

THE
DRY
RIDGE
GANG

By B. M.
BOWER

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BLAKISTON

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TRIANGLE
BOOKS

A tenderfoot Easterner gives Sheriff Whitcome unexpected and unwelcome help in catching a clever gang of bank robbers

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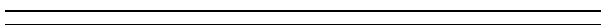
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THE DRY RIDGE GANG

CHAPTER ONE

I ARRIVE

RAY talked of buffalo hunts, Indian fights and cold-eyed two-gun men incessantly after we left Chicago behind us. He talked so much that I half expected to hear the train whistle and slow down and stop because an old bull buffalo was disputing the right of way, perhaps. Or a vast herd of antelope had chosen that moment to flee across the track and couldn't turn off for a mere express train. All jokes aside, I did half expect that one could see deer sign just outside the town which was our destination. I also believed that men of the town wore six-shooters bolstered at their hips as a matter of course.

I should have known better, I suppose. I did know that as a rule one cannot place much dependence upon another man's description of a person or place. But Ray was so enthusiastic about the wildness of his West that he had me fooled. And when we stepped down from the Pullman upon a broad concrete platform neatly blocked out in large diamond pattern and stained an elegant dark red, and looked across it, through a sprinkling of well-dressed men and women, all with pleased expectant faces (greeting those just arrived from a journey, or hurrying off upon adventures of their own), to a red depot with pillars and a fancy roof, it occurred to me that Ray had been slightly misleading. I began to doubt the deer and the

mountain lion coming down along the river just outside town on moonlight nights.

And when Ray grabbed his suitcase and took long steps toward a shiny surrey of the latest design, drawn by still shinier sorrels shying away from the train with wide eyes and flaring nostrils, I said a word under my breath and followed.

“We have this kind of wilderness back in the corn belt,” I snorted, as I came up with him. He didn’t so much as look around.

“Hello, Dad!” he was shouting at the big, placid-faced man in the light gray suit and expensive Panama that smacked of New York. “Here we are—and here you are, just exactly on time as usual. Got a new team, I see. Come on, Walter! Hurry up, man! I want you to meet my dad, the he one of all Montana!”

I hurried, but I did not run, as Ray did the last few steps. He was not my dad, and I could not see the necessity of thrusting men aside and knocking down women and little children in order to reach him and shake his hand three seconds sooner. Furthermore, I wanted to look him over and revise my mental picture of him. Thanks to Ray’s hero worship of his father and everything pertaining to him, I had expected a big, broad-shouldered, sombreroed man with flowing mustache, weather-tanned face and two guns, one riding either hip. Yes, and a sheriff’s star pinned to his vest. Well, he was big enough, and his Panama was a shade wider in the brim than most, but he was smooth-shaven and suave, and he looked like a senator or a banker or something.

By the time I arrived Ray had a foot on the hub of the front wheel—a risky proceeding, I thought, with those horses humped up ready to jump out of their harness any second—

and he was talking a blue streak, mostly asking questions, I gathered, and giving no time for his father to answer any of them. So far as I could see, he had forgotten my existence for the moment. I just stood there behind him with my suitcase in my hand and waited for him to snap out of it.

A silk-hatted old gentleman with a dignified bulge to his white waistcoat came nipping up alongside me. He lifted the shiny hat and said, “How d’ you do, Sheriff Whitcome?” in a tone of respect that impressed me even in that confused moment.

I stepped back while the old gentleman shook hands with Ray and inquired after his health and his success at school, and the health of an aunt back east, and the state of the weather when he left—

But the sheriff, his keen eyes dancing with laughter as he looked at me over the man’s head, ended the polite questionnaire by reaching out and flicking me lightly on the shoulder with the tip of his whalebone buggy whip.

“Come up here in the seat with me, young man,” he commanded, in a particularly friendly tone. “I’ve heard all about you—far as I’m concerned, no introduction is necessary. I know who you are and you know who I am, so we’ll just cut out the red tape. Mighty glad to have you with us, Walter.” He shifted the reins and shook hands with me, and his clasp was firm and friendly and gave me a pleasant glow of being accepted as one of his family.

He leaned out toward the two on the platform. “See you later, Judge. I promised to have these young cubs at the ranch in half an hour after the train pulled in. The women folks’ll check up on me—they’d see the train go by. So I’ve got just twenty-five minutes to do it in, and I’ll bet they’re holding

the watch on me to see if I make good. Get in behind, Ray. I'll send a man in after the plunder. So long, Judge.”

The pompous old man in the white vest stepped back hastily, bowed and put on his glistening top hat, all in one motion, as it seemed to me. We turned on two wheels and went careening down a side street, whipped into the planked approach to a long iron bridge across the river and went clattering across, leaving the steel rods and cables humming long after we had passed. The sorrel horses nipped at each other's manes, broke into a canter and were pulled firmly back to a trot. A scattering of small houses in bleak little yards set off from the rolling prairie with untidy picket fences zipped past, and we ducked under the railroad, crossed another, bluer river and so reached at last the prairie road winding brown across the little ridges before us.

I don't think a word was spoken during the first half of the drive. Ray's father gave his entire attention to the horses—and they certainly needed it, if I am any judge. Devils for mischief, both of them. Constantly nipping and then trying to bolt; lunging ahead as if they really meant to run away with the surrey. They didn't succeed in doing anything except keep the sheriff busy watching them, though it looked as though he was used to such performances and really thought nothing of it. I wasn't much accustomed to horses, though—at least, not that kind. It was some minutes before I realized they really weren't doing a thing he didn't want or permit. I saw that he was letting them go, just keeping them barely under control. He wanted to make up those five minutes lost at the station.

So then, having seen that it was all right, I began to take stock of Ray's father. Ray had told me all about him, of

course, and how he had been sheriff of the county for fifteen or twenty years and probably would go on being sheriff as long as he lived. No one had a chance against him, or seemed to want one. He was something important in a bank—director, and also something else; second vice president, I believe it was. Owned a lot of property, had a big ranch five or six miles out of Porcupine, was in fact one of the leading citizens of the county.

Well, he certainly looked it. He was a big man. I don't mean fat, exactly, but big. I guessed he was an inch or more over six feet and I'm sure he must have weighed over two hundred. His face, as I said before, was peculiarly placid for a sheriff; almost benign, with a strong nose and a mouth tucked in at the corners in what looked like a half smile. I liked his eyes, and yet when he looked straight at me, there was something hidden in his look, if you get what I mean. Those eyes of his had a permanent sort of twinkle, as I afterwards discovered, but behind the twinkle the man himself stood watchful, entrenched behind his smile.

I don't believe I saw so much that first day. The sheriff's eyes were a friendly blue, with a tinge of hazel next the pupils. If I seem to be going too much into detail, it is because Ray's father had been held up before me as a heroic figure, the kind of pioneer who helped to build an empire in the wilderness. And he is important to the story.

I could picture him doing big things easily and without fuss or flurry. I felt that his friendship must be worth having, and I could understand how no other man had been big enough to walk in his official shoes. Men and women would lean on his strength. They would sleep sounder at night, knowing that he was on the job, making things tough for the

lawless. I thought I should take to the tall timber if I ever broke a law in this county and got Sheriff Whitcome on my trail. Ray said he always got any man he went after, and I believed it.

He turned suddenly, gave me one keen look which must have measured me mentally, morally and physically, turned his head and looked at Ray, leaning back complacently in the seat behind me. “Those the latest collars?” he drawled unexpectedly, and my hand went up instinctively to mine. They were pretty high, all right, certainly not meant for comfort. We had wanted to arrive in style and it was Ray who had suggested the gray peg-top trousers and our high collars.

But his father did not wait to be told, but came on from another angle. “Heeled with all the implements for amusing yourselves, I suppose? Going to be college boys, down on the farm. Got a set of boxin’ gloves and a punchin’ bag, I’ll bet, and a football and so on.”

“Not on your life, Dad,” Ray corrected him. “We’re going to hunt and fish a lot, and be appointed deputies under you and help chase outlaws. I’ve promised Walter you’ll have a good supply on hand—Walter’s the human bloodhound type and he’s liable to bust his leash if he smells blood. He wants a good man hunt.”

Ray always took a crack at me if he got any kind of opening and insisted on calling me names utterly misleading. In reality, I am and always have been the most peace-loving mortal in the world, and would much rather wade in a good trout stream than in gore, any day in the week.

His father chuckled and gave me another swift measuring glance from the tail of his twinkling eye. “Oh, all right,” he yielded indulgently. “I guess I can furnish the game. There’s

the Dry Ridge gang been hellin' around over the country lately. You can turn yourselves loose on their trail—if they've got one, which I'm beginning to doubt. They'll furnish you boys all the huntin' you want."

I must have looked almost as skeptical as I felt, for he laughed a big bellowing laugh that scared the sorrel team into a gallop again.

"Oh, it's straight goods," he assured me, when he had brought them down to a fast, sweeping trot again. "There's a Dry Ridge gang, all right, and they're plumb wild and hard to catch. No killin's so far, but they've done about everything else, I guess. Robbed a bank here—the Citizens' State—about a week ago. Made quite a haul, too. I was up the line when it happened. Just got in yesterday from a four-day hunt."

"Gosh, Dad!" Ray's tone was incredulous that his infallible father should have to confess failure. "Didn't you get any clues, even?"

The sheriff laughed again, but not so loud this time. "Well, m' son, I wasn't out huntin' clues. What I wanted was the men that turned the trick. I didn't get 'em—no. Nor any sign of 'em beyond Dry Ridge. I bet I've followed that bunch forty times to Dry Ridge and lost 'em. I'm liable to follow 'em forty times more before I tie onto 'em. But I'll get 'em some day. They can't always get away—" He paused, shaking his head, his lips drawn tight. Then he returned to his banter. "So if it's hunting bold, bad men you want, fly at it, son. Yuh might win enough to pay some of them danged fraternity bills, if you're lucky. There's a reward posted on every one of 'em."

“You bet we will. We’ll just take him up on that, eh, Walter? If the sheriff is losing his grip, it’s about time the son and heir should come to the rescue. Cheer up, Dad. We’ll find your lost bandits for you. Walter’s all equipped for the chase. He’ll get a line on ’em right away.”

That speech got me another keen look from the big man beside me. “That right?” His tone was dubious, and no wonder. I certainly bear none of the well-known earmarks of the sleuth.

“About the only thing I ever got a line on is a few trout,” I told him, feeling stiff and uncomfortable. “I came fully equipped for that, at least. Ray’s just trying to spoof you, Mr. Whitcome.”

“Not on your life, Dad. Don’t you believe him. This lad’s bright. You ought to see him on the trail of anything he makes up his mind he’s got to have. Why, he—”

“I haven’t got to have a bank robber,” I snapped over my shoulder, to shut him up. “If I trail anything, it will be a good trout stream. What flies will they be taking this time of year, Mr. Whitcome? I’ve made up some of my own that get dandy results up in Maine and Vermont. I’m anxious to see what they’d do here.”

“Lord, you’ll have to talk to Ellie about that,” the sheriff said in a relaxed tone, as if he were glad to get away from the subject of that bank robbery. Probably did get under the skin, sort of, to have a reputation for always getting his man, and then not be able to get that gang.

We talked about fishing from there in to the ranch. At least I talked, and the sheriff drove the sorrels and listened, and got us to the door exactly on time.

CHAPTER TWO

BIG BEND RANCH

NATURALLY there was a good deal of embracing and incoherent talk. I stood on the side lines and nothing much came my way until the first excitement was over. For when an only son comes home with his sheepskin from college and meets his adoring mother and his ditto sister, a mere friend of that son cannot expect to seem important just at first, or receive any notice whatever.

They were mighty nice to me, though, once they let go of Ray and remembered that a guest was along. I liked Ray's mother a lot. She reminded me of a pert little Jenny Wren chirping and fussing over her brood. I knew instinctively that she was going to take me right into the nest and make me feel that I really and truly belonged there. She had soft brown hair brushed down in wings to help the likeness, and a back comb standing up from the coil behind her fine little head—I wondered if she were deliberately helping out her likeness to a wren—and her movements were quick, though every one seemed to count for something. I am not given to emotional splurges, yet I wanted to pick that little lady up in my arms and carry her to the easiest rocking chair in sight and set her down in it. She wouldn't have liked it, I know. She'd have seen something else to do and hopped right onto the job before my back was turned, but I wanted to do it just the same.

The girl, Ray's sister, was as different as it's possible for a daughter to be, I guess. Tall and cool—serene might be a better word, though her quiet manner somehow suggested

banked fires, and that certainly doesn't sound cool, does it? With the first look at her I got the impression of a lot of power lying latent. That is what I mean, really; unused strength and efficiency. And beauty too, of the kind that doesn't depend on red lips and peachbloom complexion—

Oh, well, I'm raving when I should be getting on with the foundation of my story. The family called her Ellie, and it took me a day or so to discover that it wasn't a pet name for Ella, but Ellison trimmed down to convenient length. I've got to add that she was not a person to be overlooked. Without being obtrusive, there was something about her that made one always aware of her presence, always sort of waiting for her opinion and listening when she spoke. I don't think it was just my own personal susceptibility that made me so Ellie-conscious from the very first; I think even her family felt that way about her.

Once or twice, that first day, I thought I saw a rebellious look in her eyes, though I can't remember what had called it there. I thought then how much her eyes were like her father's, but in a moment the resemblance was gone. In the main she was serene—I come back to that word, you see—and pleasant, although she didn't say much. I never would have suspected her of being a product of the wild and woolly West such as Ray continually harped on. Perhaps she used a few colloquialisms not often heard east of the Mississippi, though they always sounded right and proper when she spoke them.

After the first handshake and friendly greeting, she didn't give me much attention, which at least left me free to study her. She was frankly intrigued by Ray and his new clothes, and the way he knotted his tie and dented his hat crown. Even

the new cut of his shoes came in for her keen observation and criticism. She didn't like them, I remember. Ray always was rather extreme. He liked to look the college man as he is portrayed on the stage and in magazine ads.

He even carried a stick, though there was no earthly excuse for it—sticks not being the latest fad. He affected light gray, of the pattern called an invisible plaid but which is always perfectly obvious. His silk socks were chosen to emphasize the bright line of the plaid, whatever it was, and his ties carried the tone an octave higher, as it were. The meerschaum he smoked was dragging down the corner of his mouth, it was so heavy, and wearing the enamel off his teeth. And because he had a true magazine-cover profile, he had a trick of turning his head against the light. With his hat tilted to show a lock of brown wavy hair falling carelessly down over one eyebrow, I always thought Harrison Fisher or Gibson ought to have a look at him. He'd go well with their girls.

