

"Something in those rocks—"

"Maybe it's Porfilo!" laughed another.

"That's the gent you want!"

"Just run up to them rocks and ask him to step out and have it out with you, Baldy!"

Baldy said apologetically: “Well, I can’t keep you from laughing. But I would of said that the brim of a sombrero—”

I took off my hat and prepared my rifle. As I freshened my grip on it and tickled the trigger with my forefinger, I have to admit that I was ready to kill. I was hot and sore to the very bone. They came laughing and joking on my trail. It was a vacation, a regular party to them!

As they came closer, as the nodding shadow of the bay appeared on the white trail just before my nest, I stood up with the rifle at my shoulder.

There’s something discouraging about a rifle. About ten times as much can be said with a rifle as can be said with even a pair of revolvers. The revolvers may have a lot of speed and lead in ’em. But they *might* miss—they’re pretty *apt* to miss. Even a coward will take a gambling chance now and then. But when a rifle in a steady hand is looking in your direction, you feel sure that something is bound to drop. Somehow, there is an instinct in men which makes everyone think that the muzzle is pointed directly at him.

Only one of the three made a pass at a gun. The two boys behind shoved their hands in the air right pronto. But Baldy, up in the lead, passed a hand toward his off Colt. He was within the tenth part of a second of his long sleep when he did that. I think that there must be something in mental telepathy, because the moment that thought to kill came into my mind, he stuck both of his paws into the air and kept his arms stiff.

His bay turned around as if it were on a pivot and started moving back down the trail.

“Take your left hand, Baldy,” said I, “and stop that horse pronto!”

He did exactly as I told him to do.

“Now, boys,” said I, stepping out from the rocks with that rifle only at the ready, “I suppose that you recognize me. I’m Leon Porfilo. If you want to know me any better, make a pass at a holster. You, Baldy, were about half a step from purgatory a minute ago. The rest of you, turn your horses around with your knees. If you’re not riding hired horses, they ought to do that much without feeling the bit. Turn your horses around. I like the looks of your backs better than your faces.”

There was not a word of answer. They turned their nags obediently around. There they sat with five arms sticking into the air.

I made them dismount—the rear pair. Then I made them back up until they were near me. After that, I took their hands behind them and tied cords over them—tied them until they groaned.

“You pair of sapheads!” said I. “Sit down over there by that rock, will you—and don’t make any noise—because I feel restless today. I feel mighty restless. Baldy, you’re next!”

I tied Baldy with his own lariat, and I tied him well. I tied his hands tight behind him, and I tied his feet together under the belly of the bay.

Then I took an old envelope and wrote big on it:

To everybody in general, and Dinsmore in particular: Dinsmore got the drop on me in Elmira. I want to find him. I ask him to come and find me, now. I'll meet him any afternoon between three and four in the Elmira Pass. This holds good for the next month.

Leon Porfilo

I pinned that on the back of Baldy. Then I turned him loose. All that I wanted was to have the world see my message back to Dinsmore to let them know that I was waiting for him.

How that bay did sprint down the hill! There was a puff of trail dust, you might say, and then the bay and Baldy landed in the hollow of the valley below the mountain, and after that, they skimmed up the mountain on the other side. The bay was certainly signaling that he intended to get to that stable!

Then I went back to the other two. I didn't say a great deal, but they seemed to think that it was worth listening to. I told them that I had gone for seven years, letting people hound me through the mountains and not shooting back.

I told them that my next job was to find Dinsmore and kill him, but that in the meantime I intended to shoot, and to shoot to kill! If I met the pair of them again, they were dead men—on the street or in the mountains—it made no difference to me!

I think those fellows took it to heart. Then, because I hadn't the slightest fear that they would overtake the bay, I untied their hands and let them mount and ride back the way that they came.

# 21

ALL in all, I thought that this move of mine was a clever one and that it would reestablish me a great deal through the mountains; but the answer of Jeffrey Dinsmore was a crushing blow, because that rascal went into the office of the biggest newspaper in the capital city ten days later and called on the editor and introduced himself, and allowed the editor to photograph him, and dictated to the editor a long statement about various things.