This doesn't mean that I felt anything less than a real affection for Ray Whitcome. He was the biggest-hearted fellow in the world and one of the most likable. His little vanities were a sort of game with him. He did it partly to devil me, I always suspected, and now I saw that he was getting a real kick out of his sister's attitude, too. I know he repeated to her what he always fired at me if I got to ragging him too hard. "The girls like this sort of thing and I like the girls. See?" She saw, and gave a ladylike snort and let the argument end there. Which was what I usually did.

Well, that gives you my first impressions of the family. The sheriff was mighty proud of those two kids, as I could tell by his face; and his manner toward his little wren of a wife was almost pathetically tender and considerate. And all

the while he seemed to think he was hiding his feelings under a bluff tolerance of their pretended shortcomings. He couldn't have fooled a blind man.

As soon as I decently could, I brought out the stock excuse of wanting to get several letters ready for the next mail and left them to their own intimate gossip. I spent the evening in the big room upstairs that was to be mine for the three months I had promised Ray. There were two windows looking down toward Porcupine, the town we had arrived at on the train. I could see the trail we had come over, looking like a brown ribbon flung carelessly over the low ridges. It was five miles to Porcupine, Ray had told me, but the clear air was deceptive and it looked less than half that distance. At dusk, when the lights flashed out over the sprawling town, I felt as if I were in the suburbs and could walk to the business section in fifteen or twenty minutes. Which of course put the cap sheaf on my disillusionment and killed all my hopes of spending three months away from civilization. I meant, you see, to try my hand at writing, and I wanted solitude for that.

Porcupine, I had noticed, was quite up to date and citified. There were trolley lines running here and there, and brick business blocks of a quite imposing height, and three twenty-thirty theaters, Ray had confessed, when I asked him about entertainment. After enthusing about the frontier flavor of the county seat of Porcupine County, I certainly went after him at bedtime when he came into my room for a chat.

“But it *is* wild,” he insisted, roosting upon a corner of my dresser and holding up that infernal big pipe of his so it wouldn't pull the teeth out of his head. “Don't go and make the mistake of thinking that two trolley lines spell civilization. The town's a town, I admit. The swells on the

North Side dress for dinner and have butlers and coachmen and all the trappings of wealth—and I can take you where the lights are pretty darned bright and you can get anything you want from opium to absinthe. And you can get on a horse outside the door and in an hour gallop into the wild and woolly I've been telling you about, Walter.”

“Oh.” My tone was, I hope, ironic. “Your wild and woolly is too damned tame and smooth to interest me, my boy.”

“That’s all you know. I admit we’ve got a telephone here and a very efficient acetylene gas system—yes. Sure, we have. And I can throw a rock into the corral and hit a bronk that has to be forefooted before a man can get into the saddle, and when he’s there he’ll have to be a dandy if he stays more than two jumps—”

“Oh, yes,” I yawned. “I’ve seen horses like that in Trenton, New Jersey.”

“Well,” he flared up at me, “darn your picture, I can take you back there into Big Bend a couple of miles from this house, and give you a crack at a deer, or wolves, or a wildcat, if you’re quick enough. I can show you men right here on the ranch who wear hairy chaps for use and not for show purposes, and handle a branding iron as easily as you do a fountain pen. Why, confound you, Walter, the West is *here*—right on this ranch! The same West we always had—unless you want dime-novel trimmings, and even then I guess you could be accommodated, all right, if you want to stick around awhile.”

I like Ray when he grows heated and eloquent. He looked very handsome and earnest, perched there swinging his lavender-socked foot and holding up a pound or so of warmly shaded meerschaum. While I shook out a pair of pajamas, he

scowled at me from under the lock of hair that had fallen over one eye and waited for me to go on and argue some more. Instead, I gave him my well-known smile of amused tolerance, and that started him off again—as I knew it would.

“Why, blame your hide, Walter. I’ll just take Dad up on hunting that Dry Ridge gang, then! If Big Bend isn’t wild enough, I’ll show you some that is, by heck! Take you out after some real dyed-in-the-wool outlaws—”

“Yes, we have some pretty hard citizens in New York, too,” I observed maliciously. “Banks are robbed in the East, you know, and the robbers are just as hard to catch, from all the accounts I have heard.”

“Well, by thunder, I’ll show you before the summer’s over,” Ray snorted angrily, and took himself and his pipe and lavender socks indignantly out of my sight.

I laughed to myself while I got into bed. I didn’t actually demand that the wheels of progress should turn backwards and give me a thrill of the old gun-smoke days. If Ray had been satisfied to wait and let Montana speak for itself, there would have been no argument. As it was, he felt he had to produce the goods. Well, I was willing to let him, so long as he threw in a good trout stream.

CHAPTER THREE

I MEET THE NEIGHBORS

I'VE given myself a week or two for getting acquainted with Ray's family and the people around Porcupine, and then when I have the feel of the country, the atmosphere, if you know what I mean, I shall settle down and seriously begin what I have chosen as my life work. That is authorship. The West is as good a locale as any for a first novel. The breeziness and the spirit of adventure lend themselves to lighter fiction, though of course I shall aim much higher than that as soon as I have had some practice and have acquired the ease that makes for a smooth, flowing style.

As a preparation for my real start, I shall from time to time write down the happenings here on the Big Bend ranch. I'm beginning to see the vague outlines of my plot already. I had hoped to take a high dive into adventure of some sort, but I suppose one never does in real life; or very seldom. Still, I have an idea that I can take the Dry Ridge gang, put more pep into them and a good dramatic climax and make quite a story. Have them raid the ranch and kidnap Ellie, perhaps. A kidnaping is always good, and it could be as a challenge to her sheriff father, the price of her safe return being his promise to resign or something like that, and never run for office again.

That judge would make a fine villain, the secret enemy working under cover. Maybe he wanted his son to have the sheriff's job—something of that sort. I'll work it out when I get down to business. A political angle will sort of tone up the Wild West action and keep it out of the dime-novel class.

But that can wait. I'm not building plot now—just jotting down my impressions and the little everyday incidents that will make good filling and give authenticity to the whole thing.

Descriptions, too. I don't want to overlook my on-the-ground descriptions. And of course I mean to study the characters. I want to see a lot of the sheriff. He's a card. I'm glad I sat down and wrote up my arrival right away. Got it down while it was hot, and now I can bring myself up to date.

Ray took me out on horseback first thing, to show me wild country as he had promised. I had better set it down, I think. It's necessary to have it where I won't forget.

The Whitcome ranch was called Big Bend because the Missouri River almost surrounded his tract of land. A map would show it as a great loop of the river which came within a mile or so of meeting on the end toward Porcupine. Probably two thirds of the land was rich grass that must have made fine grazing. And there were large hay meadows down next the east side of the Bend. The other third ran back from the home ranch for miles and was certainly wild enough for anybody, though I deviled Ray a good deal about it and told him it reminded me very much of certain portions of Long Island.

Most of it was spotted with white sand dunes which shifted with the wind and never looked twice the same, except that the sides were always steep and wrinkled with wavy lines, like the ripples on water when a breeze passes over. A man could easily lose himself in there if he got back away from the river and didn't know his thickets and scattered groves of cottonwoods and box elder. There was a creepy look about the whole of it. Even the wooded hollows had a

secretiveness, hemmed in with those ghostly sand hills, some of them higher than the tallest of the trees.

I wanted to look over my shoulder to see if anything was following my tracks. I imagined I heard things easing off into thicker brush as we rode past—and I haven't a doubt that my imagination came pretty close to the truth. There were deep unexpected gullies like ragged gashes in the earth, and these were rock-rimmed and difficult to cross. There were wild cattle that tossed horns and tails and scampered off with a great crackling of brush when we rode up close. In the grassy openings we found them mostly. Back among the dunes there were tracks of wolves and bobcats, just as Ray had said there would be, and other animals I didn't ask about.

For two or three hours I let Ray lead me around through that ungodly mess before I would admit it was wild enough to suit me. Then I told him I'd had enough, and for the Lord's sake to lead me out of there. Which he did finally, after a harrowing season of riding to the hilltops and looking this way and that, trying to get his direction by the way the river ran. Trouble was, he couldn't always see the river, and when he did, he didn't seem sure which way it was running. He kept saying we couldn't get lost, really, because we'd have to cross the river to get out of the Bend unless we passed within sight of the ranch. But I noticed he looked mighty relieved when at last we came up a grassy knoll and saw a gate just down the other side.

That's the Big Bend. Six or eight miles it must be to the end of the loop, probably farther. I'm not much good at judging distances, but I know it took us a good two hours to make it from the farthest tip to the gate. I had my watch for evidence of that. I ought to add that the river where it swung

around the tip was wide and deep and ugly looking, and the opposite shore was all steep bluffs and rock-rimmed ledges, where the scant soil was dull red or yellow, and the rocks themselves looked old and worn and blackened by the weather of ages.

When we topped the knoll just before reaching the gate, Ray pointed out Dry Ridge, away across the river to the south. He said we would ride over there some day and take a look at it. And while I was not at all eager for a closer view, I know better than to let Ray see any lack of enthusiasm on my part. From where we sat our horses, Dry Ridge looked very much like any other high and barren ridge ten miles off, with the sun shining on it. It certainly didn't seem to offer much cover for bank robbers and I told Ray so. But he merely replied that I had better wait until I got over there.

Beyond the gate we climbed another hill and had a fine view of the whole country, from the Highwoods and the Belt Mountains on the east to the Rockies, shining white against the sky far off to the west. I could see the great loop of the river, and I got then my first clear impression of the Big Bend as a whole, and how a little more erosion—say a few thousand years or so—would have eaten a channel straight across the narrow north end of the loop and turned it into an island. Three or four miles away to the west, just where the river started to swing south around a point of the high plateau—Ray called it a bench—I saw another ranch and asked Ray whose it was.

“Oh, by George! One of my old sweethearts lives over there—or did, last time I was home. Named Mollie—no, Mabel—well, something like that, anyway. Big black eyes and a mouth made to be kissed. You know. Used to be

chummy with Sis. We'll ride over there to-morrow, Walter. You like black eyes and kissable mouths, as I happen to know. She's just your type. I'll have to lay off, now I'm engaged to Beatrice. But I'll take you over and introduce you, anyway. No harm in that."

"Not a bit in the world," I replied, "except that I won't have much time for girls this summer. I'm going to work, remember. And if I get in some time fishing, that's about all the recreation I'll need."

But you can't head Ray off, once he gets an idea into his brain. Next day he insisted on taking me over to meet the girl named Mollie, or Mabel perhaps, with the black eyes and the mouth made to be kissed.

Well, she had a nice mouth, I admit, and her eyes were a soft dark brown. But her name was neither Mabel nor Mollie, but Florence. I could have kicked Ray all the way home for the way that girl looked at him and for not even remembering her name. Here she had stayed home and dreamed her dreams about the young ape, and he had gone off to new loves and had all but forgotten her. Just at the time I hated him for the way her eyes lighted up when he told her none of the girls in the East would have a chance if she was around—all that blarney. I'd heard him talk along that same line to fifteen or twenty different girls at different times in the four years I had known him, and I wished I had the nerve to tell her so. She was too nice, really, to make a fool of herself over a good-looking scamp like Ray. I know he never meant harm to a living soul in his life, but that didn't help the girls much who took his love-making seriously.

Incidentally, I met the father, whom men called old Jack Johnson behind his back, though he seemed to me almost in

the prime of life; and her two brothers, Fred and Steve. They owned a horse ranch and seemed fairly prosperous, and more up-to-date than the general run of farmers—or ranchers, I should call them.

I took quite a fancy to Steve, perhaps because I discovered he was as crazy about fishing as I am. He offered to take me back in the hills across the river to a trout stream where he swore the fish would jump clear out of the water to strike a fly, and then fight like the devil to get rid of it.

He certainly had me all hopped up, as Ray would put it. I had about come to the conclusion that trout streams were about as scarce as buffalo and wild Indians in Montana. What I had seen of the country so far seemed to run to extremes, with all the water in the State running down the channel of the Missouri, and the rest of the country dry as a bone. There wasn't a creek that I had seen in all the Big Bend country we had explored, and I couldn't see anything but bald prairie and rocky hills across the river.

It had worried me a lot more than I had let on. As a matter of fact, I had come West with Ray chiefly for sake of the fishing and hunting in new and untamed country. Ray had led me to believe that I could walk out from the ranch at sunrise and catch a mess of trout for breakfast any day in the season. It had been quite a jolt when the sheriff had carelessly told me he believed there were lots of trout "up in the hills", and had pointed to a hazy group of hills off on the sky line.

So you can see why I cottoned to Steve Johnson. By the time Ray jarred loose from his absorbing conversation with the girl and was ready to start home, I was counting the hours until I could feel against my legs the push of a cold mountain stream such as Steve described, and hear the singing of my

reel when an eighteen-inch trout darted off with my hook in his gills. If I could just have one day in the hills such as Steve had described to me, I thought, I'd consider well spent the time and money it had cost me to get here. I could settle down then to my desk perfectly satisfied and ready for work.

I've jotted that down just to get the contrast between my hopes and intentions and the things that really did take up my mind and my time when I rode to the hills.

CHAPTER FOUR

I LEARN MORE ABOUT ELLIE

NEAR the ranch we overtook Ellie riding with a long-legged, handsome young fellow in fringed leather chaps, big hat and spurs with prongs an inch long. Prongs isn't the right word, probably, but I'll start a notebook of dialect and find out what cowboys really call different things. I'll want my dialect right up to the mark, of course. That's why I think it will be better maybe not to start work on the real novel until I've been here long enough to get the lingo down pat. As fast as I get onto a word or phrase, I'll use it, and that will make it come easy and natural when I really do start.

So this young cowboy I saw right away was a perfect type for my hero. Dade McArthur was his name and I liked that too. He looked at us as if we were making the proverbial crowd and I was willing to canter on—I mean gallop. But Ray refused to take any hints and kept talking to this Dade McArthur about something—I forget what it was—that sort of shut Ellie and myself out of the conversation. Finally they let their horses lag behind us and lowered their voices a little, and Ellie gave me a glance and touched her horse with the spurs, and we galloped on ahead, leaving those two alone to their confab.

“You seemed to be meditating upon matters of great portent to the human race when you two rode up,” she remarked, when we let the horses slow to a walk where the trail was a bit steep. “Might a mere woman inquire—?”

“She may. I was thinking about those pale blue hills away over there, and what Steve Johnson told me about them. And

I was wondering how soon I could get into them and hunt—”

“The Dry Ridge gang, of course,” she cut in upon my sentence. People do that out here quite a lot. Quick on the comeback, to use a phrase of theirs. As soon as they get your meaning, or think they have it, they come right back with their answer. I’ve acquired the habit now myself, more or less.

“You’ve caught the fever,” she said. “Everybody in the country has ideas about how to catch the Dry Ridge gang. It’s just about driving Dad crazy, having Tom, Dick and Harry advising him and making suggestions.”

She was dead wrong, of course; at least, where I was concerned. I had no suggestions whatever to make. I didn’t want anything of the Dry Ridge gang except to collect data for my book. Catching them was no part of my plans. I was perfectly willing to let the other fellow do that. They were just story stuff which I meant to work into my novel of the West. Lord, if an author had to get out and do all the things he puts in a story, how many books would get written?

So I just laughed at her. “Strange as it may sound, I was not thinking of them. If I must confess it, I was picturing myself wading thigh deep in a trout stream up there in those hills. Steve Johnson told me there were some dandies and he promised to take me over and show me where to find them, some Sunday when he has time.”

Then I thought I’d just kid her a little, as she had me. “In this two-gun country where human life has always been held cheaper than horseflesh, and gold was made to be pulled off stage coaches by masked robbers, who invariably respected womanhood and shot the driver off the box, why is it that this Dry Ridge gang is creating such a furore? Robbing a bank is

nothing new. That often happens in the East. What have they actually done that is out of the ordinary?”

I was just deviling her, of course. I wanted to learn all I could about them for my story—though I couldn’t tell her that. Even Ray doesn’t suspect that I mean to use this ranch for the setting, changing it enough so it can’t be identified. I certainly don’t want to betray their hospitality, or anything like that. What I write is for my eyes alone and will be used merely as a source of material—not to be recognized in the finished work, yet forming the basis for it. I’m following the story form merely for further practice in the technique.

“What have they done?” she repeated my question. “What haven’t they done, you mean. Well, for one thing, they are the first gang of outlaws that Dad hasn’t been able to round up and send to the pen—and he has been chasing criminals for twenty years now. That is a real distinction, if you ask me.”

“You sound as if you admire them for that.”

“Well, I do. Just between you and me, I think they’re the slickest outfit in the history of Montana. Of course, I’m not speaking of the moral angle. I don’t hold with thieves, whether they steal according to law or against it. But the Dry Ridge gang is too smart for Dad, and that’s going some.”

“Yes,” I said. “Just from what I’ve seen of your dad, I certainly agree with you there.”

“And not only Dad—they’ve got the whole country up in arms against them. And they just laugh and do as they darned please. One blunder will cost them their liberty—their lives too, probably, because they’re outlawed and fair game for any man’s gun. But they don’t blunder, you see. They pull the slickest stunts and do the most daring things—” She gave me

a quick, defiant glance “—I could love a man like that, even if he was an outlaw!”

From the color in her cheeks and the light that danced in her eyes, I’m inclined to think she meant what she said.

“And would you go and be a lady bandit?” I laughed and made a joke of it, but really I wanted to see how she’d react. I’ve got to study that girl, I can see that. She can give me lots of pointers on my heroine. She’s the type that’s always springing something unexpected.

Well, that look of banked fires in her eyes suddenly flamed up into something pretty startling. “Yes, I’d do that too, if I loved the bandit chief,” she retorted almost fiercely. “If I were a boy, and Dad had kept me on a picket rope the way he’s done—well, I should probably have joined the Dry Ridge gang long ago!”

“Now you’re just stringing me along,” I grinned wisely.

“I am not,” she declared. “At least they *do* something. They don’t just eat and sleep and wear clothes and jog along in a rut worn deep by conventions made before they were born. They have the courage and the initiative to get out of the rut and *live*.”

That tickled me, I’d never heard a girl talk like that before. But I glanced over my shoulder to make sure that Ray wasn’t close enough to hear her, before I egged her on.

“Do you call it living, this robbing banks and so on?”

“I call anything living that calls for brains and backbone and—and dynamic energy. I detest this three-meals-a-day existence, this dead monotony of doing nothing that hasn’t been done millions of times before, by millions of people, and will be done millions of times after we are gone. I don’t

particularly admire stealing money and shooting people,—no. But I would do even that before I would be a plodder, if I were a man.”

I still thought she was joking; or if she wasn't, it was my fault and I'd better turn it off as a joke and get that fire tamed down in her eyes—get her laughing.

“Would you call it living, Miss Whitcome, to run down this gang, and by your superior wit and courage and dynamic energy bring them to justice?”

I landed, that time, though not in the way I had intended. She didn't laugh. She caught her lip between her teeth and stared straight ahead of her, with the look that saw only what was going on in her own mind.

“I'd call that a heaven-sent opportunity to prove something to Dad I've been trying all my life to prove and never have been able to do,” she said at last, almost under her breath. “As for bringing the Dry Ridge gang to justice, I don't know about that. I'd have to decide just what and where justice is. So far as I've been able to discover, it's only a name we set up to worship—this justice thing. But to corral them and let the law take them and show them who's boss—yes, that would be living, too. And it would show Dad—”

“Show him what?”

“Show him a girl has a right to make a place for herself in the world. Show him she may have the same ability a man has. He has failed so far to catch that gang—yes, I'd like to test my wits on them. If I could out-think them, that would be something no one else has been able to do, so far.”

I saw that I had made a botch of the joke angle. I tried again. I said, “I'm beginning to suspect you of harboring

revolutionary ideas. You may even be a suffragette, for all I know!” And I looked at her with exaggerated dismay.

She made me feel like a fool. She neither laughed nor gave any sign of indignation, but gave me a pitying glance.

“If you’d ever taken the trouble to think things out for yourself, instead of blandly accepting the answer to the riddle that is written down in the book, you’d have revolutionary ideas yourself,” she told me bluntly. “Certainly I believe women should have the right to vote. Why not, for heaven’s sake?”

I had no desire to argue about woman’s suffrage. I dodged that question. But it didn’t matter—she was not to be sidetracked from her grievance, if that’s what it was.

“I wanted to go away to college when Ray went,” she said. “He hasn’t all the brains in the family. I was always ahead of him in school. But Dad wouldn’t hear of such a thing. He said it was a d. waste of money, sending girls to college. He said a man might spend good money stuffing their heads with book learning, and then they’d up and marry, and that was the end of it. Just as if a wife mustn’t know anything except how to cook and raise babies!”

“Well—”

“Oh, I know it endangers the prestige of the dominant male to have his wife as well educated as himself. You’d say the same thing to a daughter of your own, I’ve no doubt,” she snubbed me. “Dad thought he was terribly broad-minded when he said that if I were deformed, or anything like that, or so homely no man would want to marry me, I might go to school all my life, for all he cared. But seeing I’m at least passably attractive, I’d better learn to cook and keep house.

“I’d have gone anyway and earned my own way washing dishes, if I couldn’t do any better—but there was Mother. I couldn’t make a row and then go off and leave her to bear the brunt, you see. So naturally I stayed.”

“And got the equivalent of a college education, I’ll bet, reading high-brow books.”

She brushed that aside. “Ray has had four years of college that cost Dad plenty of money, believe me! And now it’s all over, he’s home with a fine assortment of silk socks and not the faintest idea of what he means to do with his education, now he’s got it. I feel sometimes—”

She stopped and looked at me, and gave a laugh which I’d call sardonic in a man. “Kind sir, you see before you a fairly well-behaved young woman who is likely to blow up and start a real revolution in her family unless something happens to give her a normal outlet for her energies! Even robbing a bank or catching the robbers would be a welcome relief.”

That explained what I saw in her eyes that first night I came, that made her look like her father. Maybe something of that sort was what hid behind the twinkle in his eyes, too. I’m going to study the sheriff. But of course I couldn’t speak of that, so I tried again to brighten up the subject.

“What do you suppose the sheriff would say if he knew he had a potential lady bandit right in his own house?”

She laughed. “I do believe he’d pull his handcuffs right out of his hip pocket and tell me to stick out my paws! Dad’s a dear in many ways but he certainly is a good sheriff. He’s the rock of Gibraltar when it comes to his official duties. He’d haul me off to jail if he thought I deserved it; or any one else, except—”

“Your mother,” I supplied, when she failed to go on.

“Well, Mother, of course. And—” she tilted her head backward toward the two behind us “—Ray. Dad worships the ground that boy walks on. It’s really pathetic, because Ray doesn’t understand. To him, Dad is the sheriff—he’s proud of Dad—but also the bank roll. Dad has always paid the bills and never made a row about them, or anything else. He’s a pretty convenient kind of a Dad to have.”

I didn’t say anything. She had hit off Ray’s attitude toward his father exactly. She didn’t seem to resent Ray, either—not in any jealous sense of the word. I began to see that here was a mighty keen girl who could see right through any kind of sham. I began to wonder whether she had weighed me and found how short I am on the many picturesque qualities she seemed to admire. Praising bank robbers for their daring—well, the summer’s still ahead. Maybe something will turn up to show me in a better light.

Ray and the handsome young cowboy overtook us then, and Ellie paired off with him. He was black as a thunderstorm when he came up, but it didn’t take her long to wipe the scowl off his face. I watched them riding along together, a few rods ahead of us, and I’ll admit they made a fine-looking couple together. Probably engaged or something, though her talk to me certainly didn’t sound that way. Still, she may just have been in one of her moods. Clever girl, though. One who does her own thinking, and that speaks well for her mind, even if she thinks wrong.

One thing that talk did for me, and that’s why I wrote down the entire conversation. It gave me a line on Sheriff Whitcome, and I’ve been taking particular notice of his attitude toward his family. Ellie has him doped out right, I can see that. Whenever he looked at Ray, there was

something in his eyes that made me gulp. I can't say that he showed his idolatry of the young whelp in any other way, but his eyes told the story. Funny I hadn't noticed it before.

I also noticed that he treats Ellie rather casually, too. He seems to take her for granted, though he listens when she speaks and watches her moving around the room. I believe, though, it's her voice and her figure that attract him, and not so much what she says. There's something in her voice I can't put a name to, and she's a darned graceful girl—even her own father would enjoy looking at her.

But I guess any particular partiality on her dad's part for Ray is mostly her imagination. The sheriff's proud of his girl, I'll bet. But he's had her around the house all her life, and Ray has been gone for months. I think maybe that's it. If she says anything more about it, I'm going to tell her that.

The sheriff is worried about that gang again. He said he had got word that they had been seen by a prospector riding into a canyon over in the Little Belt Mountains, and he's going to ride over there to-morrow himself and see what there is to it. They don't seem to have been doing anything violent; just riding along. He thinks it's possible that is where they have their hide-out. He says they could cut across from Dry Ridge easily enough, if they know the country, which they undoubtedly do.

I wish I had the nerve to ask if I might go along. Not to hunt the gang, but just to see the country. I need all the local color I can get. Maybe I could get in some fishing while he hunted his bandits. But I don't think I'll make a point of it, but just let events shape themselves.

CHAPTER FIVE

WE GO FISHING

I WAS going over my fly book when Ellie passed my open door, glanced in, then turned back and leaned against the casing. When I describe her particular expression on a girl's face in my novel, I shall call it a look of gentle raillery. Sounds better than to say she had a patronizing smile and was just trying to get a rise out of me. I was just putting a fly back into place in my Coachman section, after touching it up with a snip of feather and glue, and merely looked up and grinned without saying anything.

"Fishy, fishy in the brook?" she recited, with a rising inflection.

"Unh-hunh; Walter catch 'em with a hook," I assented, trying to match her tone and manner.

Her eyes mocked me. "Mamma won't have any to fry in a pan if you go after perch with a Royal Coachman, Kind Sir."

She's been calling me Kind Sir for a couple of days now. Evidently she finds Mr. Tenney too formal for everyday use and hasn't reached the point yet of calling me Walter. I wish she would. Still, I sort of like Kind Sir. I match that with Pretty Maid, and it does seem to give a special significance to our conversations. Think I shall have my hero and heroine do it.

"I wasn't thinking of perch, Pretty Maid. And I'm simply amazed that a mere woman should know a Royal Coachman at a glance. Would your father approve of that? Nothing to do with cooking—hm-mm! I must look into this. Such wisdom is not for woman."

“As if it took any particular wisdom to read *that* book at a glance!” She pointed a very nice finger at the fly book in my hands. “Really, though, there aren’t any trout to be caught from the river, you know. If you’d like to fish for perch, I’ll have old Jimmie dig you some bait.” She looked at me speculatively. “There isn’t a trout stream within fifteen miles of here, you know.”

“Well,” I said, “I have discovered that. But your neighbor, Steve Johnson, promised to take me to a good stream. I just thought I’d go over my flies and get them in shape.”

“In other words, gloat over them the way all fishermen do.” She laughed, then gave me a sudden look of understanding. “If you’re waiting for Steve Johnson, I happen to know he went with Dad this morning over to the Little Belts, on that wild-goose chase after the Dry Ridge gang. Steve is a sort of deputy, you know. He goes out with Dad sometimes. So does Fred, when Dad wants a posse for anything.”

“Oh, well, there are other days,” I said, trying not to show how disappointed I was. I had been hoping Steve would show up.

Ellie looked at a tiny gold watch which she wore on a chain like a locket. “If you like, I’ll take you to a dandy stream.”

If I liked! I jumped up from the table so eagerly that my chair went over and two leaders flew half across the room.

“Sorry you hate the idea so much,” Ellie drawled, and then giggled adorably, while the blood went hot all over me, settling principally, I believe, in my ears.

I covered my confusion as well as I could by getting my creel and rod from the closet and putting away my repair kit

and recovering my leaders from the floor. I can't say she helped a lot by standing there watching me, but I tried not to notice.

"I'm afraid it will have to be on horseback," she warned me, as she turned to go and get ready. "Do you think, Kind Sir, that you can make a fifteen-mile ride without—ah—disastrous consequences?"

That got under my skin, sort of. "I think possibly I can," I told her stiffly. "Some boys I know in Kentucky used to have me down at their place quite a lot." I should have let it go at that, but I didn't. I added something about steeplechasing which I hoped would give her some respect for my horsemanship. What it did was to very nearly get me into trouble.

"Oh, then you'll want a horse with plenty of pep," she remarked innocently. "I'll ask Chub to saddle Sky-high for you."