It was a grand thing in the way of a scoop for that paper. I saw a copy of it and there were headlines across the front page three inches deep. Most of the rest of the front page was covered with pictures of the editor, and the editor's office where the terrible Dinsmore had appeared; and, in the center, surrounded with little pen sketches of Dinsmore in the act of shooting down a dozen men in various scenes, was a picture of Jeffrey—the picture which the editor had snapped of him.

It showed him, dapper and easy and smiling, smoking a cigar, and holding it up so that the camera could catch the name on it. That was a cigar which the editor, mentioning the fact proudly in his article, declared that he had given to the desperado.

Altogether, it was a great spread for Dinsmore, and the editor, and the newspaper, and a great fall for me. I understood afterward that the editor got three offers from other newspapers immediately afterward, and that his salary was doubled to keep him where he was.

He couldn't say too much about the affair.

Dinsmore had appeared through the window of his office, four stories above the street, at nine o'clock in the evening when most of the reporters were out at work on their stories and their copy. The editor of *The Eagle*, being busy at his desk, looked up just in time to see a dapper young man sliding through the window with a revolver pointed at the editorial head and the smiling face of Mr. Dinsmore behind the revolver.

So the editor, taking great pride in the fact that he did not put his hands into the air, turned around and from his tilted swivel chair asked Dinsmore what he would have.

"A good reputation!" said Dinsmore.

"From that point on," declared the editor in his article, "we got on very well together, because there is nothing like a good laugh to start an interview smoothly!"

They talked of a great many things. That editor's account of Dinsmore, his polished manners, his amiable smile, was so pleasant that it was a certainty no unprejudiced jury could ever be gathered in that county. If Dinsmore had murdered ten men the same night, he would have secured a hung jury on the whole butchery.

That editor was a pretty slick writer, when you come right down to it. He made Dinsmore out the most dashing young hero that ever galloped out of the pages of a

book. It was almost a book that he wrote about him!

He declared that if Dinsmore were anything worse than an impulsive youngster who didn't know better, he, the editor, would confess that his editorial brain was not worth a damn, and that he had never been able to judge a man.

Of course, the chief point in the interview was Dinsmore's own account of his fight with me. That was the main matter, all the way through. Because Dinsmore had called at the editor's office in order to explain to the world why he did not ride back into the mountains in order to answer my challenge.

I won't put in any of the bunk with which that article was filled, where the editor kept exclaiming at Dinsmore and asking him how he dared to venture through the streets unmasked—and how he had been able to scale the sheer side of the building.

I leave out all of that stuff. I leave out, too, all that the editor had to say about Dinsmore's family—how old that family was—how rich the estate was—how good and grand and gentle and refined and soldierly and judgeline the father of Dinsmore had been. How beautiful, womanly, gentle, and Southern his mother had been. How Dinsmore himself seemed to combine in himself all of the good qualities of both of his parents.

“So that,” said the editor, “I could not help feeling that what this young man was suffering from was an overplus of talents, of wealth, of social background. His hands had been filled so completely full since his childhood with all that other men hunger for, that it was no wonder he had turned aside from the ordinary courses of ordinary men. Alas, that he did not live in some more violent, more chivalric age! Then his sword and his shield would have won a name.”

The editor rambled on like this for quite a spell. Not very good stuff, but good enough to do for a newspaper. Newsprint stuff has to be a bit raw and edgy in order to cut through the skin of the man who reads as he runs.

The whole sum of it was that Jeffrey Dinsmore was a hero, and that he was a little too good for this world of ours to appreciate.

Finally, Dinsmore told about me.

He had gone up into the mountains, to Elmira, he said, because he wanted to find me where I would be at home among my own friends—because he didn't want to take me at a disadvantage.

“But why did you go in the first place?” asked the editor.