As it happened, I had just witnessed one of Sky-high's performances a day or so ago and caught on to her intentions. "Fine," I lied, "except for carrying my outfit. I'd rather take some gentle old nag on a fishing trip, if you don't mind. That horse I've been riding around the ranch is all right for the purpose."

"Oh, all right," she said carelessly, just as if she had not meant to play a trick on me and give me a bucking broncho that would certainly throw me off. It's the favorite joke to play on Easterners, but she didn't have any excuse now.

She must have leaned from her window to call to Chub, the fellow who attended to the stables. I heard her faintly and a man's voice answering her. I was downstairs and out on the side porch in just eight minutes, but she was there ahead of

me and was telling the cook just what to put in the lunch. Yesterday she wore a blue skirt, but to-day she had on a brown denim divided skirt, cut shorter than the other one, and a regular man's shirt and tie, a cowboy hat and boots. A white silk neckerchief was knotted around her throat in the loose style which helps to make cowboys so picturesque. I liked her better than in the other tailored outfit.

She was quite the fisherman, too, with her cased rod and her creel. A pair of silver-trimmed spurs jingled from one hand, and when Chub started from the stables leading our horses, she leaned against a porch pillar just as a cowboy would have done and buckled on her spurs. That made her costume complete.

“Do you suppose Ray would want to go along?” I asked her half-heartedly, when the cook came and handed her the lunch.

“He would not. Ray isn't home, anyway. He's fishing for smiles and heart throbs. He wouldn't be interested, if he were here.” She tied the lunch to her saddle, tied the creel on the other side—disdaining Chub's assistance and motioning him to help me with my stuff. When she was ready, she caught up the reins in one hand, turned the stirrup forward, thrust in her boot toe and swung up as easily as any cowboy on the ranch.

I had stood there watching her and now she reined her horse in and watched me mount. I don't know why that girl has the power to make my ears feel like boiled beets, but she has. Whenever she has her eye on me and I have anything in particular to do, I feel as clumsy as an ox. Though I am quite accustomed to horseback riding, I know I got into the saddle like a turtle crawling out of a pond. Grabbed the cantle, though I knew that's the mark of a greenhorn. I could fairly

hear her thoughts jeering, “Steeplechaser? Oh, rats!” though she didn’t actually open her lips, so far as I know, until I had plunked down in the saddle like a sack of bran.

Mother Whitcome chirruped from the doorway that we had better take our slickers along, but Ellie merely looked up at the sky for a moment and shook her head. It wouldn’t rain, she declared, though I couldn’t see how she knew. We waved good-bye and started off, Ellie setting the pace at a brisk gallop. What surprised me was that she traveled toward Porcupine.

“Steve Johnson was going to take me in the other direction, Pretty Maid,” I ventured, when we were entering the outskirts of town between the two bridges.

“I’m sorry, Kind Sir, but you are not following Steve Johnson’s trail just now.” After half a block she added, “Do you want to turn back?”

“Not on your life,” I retorted. And for some reason she laughed at that, as if I had somehow got the phrase twisted. Which I knew I hadn’t. She certainly is a strange girl. Sort of keeps a fellow guessing. I’m not sure I like that much.

Straight into the main business section that girl led me, and stopped before an ice-cream parlor where the passers-by stared at us and went on up the street, smiling. She never gave them a glance.

“If you like beer, Kind Sir, you had better go in that hotel bar and buy yourself a couple of pints or so,” she advised me in a matter-of-fact tone. “You can carry them in your pockets very easily, and we’ve a long hot ride before us.” And she answered the question in my eyes, “I’ll take root beer along.”

It was a long, hot ride, all right enough. No use writing a description of it; I can fill that in any time I like. Our horses

sweated until even their ears were wet, but I couldn't see that it did them any harm. The last few miles were rough ones. Ellie rode in front up narrow twisting gorges that hadn't a sign of water in them, and how she could tell where to go was a mystery to me. It was wild enough up in there for the hide-out of that gang, though I could see that the Belt Mountains were away off in the opposite direction. But if I were an outlaw, those hills north of town is where I certainly would head for when I wanted to hide out.

The end justified the ride, I must admit. We edged around a high sharp ledge, and there was the stream I'd been dreaming about; noisy, without much brush, and just wide enough for good casting; just deep enough also to justify the wading boots I'd brought along. We ate our luncheon in the shade of a willow clump, drank what was left of our beer and saved the bottles so we could fill them with water for the trip back, and fitted up our rods at once.

I'm afraid I forgot the girl and everything else for awhile. Almost the first cast I got a strike, and a half-pounder made my reel hum as he flashed off into a deep shady pool. He fought like a tiger and it must have taken me all of ten minutes to land that one. It wasn't until I had him in my creel, flopping around in a handful of that long grass which grows alongside streams so fishermen will have something to bed their trout in, that I remembered I had a lady along.

I looked around for her and saw her some distance upstream, standing poised on a big rock, casting out over a promising pool. I shouted and dug my fish out of the creel, holding it up for her to see; and she just nodded, reeled in, tapped her basket and held up two fingers, measuring off about twelve inches in the air with her hands. Then she

calmly stepped down off the rock on the other side and I didn't see her again for three hours and more.

After the first hour I found it slow sport. The sun was hot and the trout were lazy. When they rose it was in a half-hearted fashion that just nipped at the fly and let it go again. We were fishing upstream and there were places hard to negotiate. By the middle of the afternoon I admit that I was feeling fagged, what with that fifteen-mile ride, and the heat and all. When I rounded a sharp bend and came upon Ellie lying curled up comfortably in the shade of a rock, with her creel and rod near by, I hurried over and sat down beside her.

"What luck?" she asked, not moving except to tilt up her hatbrim for a sleepy glance at me.

"I'll see." And I laid out my trout in a row on the rock for her inspection. "Thirteen and some little fellows I hooked and threw back."

"Thirteen's unlucky, Kind Sir. Go away and fish and let me take a nap."

"Well, but how many did you catch?" Naturally, I did not want to go—and at that moment I was not at all sure she wanted me to, really.

"Oh," she yawned, with one arm flung across her mouth, "I don't know. Count 'em yourself, if you've got to know. And then do go away somewhere. I'm sleepy."

That time I was convinced she meant it. No romance in the girl, apparently. I looked in her basket, counted nineteen fish—some of them much bigger than any I had caught—and I dumped them back, gathered up my basket and rod and left her without saying another word. These strong-minded efficient young women sometimes give me a pain.

That shady spot where she lay was made to order for us two, if she had only been human enough to see it. We could have sat there and talked and got quite confidential. I could have been half in love with her in a couple of hours, I believe, if she had let me stay and look at her and talk awhile. I just don't understand how any sister of Ray's can be like that. Ray must have all the sentiment in the Whitcome family. Of course, she may be in love with that dark-browed young McArthur; probably is. But that's no reason why she should drive off a guest like that. I wouldn't bite her. I wouldn't even make love to her.

Then I broke my leader on a snag and swore like a trooper and felt better. I went on fishing without much luck for another couple of hours, though I didn't cover much of the creek. I was too tired to do much more tramping in those heavy boots, and a hundred yards of good riffle with a pool just below furnished some pretty fair sport. Then here came Ellie, fishing downstream to me, and I went on. I wasn't going to have her accuse me of loitering along, waiting for her to catch up.

She seemed to be in a wonderful mood. She called out, so I had to stop or let her think I was sulking; and she came picking her way over the rough stones and looking darned graceful and pretty after her nap.

"We'll go back to the horses and scrape up some sort of supper," she informed me, as she came up. "I'm simply ravenous and I'll bet you are too. Kind Sir, did you ever broil trout over a campfire?"

I don't know what kind of a sissy she thinks I am. I came darned near telling her how I've been in the habit of spending most of my summers, but I didn't. Instead, I hurried on ahead

and had a fire going and was already cleaning my fish beside the creek when she got there. I didn't get any thanks for it, though. For all the notice she took of what I had done, I might have been Chub, choring around for my board and wages. I never saw such a girl.

By the time we had eaten all the trout we could swallow and had fished awhile longer it was well after sundown, so we started home. Then, just as we were coming out of the hills and could see the town lights away off in the distance, a thunder shower struck us and we had to take shelter under a rock ledge caved back quite a way underneath.

It was dry in there and not at all uncomfortable. The girl didn't seem in the mood for talking, and I was pretty tired myself, so once more we sinfully wasted a chance to be romantic. But it was a good thing, in one way. It really gave me my first chance to get the feel of the wilderness, which I am going to need later when I start my book.

I tried to imagine myself an outlaw, one of the Dry Ridge gang perhaps, driven to take shelter from the storm and knowing all the while that I was being hunted down like a wolf. Quite a thrill in that sort of thing. Watching the lightning rip through the dark and listening to the roll and echo of the thunder, I really did begin to feel my pulse hammering in my throat, when I made myself think the sheriff and his posse were just down the canyon, maybe around the next turn.

I learned something, too, which I must set down. Horses don't like thunder and lightning any better than we do. My horse would flinch and crowd toward the wall, when the worst claps of thunder came, and I could feel him trembling. He held his head high and kept staring out at the storm, and

now and then he'd snort when something startled him especially.

Finally the storm passed on and the rain stopped, and we plodded up and down a few more hills, slippery as soap after the rain, except now and then when we struck patches of gravel. It was all dandy local color. When I have time I shall describe it in detail. We crossed what Ellie called a "doby" flat, an abominable stretch of mud that stuck to our horses' feet like pancakes made of glue, and stretched our fifteen miles to seem like thirty. But finally, when I was beginning to have uncomfortable visions of searching parties scouring the country for us, we rode down the long bare hill to the river once more, crossed on a clanking steel bridge and went on into the darkened streets of the sleeping town.

CHAPTER SIX

I SEE A SHADOW

THROUGH quiet streets and past the vacant stare of deserted business blocks we rode, the silent stores dimly lighted far back in their sheeted interiors. I kept an eye out for an all-night restaurant where we could get hot coffee and maybe a steak, if we were lucky, but everything in town seemed to be closed. It must have been long after midnight, and we still had five miles to ride on tired horses.

I kept thinking of the wrenlike mother and how frantic she must be, wondering what had happened. But riding along beside me, the girl looked perfectly contented and without a care in the world. The clop-clop of our walking horses sounded hollow as the trot of an early milkman's horse, and under her breath Ellie hummed a little tune. She seemed actually to enjoy riding through town long after nice young ladies are tucked into their little beds.

We rode past the curtained plate-glass front of a bank, and she gestured toward it with a gauntleted hand. "That's the bank the Dry Ridge gang robbed, a few nights ago," she stopped humming long enough to tell me.

"Your mother will think they've got you, we're so late," I observed, just as a hint to hurry.

"Oh, Mother's sound asleep. Anyway, it will be later before we get there," she replied indifferently, and turned sharply into an alley, and the sudden muffling of hoofbeats gave me an odd sensation of stealth; as if we were out at that hour for no good.

“I think we ought to get home as soon as possible,” I hinted again, when she reined in her horse as if she were looking for something.

“Why? You wouldn’t fuss about it if I were a man, would you?”

“That,” I retorted huffily, “would be another matter. I’m practically a stranger to your mother and she may—”

“Oh, forget it! That’s why I hate being a woman. Hold my horse, will you? This is the kitchen where Mrs. Oleson makes all her own candy and cake for the store. She’s there yet, I’m sure. I want to see her.” And without more ado, she swung off her horse and handed me the reins.

“Well, don’t be long,” I told her, not thinking at the moment how contrary she can be when she’s in the mood.

She did not deign me an answer, but picked her way in the dark to a shack where threads of light shone around a door shrunken in its frame. I heard her gloved knuckles beat a soft tattoo on the door panel, heard a lock rattle. The door opened a crack and warm sweet odors gushed out in my hungry face. A Swedish voice exclaimed in friendly singsong, though I did not catch the words; and Ellie stepped inside and pushed the door shut behind her, leaving me in that dark alley alone with our tired horses.

I pride myself on my tolerance and patience. I’m something of a philosopher, and I don’t as a rule kick up a row over trifles. But after several minutes there in that black alley, sniffing the vague tantalizing odors of boiled caramel and chocolate and stuff, I was pretty mad, I can tell you. If Ellie had been Ray, I’d have gone in there after him. But I don’t chase girls into kitchens, especially when I know

darned well they are trying to egg me into some fool stunt like that.

Across the alley, in behind the bank, something plunked as if a tin can had been sent rolling along the ground. The horses threw up their heads and stared over that way, with their ears tipped forward, and moved uneasily as if they were scared. It was only a cat, however. I saw it scud across the patch of road half lighted by the bank's rear window of ground glass. By the time I had quieted the horses, they were sort of backed in between the Swedish lady's kitchen and a shed, and I let them stay where they were. It would serve Ellie right, I thought, to come out and discover I was not exactly where she had left me.

The horses stood quietly now, though they still stared across the alley. I looked that way also and saw, on the frosted glass of that side window, the shadow of a man bending over a desk or a table. One of the clerks working overtime, I told myself, after the first glance. Just about ready to quit and go home, by the look of him. Of course I had no clear view, but just the shadow of his head and torso down about to the third button on his vest. He was facing the window at first, I think, and the light was dropped down on a cord behind him—or maybe it was a two-light chandelier; I don't suppose a bank like that would have a cheap drop-cord arrangement.

Anyway, the poor devil was working overtime and for want of something better to do, with no other living thing in sight, I watched him. That darned girl was killing all the time she could just to spite me, so I had plenty of time to watch and think that after all working in a bank was no snap. For two or three minutes he was busy at the desk, then he turned

so that his profile was silhouetted on the glass, and stood so for several seconds.

I felt a queer mental jolt, as if there were something I ought to know and didn't. That profile looked familiar and I scowled and squinted, trying to place the man. But I know no bank clerks; not in Porcupine, at least, though of course I may have seen this one on the street or somewhere. Then I heard a door shut softly and the shuffle of footsteps. I looked toward the Oleson door, thinking I heard Ellie coming out at last, but after a long glance decided she wasn't.

The sound had come from across the alley, in behind the bank. As I glanced that way, I'll swear my heart hit the roof of my mouth with the jump it gave. The shadow on the glass was stooped forward, just the hump of the shoulders and hatbrim showing. It straightened, slid on past the window.

There was a brief glow at the back of the building, another faint shuffling sound. Then, while I leaned forward, peering from the black yard between shed and kitchen, out from blackness as deep, across the way, three shadowy horsemen rode silently, Indian file, into the alley and out of sight toward the side street beyond.

My horses stepped forward, wanting to follow, but I pulled them back. Their feet thudded dully on the hard-packed earth of the little yard and gave me another jolt of surprise or something. (I must find the right word for that sensation when I get down to real composition.) Because my two horses made a certain amount of noise stepping around on hard earth, and those other three going off up the alley didn't, though I'm positive that delivery wagons using that alley constantly had packed the ground as hard as Mrs. Oleson

could have done in her back yard. That should go without saying.

The only comparison I could think of was muffled oars; something tied on the feet of those three horses to silence their hoofbeats. And that, of course, would only have been done with some sinister purpose, such as robbing the bank and not wanting to be heard going or coming. But that seemed to be rather far-fetched and improbable, because this particular bank had already been robbed, unless Ellie had made a mistake—and she isn't the type of girl who would be mistaken.

There was one way to make certain, and I took it. I pulled Ellie's horse after me and rode down the alley to the street and far enough around the corner to read the name of the bank on the window. The Citizens' State it was, all right. I remembered the sheriff had given that as the name of the bank looted last week. So I didn't see why it should be robbed again so soon. It just didn't seem plausible, somehow.

When I returned to the Oleson woman's back door, Ellie stood there waiting, a package in her hands.

"Well, I was beginning to think you had gone and lost yourself," she said, a touch of tartness in her tone.

"Oh, no," I told her politely. "I merely took the horses for a bit of exercise. They were getting stiff, standing so long in one spot."

In the dimness I saw her head swing quickly toward me, and though she didn't say a word—perhaps it was because she didn't say a word—I felt that we were even. In silence she took the reins from me and mounted, and in silence she led the way up the alley where the three ghostly horsemen

had disappeared, and turned into the side street leading to the bridge.

We trotted across the bridge, its clanking rattle sounding thunderous in our ears at that hour of the night. The river below was a dark rushing shadow—like the River Styx, I remember thinking, though I don't suppose there is any use in writing down such fanciful thoughts in this Western story material. Black houses sat asleep in their little yards as we rode past and left them behind us. A dog ran out and yapped at our heels, and a white cat ran slinking along a fence to the corner and leaped up yowling to the top of the post.

And still there were no words between us two. I'm not of a sulky disposition but I never did lie down and let a girl walk over me, and I didn't propose starting in with Ellie. I knew of course that she was huffy over the remark I'd made about the horses standing so long, but she certainly brought it on herself by hanging around in that kitchen all hours of the night, and I didn't see where it was up to me to apologize. So I let her alone. She'd speak when she got ready, I supposed.

We had slowed on the second bridge when she made an unexpected movement, holding out something to me. "Eat it—it's good," she commanded cheerfully.

With only the conventional thanks I accepted the offering and ate it in half a dozen bites. Even if I had not been ravenous, I'm sure it would have been just as good. I couldn't give a name to it; something fresh baked, crisp and yet melting in my mouth. I know there was puff paste, chopped nuts and something sticky and sweet that made up the balance. I forgave the girl her dallying, but I had too much sense to tell her so.

Off the bridge again the horses, knowing full well that they were headed now for their own stalls, lifted themselves into a gallop, thudding along the sandy road at a great clip. That reminded me of something which Ellie and her peace offering had put out of my head for a bit.

“I don’t see why it is those other horsemen made no noise at all, unless they had padded their horses’ feet with something,” I observed. “Ours certainly could be heard—”

“What other horsemen, for mercy’s sake?” Ellie cut in. I thought she would. I had worded my remark so as to excite her curiosity.

Now I could be bland and innocent. “Why, the three men who rode out from behind that bank while I waited for you in the alley. Silent as ghosts. I wonder why. Even off the pavement our horses clumped quite distinctly, I noticed. But I suppose—”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, stop deducing and supposing a minute!” I had her going now, I could see that. “Who were they, and why were they silent as ghosts? Why would they want to be?”

“That,” I replied, as naïve as I know how to be, “is what I was wondering. I don’t know why, unless they had been robbing the bank. But it has been robbed before, so—”

Ellie said something that sounded to me very much like damn, then she laughed. “All right, Kind Sir, you win. I’ll explain that Mrs. Oleson kept me there while she told me all about her daughter’s sickness and death—Freda; I went to school with her, and she died a couple of weeks ago. I couldn’t walk out on her poor mother when she was pouring her troubles out to me. It did her a world of good to talk to some one who had known and loved Freda.

“So now, what’s this about three silent horsemen riding like ghosts from behind the bank?”

Of course there wasn’t much to tell, but I made the most of it, even describing just how our horses had acted and about the cat streaking away from behind the bank. And of course the man’s shadow on the blind.

“Well, it does sound queer,” Ellie admitted. “It couldn’t be another robbery right on top of the one last week—but still, you wouldn’t think a bank clerk would be working with his hat on, would you?”

“Not from what I know about bank clerks. They’re trained to take their hats off when they step under a roof; any roof. You get so you do that automatically when you live an indoor life, I believe. But another thing, Pretty Maid; that back door opened. Some one left the bank before the horsemen came out into the alley. I could swear to that, for I saw the light come and go when the door opened and shut.”

Ellie thought that sounded very sinister, because bank clerks, or whoever would be working there at night, would leave by the front way. “You ought to have told me before,” she said, just as any woman would. “We could have found a policeman somewhere and told him to go take a look.”

“I’d like to know where you’d have found one,” I retorted, “unless maybe you know where they live. There certainly weren’t any awake in that town.”

We were at the ranch gate by then, and we argued all the way to the stable, and while we were putting the horses inside. On the way to the house, Ellie had an idea. “I’m going to call up the president of the bank,” she said, “and have him send somebody downtown to find out for sure if anything’s wrong at the bank. And if there is, I’ll wake Dad and he can

get right out on the trail. It would be the Dry Ridge gang, I'll bet. No one else would have the nerve." And she repeated that I ought to have told her before.

Hungry as we were, and knowing our supper would be set out for us in the kitchen—so she said—she went straight to the front hall where the telephone was located, and called central. It looked for awhile as though central was asleep too, though Ellie said this is supposed to be a twenty-four-hour service. But in course of time I heard a voice asking the number. Then it took a deuce of a lot of ringing and waiting before they raised any one at the bank president's house, and some argument before the lady at the 'phone would go wake her father. I wanted Ellie to let him sleep and just deliver the message for him, but she's the persistent type. She hung on until she heard the growl of the big guy himself.

I must admit I was surprised at the clearness and the moderation with which she stated our suspicions. She told him that she felt it her duty to let him know at once, so that he might 'phone the night watchman if he had one, and make certain everything was all right. The man humphed and grumped, one eye on his bed, I'll bet. Just before he hung up, he rumbled out one sentence that turned Ellie's face red.

I couldn't wait. "What'd he say?"

She gave that ladylike snort of hers and tossed her head. "The old walrus!" She dropped her voice to a growl—"Madam, you doubtless haven't heard that we've already been robbed, some days ago."

I laughed, following her back to the kitchen.

"Just for that, I almost hope it *was* another robbery," she exclaimed viciously. "Everybody hates that man, and no wonder."

While she pulled cold food from an oven cool as outdoors she added, “Well, we’ve done our duty, anyway.”

That, I naturally supposed, settled the matter.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE DRY RIDGE GANG

I CAN'T say just how long I slept. I only know that I was very busy trying to land a four-pound rainbow (trout, of course) when the shrill jangle of the telephone in the hall below woke me. I was just dropping off again, trying to get back in my dream, when Ellie tapped on my door. I knew then just how that bank president had felt and why he grumped. Though of course I did my best to be decent about it.

Through a crack in the door Ellie told me what was up, and I could tell by her voice that she was not going to stand for any hanging back.

“It was the Dry Ridge gang, Walter! The president himself just ’phoned for Dad—and he isn’t back yet. They *did* rob the bank again. Oh, if you had only known it when you saw them, we could have caught them, maybe. The president finally did go to the bank, it seems, just to satisfy himself, and the watchman had been hit over the head with a gun and then tied up and gagged. He said if Dad got on their trail right away—”

She stopped right there, and we looked at each other through the narrow door space. I will admit that premonitory crimples went down my spine. Even before she spoke I knew about what she was going to say, and yet her next sentence startled me.

“There are fresh horses in the stable, so hurry up and dress. We ought to get started in fifteen minutes at the outside.”

“St-started where?” I already knew in my bones, but my mind refused to accept the knowledge. We all love to drag bad news out into plain words, I notice.

She stared at me with eyes that narrowed and jabbed into my pride. “Oh, don’t be so stupid! They headed for Dry Ridge, of course. We can’t beat them to it, but we can get over there before the sun dries out the scent—”

I was honestly bewildered. “Scent? I’m afraid my smeller isn’t—”

“Dogs, you chump! Dad has two hounds especially for trailing. You’ve seen them, so don’t play off ignorant. I’ll have breakfast ready in five minutes, so hurry.”

What can a fellow do with a girl like that? I looked at my watch and it lacked six minutes of five. I looked at my bed, damned all bank robbers for getting me out at that ungodly hour, and pulled on my riding clothes which I had just taken off, it seemed to me. I kept yawning and I guess swearing to myself while I dressed.

I’m going into these details because later on I might forget just how a fellow reacts to being dragged out of bed before daylight by a girl who wants to go and hunt bandits with two hounds. I might get the idea a fellow would feel the romance of the situation—riding out at dawn with a girl, and all that stuff. As a matter of fact, I doubt if any man on earth would feel romantic or even brave and adventurous at that hour, even if he loved the girl. I certainly can’t have my heroine pulling stunts like that—not and expect to work up a convincing love affair between her and the hero. It simply wouldn’t go.

I heard her in the kitchen when I went down. She had a fire going and the coffee on, and knowing what I do about camp

cooking, I saw that she must have started the fire for our breakfast immediately after answering the telephone and some time before she woke me. It made me ashamed of myself to see a girl so full of energy and ambition, and that didn't improve my temper any, I suppose. I can see now that I was inclined to nag in a nice way.

"Pretty Maid," I began, "this is a most unseemly hour for a young lady to go roaming through the wilderness, chasing bandits."

She looked up at me from turning bacon in the frying pan. "I wish you'd stop saying bandits," she said calmly. "It sounds so—dime novelish."

"And that," I told her, "sounds absolutely profane. I wish you'd listen to reason about this. The idea of a girl going out hunting a gang of bank robbers as desperate as these seem to be is downright foolhardy."

I was setting plates and cups and so forth on the table while I talked, and it did not occur to me until later how inconsistent it must have looked. But fortunately she was too engrossed with her purpose to notice.

"Oh, I know a girl is not supposed to do anything that might call for courage or strength of mind or brains. I can't help being born a girl, but I certainly don't intend to sit on cushions and sew fine seams all my life. I just don't happen to be cursed with the purely feminine mind. I'm going just as soon as I have my breakfast coffee, and if you don't care to go along, you are free to stay at home. It doesn't matter in the least what you do." Nevertheless, she poured two cups of coffee, I observed, and pushed the plate of bacon toward me.

"Then why did you drag me out of bed to go with you?"

“Because you are a guest,” she explained with dignity, dropping a lump of sugar into her cup. “You have said you want to see the country and I merely offer you the opportunity. Suit yourself about accepting, though it will be more convenient if there are two of us, with the dogs to manage.”

I handed her the jug of thick cream. “Do you think it’s right to go after them with bloodhounds?” I inquired mildly. “It smacks of slaves and Everglade swamps. You say you admire these bandits—this gang, I mean. Why hunt them down in such a savage manner? Seems terribly—er—vindictive, for a young lady.”

She looked across at me with that mocking light in her eyes. “Really, I didn’t suppose you were so tenderhearted,” she said ironically. “However, this won’t be any Eliza-crossing-the-ice drama. Even if the dogs overtook the gang, they couldn’t possibly hurt them. I suppose if the dogs come up on them, they’ll shoot the dogs and that will settle it.”

“So you’re taking your father’s dogs out to be shot!”

“Not that exactly,” she replied coolly, as if she were determined I should not ruffle her temper, no matter what I said. “That’s the chance a dog takes when he’s a hound. Dad sent away and got them after the Dry Ridge gang had played tag with him all over the country. He’s had them out twice, but they couldn’t seem to hold the trail, even after they found what was supposed to be it. That ridge is very dry and barren. That’s why it’s important to put the dogs on the trail while it’s fresh.”

Quick steps came down the hall. The door opened and Mrs. Whitcome came in, looking smooth and neat even though she wore a flannel bathrobe.

“Now what?” she chirped, nodding good morning to me. “I thought maybe it was your father. You didn’t just get in, for mercy’s sake? I thought I heard you last night.”

“You did, dear. There are some nice trout in the icebox for you.”

“Then what’s all this?” Her bright brown eyes swept quick glances over our riding clothes.

“Oh, we’re just going out on an early hunting trip, Mother. Mr. Tenney has been wanting to ride out at sunrise. If Dad comes back—”

“Your father won’t be here until to-morrow morning. He had a message telephoned out from the office, saying he had a clue that led to Billings and he was going to see about it.”

“Billings!” Ellie looked at me with some excitement in her face. “That means two deputies are holding down the office, and probably Pat Ellis will scare up a posse and comb Dry Ridge again.” She glanced at her mother. “Mr. Parks just called up and wanted Dad. His bank has been robbed again. But the office will know all about it by now, of course.”

“Robbed again? Well, I declare! If that gang isn’t rounded up pretty soon, I don’t know what will happen.”

“Well, you trot along back to bed, Mother, and let Dad do the worrying. We’ll have to start, or Mr. Tenney will miss the thrill of riding out to meet the dawn.”

The look I gave that girl was meant as a stinging rebuke, but I’m not sure she noticed it.

“I should think you’d had enough riding for a day or two, with that trip you’ve just had,” chirped Mother Whitcome, as querulous as she knew how to be. “Don’t be gone all day,

Ellie. The Perhams are coming out this afternoon, remember.”

“Oh, we’ll be back by noon,” Ellie casually assured her. “Don’t look for us much before then, will you?” And by the very fact that she avoided glancing my way, I knew she spoke largely for my mental torment.

I don’t think any one could call me lazy or a poor sport, but I will say I dreaded this adventure. I was still tired, of course, from the long day’s fishing and could feel no enthusiasm for breaking my sleep and taking another long ride so early in the morning, but there was more to it than that. I hate to see a fine-spirited girl let herself in for something she isn’t prepared for, and hunting down a band of robbers is a risky proposition under any condition, I should think.