“I'm rather ashamed to confess it,” said Dinsmore, with an apologetic smile, “but when I heard of all of the atrocities of this fellow Porfilo, and how he had butchered men—not in fair fight but rather because he loved butchery—and how helpless the law had proved against him—well, sir, I decided that I couldn't stand it, and so I decided that I should have to get up into those mountains, and there I'd meet Mr. Porfilo hand to hand and kill him if I could!”

The editor couldn't let Dinsmore say any more than this without breaking in to comment and praise Dinsmore and show that he was like some knight out of the Middle Ages riding through the dark and unknown mountains to find the dragon.

Well, as I said before, that editor was a good editor, but what he had to say began to get under my skin. I looked again at his picture. He had a thin face and he wore glasses.

I wonder why it is that spectacles always make me pity a man?

Dinsmore went on to tell how he had met me, and how I had whirled on him and fired the first shot, while he was waiting to talk. Well, that was all very true. Twenty people could swear to the truth of that, but not one of them had the sense to know that I had fired wide.

Then he said that the firing of that first shot showed him that I was a coward and a bully—a coward because I was a bully, and a bully because I was so very willing to take advantage of another man who only wanted to stand up and fight fair and square.

I couldn't read farther in the paper at that time. I had to walk up and down for a time to cool off. Then I looked hurriedly through the paper to try to find a statement by Dick Lawton, or somebody like that, defending me. But there wasn't any such statement. Only, on the fourth and fifth pages of the paper there were opposite accounts of the pair of us.

On one page there was the story of Dinsmore, with little illustrations inset, showing the great big house that he had been born and raised in; and how Dinsmore looked in his rowing squad at college in the East, and how Dinsmore looked in his year of captaincy of the football team, when his quarterback run had smashed the Orange to smithereens in the last two seconds of the game.

It showed how he looked on a polo pony—and what the five girls looked like that he had been engaged to at various times in his life—and how he looked standing beside his father, Senator Dinsmore—and how he looked arm in arm with his dear old mother—and how he looked when he rode the famous hunter, Tippetty Splatchet, to victory in the Yarrum Cup.

Well, there was a lot of stuff like that, with the history of his life written alongside of it.

On the opposite page it showed the house I was born in in Mendez, and there was a picture of the butcher shop that my father had owned. There was a picture of myself, too, showing my broad face and heavy jaw and cheekbones.

“Like a prizefighter of the more brutal kind!” Dinsmore had said.

But there was only a dull account of my affairs—“butcheries,” the editor called them. I was made out pretty black, and there was not a word of truth said to defend me. When I got through, I wanted to kill that editor!

I went back to Dinsmore's account. He told how he had decided that I was a swine, and then he had fired after my second shot, and the bullet had wounded me in the head—after which I spurred the mule away down the street as fast as I could!

There were plenty of witnesses who could prove that the bullet stunned me and that I did not begin to flee of my own free will. But of course none of their statements was wanted. Nothing but the word of the hero!

As for coming back into the mountains, Mr. Dinsmore said that after standing in the street of Elmira and firing shot after shot “into the air” and watching me ride “like

mad” to get away from danger, he had no wish to come back to find me again.

He said that he felt he had fairly well demonstrated that the bully Porfilo was a coward at heart. He, Dinsmore, feared a coward more than he did any brave man. For a coward was capable of sinking to the lowest devices! He knew quite well that if he accepted the invitation to face the challenge of Leon Porfilo, he would be waylaid and murdered!

So much for his opinion of Leon Porfilo.

Now, as I read this letter, such a madness came over me that I trembled like a frightened girl. Then I steadied myself and sat with my head in my hands for a long time, thinking, wondering.

But what I made out at last was rather startling.

For it was declared in the paper that Mr. Dinsmore had said that he was in the capital city because he was then engaged in the task of drifting himself rapidly East and that the West perhaps would see him never again.

But, as I read this statement, I could not help remembering that I had seen him once before in the capital city, and I remembered, also, all of the nasty thoughts that had gone through my mind at that time.

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Six-Gun Country* by Frederick Shiller Faust (as Max Brand)]