She didn’t seem to be worrying about it, though. She was more eager than when we started fishing. She wouldn’t wake Chub—I think because she hated to lie, and she wouldn’t dare tell him why we wanted horses again so early. She chose a couple of brown horses very nearly alike, and started to saddle mine for me, until I saw what was in her mind and made it plain to her that I might be trusted to set a saddle on a horse without getting it wrong end foremost. Then she left me alone and saddled her own, leaving me at the stables while she made a hurried trip back to the house.

She returned with two canteens which we tied to our saddles, and a package of lunch which she had forgotten. After that she shaved off seconds, getting the two dogs on leashes and out of their kennel. We started off at a sharp trot for the river crossing, the dogs lolloping along beside the

horses with their sad eyes fixed upon the ground in utter indifference to their errand or to us.

Though it was not more than half a mile from the house, this was the first time I had been down to the ferry crossing. It was an ingenious contrivance, that ferry. It was held by a system of cables and pulleys that worked with the force of the current which carried us across. Ellie seemed to know all about it, and we were on and had swung out away from the bank before I realized that she was really starting the thing to go.

While I was yet wondering whether it was my duty as a gentleman to insist on running the contraption myself, the scow thrust its blunt nose against the makeshift wharf on the east side and Ellie had fastened it there. We led the horses and dogs off on sandy ground and remounted without a word.

As we rode up the low, sandy bank to the prairie beyond, I admit that I was glad to be awake and out in the open. The sun was preparing to show above the distant hills and the few clouds were a glorious sight, with crimson, gold and purple all piled together as no artist on earth would dare to paint a sunrise. Even the nearer hills and valleys looked as if they had been touched with magic.

You could scarcely believe those soft violet hills were barren ridges where bandits hid from the law. The whole world looked too pure, too utterly at peace with the universe, to harbor any save god-like creatures who rested serene in a world made new overnight.

(This is just my own private splurge, which of course I shall not use seriously in my story. It's a good idea, though, to limber up my poetic fancy now and then and keep my vocabulary from narrowing down to colloquialisms and

Western cowboy dialect. I certainly wouldn't want my style and diction to suffer while I practise my technique on this lighter type of fiction. I'll be getting down to business and doing really worth-while work in a year or so, when I am more familiar with the tools of my trade.)

"This is something like it!" I exclaimed unguardedly, when the first thin rind of gold appeared over a sharp peak of the Highwoods. "It's worth getting up for, after all."

Ellie gave me a quick glance and a smile that sort of thrilled me—almost the way I'd want my hero to be thrilled by the Girl's smile, just when he was beginning to slip a little on his way to falling in love. In this instance, there was the surprise element. I wouldn't have blamed Ellie much if she had given me a piece of her mind after the way I had balked on coming along.

"You'll find more than this sunrise worth while, once you get started," she declared. "If you'd forget the East and all your conventional past, Kind Sir, and just let yourself go, you'd understand the West as you never will, looking on at us as if you were a bystander. Why don't you throw off the yoke of convention and be your real self for awhile and—"

"And what, Pretty Maid?"

"And hunt men with some zest for the chase, if they challenge you to the pursuit and are your equals, at least in strength and cunning?"

"If you mean this Dry Ridge gang, Pretty Maid, they haven't challenged me, and I expect they are more than my equals in the qualities you name."

"They challenge every law-abiding person, just by the things they do," she contended. "They're making a game of

breaking the laws, so why not make a game of catching them?”

That reckless gleam was in her eyes again, making her look like her dad. I wondered if being sheriff wasn't just a game with him, and if he didn't keep on being one mostly for the excitement.

“It's just a game with them,” she repeated, half smiling. “They play it for the thrill there is in it, as much as anything. I know that, because they've never done the sort of thing other criminals do. They just rob banks and hold up people with plenty of money—things like that. They've never killed any one so far, nor harmed any poor rancher. They don't,” she said spiritedly, “rob widows and orphans, the way these church-going moneylenders do, and the crooks who sell fake mining stock and all that.”

She was letting the romance run away with her good sense. I don't like to see a pretty girl pleading the cause of a gang of thieves, and I tried to bring her back to earth with a few coldblooded facts.

“Now look here, Pretty Maid. Indirectly they rob widows and orphans, and poor ranchers too, when they rob the bank where widows, orphans and poor ranchers keep their money. If this pet gang of yours has the intelligence you give them credit for, they ought to realize that.”

“No, you're wrong there. The poor people won't lose their money, because the stockholders of the bank will have to make it good. Mostly, that's old Jeremiah Parks, because he practically owns the bank in this case. Dad's a director and owns a few shares, so I know what I'm talking about. He'll be nicked for his percentage of the loss, if they don't catch

the bandits and get back the money. The widows and orphans won't suffer, Kind Sir."

"And this expedition is really to try and save your father from having to make good his share—"

"Oh, I'm not kidding myself it's to save Dad money. I'm just taking a hand in the game because—well, because if I were a man instead of a woman, Dad would expect me to take his place in an emergency call which he wasn't here to answer himself. Why, I'd be a deputy sheriff, if I were a man! I've wanted to go with Dad, several times, and he always hooted at the idea and said a woman couldn't help and would only be a handicap. I want to show him and those town deputies that I can get on the job the same as any man, and, I hope, do as much good."

"Oh." I laughed a little. "I thought, Pretty Maid, it was the Dry Ridge gang you're so anxious to show."

"Well, yes. The whole kit and caboodle, gang and sheriff and all, would be better off if they were shown a few things. In the last analysis, there isn't so much difference between them, as I see it. They're all out to get what they want, and that's money. The gang robs the bank, and takes the money the bank has gouged out of people in the way of interest and so on. Dad hunts the gang, to get the money back and give it to the bank, so he can go on being sheriff and draw his salary."

"Sophistry."

"I wonder. Anyway, I can thrill to their directness and their daring—the robbers, I mean—and I can't to bankers or lawyers—there's a fine type of legal bandit for you!—or any other kind of Shylock—"

“Who doesn’t have to take to the hills with his loot, but instead may walk down the street with his chin up, and be invited to dinner, and sleep in his bed without fear of hounds baying at his heels.” I looked down at the two dogs.

Ellie glanced wistfully at Dry Ridge growing rougher and more barren in appearance as we rode toward it. “Your legal robbers aren’t picturesque, and they lack that cold nerve the Dry Ridge gang has shown. That’s what I admire. They take hold of my imagination, Kind Sir! And yet I’m crazy to run them down. I—”

“That’s nothing more than plain unadulterated vanity,” I stated. “You want to show your daring picturesque bandits what a girl can do. Is that admirable?”

She blushed, I’ll say that much for her, but she stood her ground. “Well, it’s human, at least. I don’t pretend to be a goody-goody kind of girl. I’d even turn them loose again probably—”

“Not if I know it, you won’t,” I cut in, surprising myself as much as the girl. “You’ve got me out here to trail that gang, and now if we do run them down, there’ll be no turning them loose, I promise you that.”

To my astonishment, she nodded her head at that. “Of course,” she said simply. “Don’t mind my ravings, will you? When you come down to facts, I want to help Dad out if I can. He’s never had so hot a trail as this is going to be. We’re miles ahead of any posse from town, even if Pat gets quick action—which he won’t. Pat Ellis is a good man, but he does fiddle around terribly when he’s left to give the orders himself.”

“And you really do think we may be able to accomplish something?”

“Certainly, Mr. Tenney. It’s simply a matter of getting the dogs on the trail while it’s warm. Not to capture them—I’m not that silly, really—but just to see where they go.”

I hoped this was the real Ellie speaking and that she was right.

CHAPTER EIGHT

WE GO BANDIT HUNTING

“WE’RE just five miles from the foot of Dry Ridge,” Ellie told me. “On the other side of this little knoll we strike the main road from town. See, away over there to the north, where that smudge is against the sky? That’s Porcupine, just behind that hill.”

Even in the clear air it looked a long way, and I said so.

“About eighteen miles. You see now why it meant so much to get started with the dogs right away. Our ranch is only about seven or eight miles from the Ridge. We can’t be more than three or four hours behind the gang, and that’s the closest any one has ever been on their trail. There’s no dust on the road from town, I notice. I’ll bet Pat Ellis hasn’t even started yet. He may not think it’s worth while to come at all. The sheriff’s office is pretty much discouraged about catching the gang.”

We were picking our way through rocks and brush, not making any time at all. “Don’t you think we ought to follow the road as soon as possible?” I asked her. “We could travel twice as fast.”

“Yes, we could. But it seems to me, if I were an outlaw making my getaway after a big haul, I shouldn’t keep to the road any longer than was necessary.”

“Well, it’s any man’s guess, then, which way they’d go.”

“Not so bad as that, Kind Sir.” She gave me the friendliest look I’d had from her since last night. “There’s a narrow draw on the other side of the trail—perhaps half a mile

beyond—that leads up into the heart of Dry Ridge. If I were an outlaw, I'd go that way and keep out of sight all the way up into the rough country. I think we'd better try it first.”

Naturally, I was in no position to argue the point. I knew nothing of the country and little more of the ways of outlaws. Now that she had abandoned her wild flight into sociological nonsense, I had to admire the manner in which she was taking hold of the chase, and the way she managed her horse and the two dogs. Not for the world would I have made her feel useless and feminine again by letting her know I had hunted with dogs, both on land and by boat on the salt marshes. She was having the time of her life patronizing the dude from back East. Far be it from me to spoil her fun.

Really, I never met a girl just like Ray's sister. I've know lady athletes, as Ray calls them, but none who was in the least like Ellie Whitcome. I've known girls who proclaimed themselves rebels against all the conventions, but usually they were loud and unattractive. Suffragettes I would cross the street to avoid, be they young or old; but so far I have not attempted to avoid this one, even when she is in one of her most difficult moods. It will be interesting to follow developments and see just what it is that gives the girl her charm in spite of her erratic theories about life.

We crossed the trail from town, and she told me—as if I couldn't read the signs for myself—that the muddle of recent hoofprints stamped deep into the dry earth meant that the posse from town had already passed, riding that way in pursuit of the gang; which proved her wrong in one respect at least.

“But perhaps those are the tracks of the bandits themselves,” I suggested mildly.

“As if the Dry Ridge gang were silly enough to keep to the main road!” she laughed scornfully. “Why, it’s because they know all the possibilities of the country—every little coulee where they can ride unseen, and every gulch and where it leads to and whether it’s passable for horses—that they have kept out of Dad’s clutches these last five years.

“Think of it, Kind Sir! A real, dyed-in-the-wool bunch of outlaws flourishing right here within a few hours’ ride of the county seat! You know, they even robbed a train once—or tried to. They didn’t get away with any money that time, but they would have, except for an accident. Of course they don’t travel the road.”

“Well, I can see it would be risky.”

“Right ahead here’s where we strike into the draw I spoke of. I have a hunch they rode this way last night; up that wrinkle you see running in toward the side of the Ridge. It’s really quite deep when you’re in it. Come on. The sun is up and we’ll have to hurry.”

Wanted to find a trail with the dew on, of course—though this country doesn’t seem to produce much dew. Her optimism would have been more impressive if it had been justified by the facts, but I was well awake now and wouldn’t spoil her sport. She yanked the dogs into a run, put her horse to a swifter pace and we raced together toward the rough swale she called a draw.

I have never been accused of being timid, especially on horseback, but I admit that I was not a darned bit easy in my mind during the next few minutes. The soil was pitted with holes of various sizes made by gophers. The girl rode recklessly among them. I expected any second to see her horse go down and at the very best give her a bad fall. But

when I ventured to warn her, she smiled and kept on galloping.

“The horses are used to them. They won’t step in a hole and break your neck,” she soothed, driving me to silence again.

As a matter of fact, they didn’t fall, though how they managed not to is still a mystery. We gained the draw. It proved at first to be little more than a grassy furrow in the surface of the prairie, yet when we rode into it a few rods, I found that the sides came higher than our heads; a green, sunken way where we might gallop unseen straight toward the Ridge, just as Ellie had described it. What pleased me most, I think, was the fact that there were no gopher holes—probably because the gophers were sharp enough to know that water running down the draw would drown them out.

Where the draw forked, Ellie swung her horse into the branch I never would have chosen and went on at a steady lope. She looked another girl, almost. When she turned her eyes briefly to meet mine, I saw that they had lost the shadow which seemed to live there all the time. It was easy enough to see that she was enjoying every minute of this mad quest. And when she spoke, she proved my guess was right.

“I’m imagining myself the leader of the gang,” she said, with a strange, shy look that was yet eager and intent; hard to describe. “I don’t believe Dad ever works from this angle. He never forgets that he’s the sheriff and they’re the criminals.”

“I believe your way is the right one,” I approved, and more than half meant it, at that.

“I’m sure it is. I’d be willing to bet anything they came up along here. It looks so simple—just a grassy wrinkle running out from the Ridge. No rocks or tricky turns where men can

duck out of sight—I don't believe any one ever gave this draw a second thought. A posse would be all for getting up into the rough country as quickly as possible. They hit the main trail and pound along it to the top of the Ridge, and then prowl up and down among the rocks until their horses give out. Then they straggle back to town and wonder how the gang managed to give them the slip."

"You mean that's the way the sheriff hunts them?" I wondered what her father would think of his daughter's attitude of calm superiority.

"Oh, Dad wouldn't go at it exactly like that. But he is terribly busy, you know, and half the time he sends out one or the other of his deputies with some men, and that's about the way they work, I know. The gang covers a wide territory with their operations—though they manage to keep within a night's ride of the Ridge, I've noticed.

"Dad gets out when he can and prowls around, and since he got these dogs, he has had them over here. But so far he hasn't had any luck whatever."

She stopped abruptly, for we were approaching another branch. A second gully angled away from the one we were following, and I saw her eyebrows pinch together when she looked that way. Then she pulled up and looked down discontentedly at the mournful-faced dogs.

"If they only had something that belonged to one of the gang," she began impatiently, "they could identify the scent and tell us which way to go from here. Either gully is feasible —"

Suddenly she swung a khaki-skirted leg over the cantle and stepped down from the saddle as limber as any cowboy in the country, and twice as graceful. She gave me the leashes to

hold, pulled her gray range hat down over one eyebrow to shield her eyes from the sun—and unconsciously gave herself quite a fascinating air of deviltry—and walked to the mouth of the tributary gully. I let her go. This was her hunt and I had no intention whatever of spoiling it for her.

So I waited on my horse and held the dogs while she walked slowly into the gully, her head bent as if she were looking for something she had dropped along there. She was absolutely oblivious to me or to the picture she made, her slim figure completely framed in sloping banks of short curly grass. While I studied her and tried to think of the words that would describe her and do her justice without sounding overdone, she cared only for finding some track or trace of the bandits.

But that short and wiry grass which grew so luxuriantly down in the bottom where we were held no imprint, except some sign that cattle, and horses too, had grazed in there. She came back abstractedly to her horse, mounted absentmindedly and then sat hesitating, studying first one gully and then the other.

At last she took up the slack in her reins and led the way straight ahead along the draw or gully we had been following. “They wouldn’t turn off so soon,” she observed, speaking absently. “That would lose them time getting up into the Ridge country. There’s another one turning off farther along, I think. If I were in their places, I’d wait and take that one.”

“Why would you?” I wasn’t trying to start an argument. I really wanted to help her now.

“Well, it leads right up to the Ridge and grows crooked and narrow. And if they were followed, there are places where

they could stop and kill off a whole posse if they had to.” She urged her horse ahead with the spurs and I followed close behind.

In spite of my calmness in the face of excitement, my blood was beginning to tingle a bit. Once or twice I caught myself thinking rather fiercely about the Dry Ridge gang, as if it were a matter of life and death to find them. I was getting into the spirit of the hunt—going ahead on my own account and not just to please Ellie. You couldn’t have hired me to turn back then.

Sure enough, we came to that other branch. Into this she reined her horse without the slightest hesitation. Though she did not mention it again, I could see that she was still imagining herself leader of the gang. I began to imagine myself a bank robber following her lead. It wasn’t as hard as one might think.

We rode for perhaps another half mile before the grassy banks petered out and the gully walls became steep and rough, the bottom narrow. I remembered what she had said about the possibilities there were of ambush farther along, where it would be easy to kill off a whole posse.

“I wish you’d let me ride in the lead for awhile,” I suggested, as casually as possible.

But she shook her head and sent me a brief, condescending smile over her shoulder.

“Oh, they’re not here now, Kind Sir, though I thank you for wanting to protect me. I’m afraid we’re about four hours too late to hear bullets come whining past our ears.” From the lift in her voice, darned if I don’t think that girl would have gotten a thrill out of it.

We went slowly after that, climbing what amounted to a steep trough of a ravine and finding the way rougher as we went along, with natural ambushes at every turn. An ideal trail for outlaws to make their getaway, I could see that.

In spite of Ellie's assurance, I rode warily. I was glad too that I had slipped my pistol into my coat pocket before I left the house. It's an automatic, and Ray laughs at it whenever he sees it, but I'll take my chances with it any time I need a side arm. It will pour .38-caliber bullets into a man faster than any of their six-shooters can do it, and even if it is something new that doesn't mean it isn't competent for the job. At the same time, I didn't feel called upon to show it to Ellie, who had a thirty-two in a holster on her belt, and her rifle on her saddle. She thought I had come out unarmed, and patronized me on that account, I believe. But that was all right.

There was another parting of the way, and once more the girl stopped. This new gorge, narrow and rocky like the one we were in, turned sharply toward the west—that is, toward the main road, which followed the river.

“I can't help it—I'm going to try that one,” she said abruptly, answering some inner objection, I suppose, since I had not said a word about it. “I know it leads back toward the road, but still—”

She turned into it and I followed, riding close to the heels of her horse, the dogs scrambling after me since I still led them along. They were well-behaved animals, I'll say that much for them. Spiritless brutes they seemed to be, not caring where they went but taking it all as a part of the day's work.

We rode along slowly. It was unmercifully rough, with now and then a big rock which the horses must jump over.

I'll describe it in detail when I have time to hunt out a bunch of adjectives that will fit.

Suddenly, without any warning whatever or any widening of the ravine, we came out into a tiny basin—not as large as the average tennis court, even; no, not more than half as large—where there was bright green grass and a spring near one side. After picking our way up those rocky gorges the contrast was startling.

“A perfect little nook where me and my gang can draw a long breath or two and let our poor horses get their wind,” Ellie cried in guarded triumph—for the place somehow didn't encourage loud voices. “Maybe you won't believe me, Kind Sir, but I honestly didn't know this place was here. I merely went by opposites when I took that last turn. The obvious thing to do was turn away from the road, so I turned toward it ___”

“That,” I observed, “is the advantage of being a woman. Being congenitally opposed to logic—”

“You mean, able to rise above mere logic into the realm of intuition. Given a choice in the matter, a woman follows her intuition and finds what she's looking for. Dismount, gang, and take a drink from Outlaw Spring.”

“Is that the name of it?” I knew, of course, it wasn't, since she had not even known there was such a place. But she was enjoying herself so much I wanted to humor her. It was pretty plain to me that if the Dry Ridge gang had ever been there, they had gone on hours ago, and the danger was negligible. Furthermore, I'm a pretty fair shot and was keeping my eyes open while I dismounted and let the dogs and my horse have a drink from the overflow of the spring.

“I don’t suppose it ever had a name, but it’s going to have one from now on.” Ellie laughed and took a little telescope cup from her pocket. She flipped it open and dipped it full of water, holding it high.

“I hereby christen you Outlaw Spring, in honor of those who drank here before this day dawned.” She spilled a few drops gracefully into the trampled grass. “Here’s to the speedy capture of the Dry Ridge gang, and may I be the one who does it.” Then she drank from the cup, her eyes taunting me over its metal rim.

CHAPTER NINE

A PIECE OF STRING

AROUND the spring the mud was pitted with tracks, but whether of horses or cattle it would be hard to say, they were so blurred. Ellie chose to believe them horse tracks, though there were droppings of both horses and cattle about.

I suppose a spring will attract range stock to it, no matter how rough the trail that must be traveled, though Ellie was of the opinion that they came down off the ridge occasionally to water there. There couldn't have been many, for the grass would otherwise have been cropped off short. (And this, I think, is a very passable deduction for a tenderfoot to make; though of course it's only common sense. I'm going to make it my business to collect all sorts of range lore.)

Ellie went searching the basin over for clues, leaving me to hold the dogs. It was the big lop-eared dog called Tex that fixed my attention on something half buried in the grass near where I sat and smoked a cigarette. He had come out of his lethargy and was sniffing at something, which was so marked a change in his manner that I leaned over to see what it was.

I held it up between thumb and finger and called, "Here's a string that looks as if it had come off a saddle, Pretty Maid. It seems quite highly scented. At least, one of your dogs has taken a fancy to it."

She came hurrying back to me, took the leather thong and looked it over. "A saddle string, sure enough. Broken off, probably, when one of the gang was tying something on. Money, wouldn't you think? Because he'd have to be pulling

pretty hard to break this string, and money would be something he'd tie on as tightly as possible.”

“Great thinking!”

She flushed, but her eyes looked pleased. “Well, that’s logic, which you say a woman is incapable of using. Come on. I think this is going to put the dogs on the trail. It carries the scent of the horse and its rider too, you see.”

She took the leashes from me, called the dogs close, patted them on their heads and held the leather string under their noses.

“Draw deep breaths,” I directed helpfully, “and get both snouts full, so you’ll remember.” Which got me no attention from the dogs and only a scowl from their mistress.

They were big upstanding brutes, though I don’t think they were pure bloodhound but a crossbreed. Now that their professional skill was called upon, they looked up at us with eloquent eyes, quivering with impatience.

Ellie mounted her horse, then leaned and dangled the string before the dogs again.

“Seek ’em, Texas! Go get ’em, Bannock! Go on—go find ’em, boys!” She was going to have her hands full, I could have told her that, but she wouldn’t give the leashes to me. As the dogs circled and whimpered, noses to the ground, her horse backed and circled with them, dancing away from the stout pliable leathers, probably thinking this was some strange roping contest and he was expected to hold two animals at once.

Straining at their leashes, they headed out of the basin, straight for the bluff. Ellie gave a gasp and set her teeth, bracing herself against the pull.

That was when I had to take matters into my own hands. I leaped forward and snatched the leashes from her, and I was none too soon. In another ten seconds she would have had to let the dogs go or be pulled from the saddle.

“Get off!” I yelled. “We’d better lead our horses up this bluff—or you can ride and lead mine, and I’ll handle the hounds.”

Well, she surrendered to my strength and masculine authority, and I drew a long breath of relief. She might have her independent ideas and welcome, so long as she used common sense in a pinch. She took my bridle reins without a word, her eyes on the straining, whining dogs. Her cheeks were red and her eyes were sparkling—that much I saw as my glance flicked over her.

I admit that now the hunt was really on, my own nerves were tingling and I wished I had brought my rifle along. The dogs pulled me up a steep trail so dim no one would ever see it among the rocks, though here and there I saw a hoofprint as I climbed.

Those damned dogs nearly tore my arm from my shoulder, but I hung on and let them drag me to the top. Turn them loose and they’d have been gone like scared wolves, and we’d have had a deuce of a time trying to keep up, or calling them off when they ran their quarry to earth. It was no part of my plan, even if it was hers, to beard the Dry Ridge gang in their den and fight it out. That was the sheriff’s job. If we trailed them and found where they went, that seemed to me sufficient.

Somehow we gained the top and I mounted while the two dogs fairly wept tears at the delay. I saw I was going to have my work cut out, keeping them in control and handling my

confounded horse, which seemed to think this was a race and didn't mean to be left at the post.

When I convinced him that bolting was out of the question, he walked on his hind feet and had to be argued with on that point. Then he tried bucking, but luckily it was only in a tentative way. I would not let him get his nose down between his front feet, so he was obliged to abandon that idea also. As it was, I kept to the saddle and was spared humiliation. And once he saw who was master, he settled down and behaved quite well for the rest of our ride.

As soon as she dared ride close enough, Ellie came up and took one of the dogs. We went on, hunt mad. I know I quite forgot they were men we were tracking, and I don't believe the girl realized it, either. Life and the whole scheme of existence narrowed down to following blindly where those quivering nostrils led.

I had ridden to hounds, but I found that this was altogether a different matter. Holding the dogs in leash was no joke. My respect for them rose with every mile they strained ahead of us. From lackadaisical brutes they had changed to demons, pulling and tugging us along and keeping our horses in a lather of excitement. Never did we go fast enough to suit them. Where we had to slow down for rough ground, they wanted to larrup along regardless. It was work for all of us, believe me.

It's all a blurred panorama in my mind now, as I'm trying to get it down while it's freshest in my memory. I know we did a lot of climbing up and down sharp ridges, and we traveled rocky ground a lot, the trail avoiding all soft places where tracks would be too distinct. I saw where Ellie had the right idea about wanting to get out early while the scent was

fresh. Another few hours and I doubt if we could have held the trail at all.

Even so early in the morning the dogs were often at fault for minutes at a time, where the rocks were flat on the ground and the sun beat down upon them. This gave our horses a chance to breathe while we waited for the dogs. Then again the hounds pulled so hard against their collars we could scarcely hold them. I got so reckless and impatient I wanted to turn the blamed things loose and take a chance, but for once Ellie was more prudent than I.

She shook her head. “No, we mustn’t do that. I wouldn’t know how to call them back, and goodness knows where they’d go or what would happen. I don’t dare let them off the leash—you see, I never was out of the yard with them before!”

I stared at her, then laughed loud and long without feeling amused. The nerve of that girl astounds me at times. If I had known she was seriously out to trail outlaws in utter ignorance—well, no use setting down my emotions concerning that performance. I’m not likely to forget how I felt.

Needless to say, I did not repeat my suggestion to unleash the dogs.

After an unmeasured time, during which we halted, went on, doubled, circled and seemed to get nowhere at all, I was ready to balk. I’ll stand for a great deal of practical joking, but I draw the line at letting a gang of outlaws make a monkey of me. It was plain that they had deliberately crossed their own trail and ridden aimlessly around and around, for the express purpose of getting the laugh on the sheriff’s dogs.

I was on the point of telling the girl so and putting my foot down on going any farther, when we arrived at the crest of a gentle slope which dipped abruptly to the head of four small gulches spreading out fanwise from where we had halted. I scanned the terrain before me and held my tongue. The outlaws would have to choose one gulch out of the four and stick to it, I thought. There could be no more doubling back to fool us, and possibly we might learn something.

Just then both dogs set up a terrific sneezing and came back and looked up at us with tears in their eyes, trying to tell us something. We tried to put them back on the trail, but it was useless. Those hounds were whipped. They just slunk around with their tails between their legs and pawed at their faces.

“Pepper,” I said succinctly. “The hunt’s over, Pretty Maid.”

She nodded disconsolately. “Dad said the dogs ran into pepper when he brought them over here before. I thought perhaps we might be lucky this time. Dad says the way criminals cover their trails with pepper, they drag a bag of it behind them and let it dust out on the ground, and dogs sniff it—”

“And get hay fever,” I finished for her.

Her smile was a mere twist of her lips. For a minute or two she drooped in the saddle, staring down into the head of the gorges.

“We could still find the right gulch,” she said, without much conviction in her tone. “The one that had pepper in would be the right one, don’t you see?”

“No,” I retorted discouragingly, “I’m afraid I don’t see. I think we have done all that is humanly possible, Pretty Maid.

Here is where a posse would turn back. Score one more for the Dry Ridge gang and let's go home."

She lifted one hand and brushed gloved fingers across her eyes, then settled her gray felt hat more firmly on her brown hair. With a twitch of the reins she moved the horse so that her back was turned to me, and sat staring out over the country, studying—or pretending to study—all the possible routes and secret ways the bandits could have taken from where we were halted.

She needed a little time to adjust herself to her disappointment, so I left her to herself and tried to familiarize myself with this wild stretch of country. And I will say it was time well spent, and right there I learned more about Montana, I think, than Ray had ever been able to tell me.

For one thing the view was limited only by the power of the human eye to see. Fifty miles—a hundred—I have no idea how much country I surveyed from that point. And all empty, for the most part, so far as I could see. I suppose that is because all the ranches are set down in sheltered valleys—coulees, I believe they are called. From that high point I could count no more than half a dozen, and they were miles apart.

Dry Ridge itself is an immense plateau, but not so level as those called benches. Ages ago old Nature must have ridden this earth like a bucking broncho. It must have looked to the gods like a great storm at sea, with the earth heaving with enormous billows that never subsided altogether. Actually there was a great commotion here when the crust cooled. Internal disturbances that lifted up the mountains must have heaved up Dry Ridge and cracked the crust so the lava oozed

out and cooled to rock. Not a complete overflow, but just a leaking out along the crack.

That ridge of broken lava rock extends from the mountains to the river, where it ends in sandstone cliffs along the water's edge. From the Ridge, running in all directions, twisting and turning this way and that, run the wrinkles and seams and gashes, several of which we had followed for a way getting up on the Ridge.

I turned in the saddle and saw the town of Porcupine off in the distance, a blot of smoke and blackish blur that might have passed for another outcropping of lava had I not known that there lay the town, and that the patchy blur was really the houses.

Nearer, I looked down upon Big Bend Ranch, looped about by its great silver ribbon which was the Missouri. I could gaze upon what amounted to a bird's-eye view of the Bend itself, that strange wild tract of dunes and small hills and little secret hollows, more sinister, in my opinion, than Dry Ridge itself.

And what an ideal outlaw country Dry Ridge does make! It's no wonder to me that for four or five years they have had the run of the country and could tell Sheriff Whitcome to go chase himself. With good glasses up here they could watch the posses start out after them—no doubt they had seen us leave the stables and cross the river with these great hounds, that would show up like calves on the ferry. They could have watched us until we took to that grassy draw and would have known exactly what we were after.

I'll admit the thought did not exactly pander to my vanity. To know that we had been watched and laughed at and kidded along until they were tired of us, and then stopped

here with a bag of pepper so that the gang could go on about their business, was distinctly humiliating to my pride. Except for the thrill of the ride and the mistaken belief that we might accomplish something, we might much better have stayed at home and had our sleep out.

I think Ellie must have felt as let down as I did, for she turned to me and said, "Let's go home, Kind Sir," in a tired, listless voice. "We can turn the dogs loose. They'll follow us back, all right. My arms feel half broken."

I could believe that, for my own arms ached like the very devil.

"I'm sorry it had to turn out a fizzle, Pretty Maid," I told her, as gently as possible.

"This," she said grittily, "is only the first attempt. Do you see that?" She held up the broken piece of saddle string and tried to laugh. "That isn't much to look at, but it may mean their downfall before I'm through with them. I shall put it in a sterilized bottle with a tight cork to preserve the scent, and some day—" her teeth came together with a click "—they may run out of pepper."

She tied it around her saddle horn to keep it as free as possible from mixed emanations, and waited while I got off and unsnapped the leashes. The poor brutes looked as crestfallen as we felt and went to heel and stayed there.

We turned and rode in silence back down to the trail and on home.

CHAPTER TEN

THE SHERIFF TAKES THE TRAIL

THE wide, homey porch at Big Bend Ranch looked pretty well populated when we rode up to the stables. Chub came out and took the horses with an air of portentous gloom and the look of a man who is consciously refraining from making any comments. Only,

“Your dad’s home, Ellie,” he vouchsafed laconically, as if that statement was all that was necessary.

It was, evidently. Ellie drew in her breath and her lips, then squared her shoulders and led the way to the house, the dogs close to her heels.

“It’s my fault and I coaxed you to go, remember,” I suggested in an undertone, thinking that might help a little.

She only shrugged. “Don’t be silly,” she said with suppressed impatience, and let it go at that. So I turned my attention to the porch.

Ray was there, the greater portion of him sprawled in the hammock, though his long legs trailed on the floor. One hand supported that ungodly pipe of his and the other lazily waved a palm-leaf fan. And all at once I knew that it was hot and I was hungry and tired, and filled with a vast resentment of Ray’s comfort. What right had he to sprawl there in that hammock and let his guest starve?

The sheriff was there, of course, standing with his hands deep in his pockets, staring fixedly at our approach. Even at a distance I felt the weight of his displeasure—which is putting it as elegantly as possible. In plain words, the sheriff was mad

and showed it, even from a distance. The set of his shoulders, his head—well, he made me thankful I was not his prisoner just then.

But it was Ray who fired the first shot. Before we arrived he was shouting at us, which perhaps was a good thing, for it gave us both the cue for our speeches.

“Fine bunch you are!” Ray cried, with mock severity, getting lazily to his feet. “Here’s all kinds of doings, and you two galloping off to Lord knows where! Dad’s been a raving maniac for the last two hours, and me holding him down by main strength! I hope you appreciate the fact that I’ve saved you both from going to the calaboose—

“What d’ you think, Walter? The Dry Ridgers have broken loose again! Robbed a bank in town last night, and Dad has promised to let us join the posse that’s going out after them! There’s your Wild West for you, with all the wool on. We’ve just been waiting for the dogs—”

With an abrupt gesture the sheriff brushed Ray aside as if he were a troublesome child getting underfoot. He came down the steps, his face dark with anger.

“Where you been, Ellie?” I think I was a restraint upon him. If they had been alone, his language would have been much stronger, I’m sure.

“Oh, just around in the hills,” Ellie replied calmly.

I gave her a quick side glance. Her father’s tone had driven her once more within her fortress of cool indifference where no storm of words could touch her. I understood her better now and at that moment I hated the sheriff.

“What did yuh take the dogs for? Think I shipped ’em in here to chase jack rabbits? You leave the dogs at home after

this. I need 'em—need 'em damn bad, right now. And I s'pose they're all tuckered out and footsore, running rabbits for fun.”

“Oh, they're all right.” Ellie's tone was airily indifferent both to dogs and men. “I think it's a shame to keep the poor things penned up all the while. You haven't used them more than twice since you got them. They were just wild for a run.”

The sheriff glared at her as she passed him going up the steps. “Well, you let 'em alone hereafter. If I knew in advance just when I was going to need 'em, they wouldn't be a damn bit of use to me!”

He was holding himself in, I could see that. It gave me a new slant on these big, bluff, good-natured men. They can be tyrants at home, I see that. I can't blame Ellie so much for her rebellious moods.

“There's been a big robbery pulled off in town,” he said more calmly, and stooped to pat Texas, who had stopped beside him and was sniffing his boots. “I wanted the dogs fresh. Hell, there's always some damn thing coming up to give that Dry Ridge bunch the edge on me. You two kids didn't know, of course. But y' see now, Ellie, you've gone and played your poor old dad right into the hands of that cussed gang.”

Ray came to the rescue. “Oh, don't worry about the dogs, Dad! They both look fresh as daisies. Remember what I told you, Walter? You can have a real bandit hunt—the Dry Ridge gang, at that. Dad heard about it when he got in town. His under-sheriff is out with a posse, and Dad's going to try and locate them out on the Ridge.

“Talk about sport! I jollied him into waiting for you, more than anything. Gosh, he’s run down bandits before ever he got dogs to do it with—don’t you worry, Sis. He was just bluffing you about that.

“We’re going to stay out two or three days—longer, if we don’t round ’em up before. You want to be in on it, Walter. Bloodhounds on the trail—you going to take the dogs, Dad? They look all right.”

“Oh—I reckon I might as well,” the sheriff yielded, gruffly trying to hide his readiness to humor Ray. “Spoils ’em, though, to run rabbits. I don’t want that to happen again.”

“Mr. Tenney and I haven’t had anything but a sandwich since morning,” Ellie informed them. “If he is half as hungry as I am, he isn’t interested in any more trips just now. We’ve been out since sunrise, remember.”

I followed her inside without having committed myself on the expedition.

“Are you going with them?” she asked, turning to give me a long enigmatic glance.

“Well, shall I?” I tried in vain to read her thoughts.

“Just as you please, Mr. Tenney.” And she led the way back to the dining room where our places were still ready for us on the big oval table, all the fixings pushed down to one end.

She rang the bell for the cook—there was little ceremony in that house and only the one servant—and said we would eat at once, without changing. Then, just as I was wondering what I had done to make her push me off with a formal “Mr. Tenney”, she suddenly abandoned her aloofness.

“Let him take the dogs if he likes,” she said, in a fierce undertone, evidently referring to her father. “He won’t even pick up the trail, this time of day. They’ll prowl around and won’t find a thing, as usual.”

“Then you aren’t going to say anything—”

“About that saddle string? I should say not!” Her eyebrows drew together. “He’d probably toss it away as useless, just because we found it.” She laughed shortly and held up the leather string between thumb and finger. “I think I’ll go put it away for future reference. Dad isn’t going to hear anything about it—from me, at least.”

“Nor from me, Pretty Maid,” I promised quickly. “We ought to be ashamed of ourselves, taking the dogs out after rabbits and then not getting any, but it was great sport while it lasted.”

Her smile was both grateful and understanding. “There’ll be more of the same sport, Kind Sir—”

She stopped abruptly when she heard the front screen door slam and gave me a look which bound me to my promise of secrecy. So not even Ray is going to hear a word about how we really spent our morning.

I made the most of my stiffness and lack of sleep and begged off from the bandit hunt. Ray kicked up his usual row and called me a piker, and I know the sheriff put me down as a lily-fingered dude, and maybe a coward into the bargain. But I stuck to my refusal to go along and watched from the porch while they started off—the sheriff, Ray, and two deputies who came from the bunkhouse, and at the very last Steve Johnson, who rode up with a pack horse loaded with camp stuff. The sheriff, it seemed, had ’phoned Steve and asked him to come. If I had known that in the start, I believe

I'd have gone along. Maybe he'd have had a chance to show me the trout stream he told me about.

I certainly do like that boy. While the rest were doing last little things, Steve strolled over to me. "Too bad you aren't going along," he grinned. "There's nothing like it, once you get hardened to the saddle and to sleeping on the ground. I've been kept on the jump, the last few days, or I'd have made good on that promise."

I told him that was all right, and that I'd had a pretty good trip with Miss Whitcome. And I gave the number and size of the trout, as all fishermen do. Then Ellie came out and stood leaning against a pillar to watch them start.

Some things, trivial in themselves, sort of stick in a person's memory. That look in Steve Johnson's eyes when he turned his head and saw Ellie is going to stay with me a good long while, I'm afraid. I turned and looked at her to see if she noticed, and—well, for some damned reason, my chest felt as if a ton of lead was sitting on it.

I can't understand the effect they had on me. I certainly am not in love with the girl myself, and I hope I'm no dog-in-the-manger. I'm writing it down, just in case something in the future may have some bearing on it, or explain why I should feel that way. It never happened before that I remember. I think perhaps it is my dramatic instinct that is growing more sensitive now that I am going to be an author. I see more in faces, especially eyes, and hear more in tones than I used to do, and with a more sympathetic understanding. That would explain it.

I certainly would hate to think there was any personal feeling in the matter. I've had my little romances and have come out of them untrapped. My emotions are not tangled up

with any girl and I intend to keep them free. I most assuredly cannot afford to be bothered with love just at the beginning of my career. I know now that Steve Johnson is heels over head in love with Ellie and that she is undoubtedly in love with him. This upsets my theory that the dark young cowboy, Dade McArthur, is the one. I should not like to think the girl is a flirt, yet she must be one unless she meant the message her eyes carried to young Steve.

What they actually said to each other doesn't count—and that's going to play the deuce with putting over love scenes in a story, I should think. You have to depend so much on dialogue. Adjectives don't seem to hit the spot exactly. Take those two as an example. One long glance between them and a glow around their eyes. The words were what any neighbors might have spoken. "Oh, good morning, Steve."—"Hello, Ellie."—"Going to hunt bandits?"—"Going to *hunt*—yes." And a wave of the hand from the porch, Steve waiting to lift his hat and look at her again as he rode off.

That was all, but I know he worships her. Hell! I don't seem to like it a darn bit, but I can't see why. It certainly is nothing to me.

She stood on the steps and shaded her eyes with one hand and watched them go. Watched Steve, I'd bet anything. I wanted to ask her what she was thinking about, but I didn't.

When they had swung the ferry out across the river and had ridden up over the sandy bank and out of sight, she turned without a word to me or her mother and went into the house and upstairs.

That gave me time to take a long siesta. I've tried, but for some reason I can't sleep. Too many things go round and round in my head. I thought that writing it all down would

help me dismiss it from my mind so I could rest, but so far it hasn't helped a bit.

I want to know where those outlaws went after they stopped us with the pepper. I'll bet they didn't go down into those gulches at all. Too obvious, as Ellie would say. I'll bet they backtrailed on us and went off in another direction entirely. If I were up there now, I believe I could get a line on them—with the dogs or without. The dogs are all right. They've been trained not to bay all over the place while they're tracking. I guess they wouldn't be any good hunting criminals if they did.

I wish I knew just what there is between Ellie and Steve—

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WE COMPARE CLUES

FROM downstairs came the chatter of strange women and the clink of china. Tea was being served on the porch, from the sound. No use trying to sleep, so I decided to slip out of the house and take a walk down to the river. By way of the back stairs I made my escape and found a shady place above the ferry, where the grass was thick and green and the river made a pleasant gurgling sound as it lapped around a half-submerged log.

I suppose I slept. I know I started thinking about that fishing trip with Ellie and the long wait in the alley opposite the bank, and I followed the complete sequence of events from there so closely I must have been dreaming. It seemed as though the Dry Ridge gang were attached to one end of a slender chain, and I had accidentally picked up the other end, which was that shadowed silhouette on the bank window.

Again I was tormented by the elusive likeness to some one I had once known, or to a portrait I had seen. For the life of me I could not determine which it was, though the more I thought of it the more I became convinced that it was like some picture. I'll get the connection some day, I suppose.

As a clue, it has a doubtful value. I would have to see the fellow's shadow thrown in profile, and that's too long a chance to be called a probability. About one chance in a thousand. There's just one thing about it worth considering. If I ever should see it—a remote possibility—I should recognize it. Then, if it's a man's profile, the sheriff can nab

him. If it's a picture, I'll have small chance of finding the man who resembles the thing.

From there my thoughts drifted to our ride that morning and to the piece of string I had found by that little spring. Any horseman could have dropped it there. It might not belong to a bandit at all. Dry Ridge was dry, and any man would take the trouble to ride into that tiny pocket in the hills just to water his horse and get a drink from the spring. I don't suppose they all carry canteens, as we did.

"So that piece of string probably never saw the Dry Ridge gang," I summed up the matter.

"And why do you say that, Kind Sir?"

I sat up with a jerk, and I suppose I looked about, half-witted. I must have been dozing, for I certainly did not realize I was talking out in meeting. I hastily smoothed down my hair.

Ellie laughed and sat down beside me, the old mocking light in her eyes and hiding at the corners of her lips. "What makes you think that saddle string never saw the Dry Ridge gang?"

I reached for my cigarette case and tried not to blink like an owl in the sunlight. Now that I was fully awake, I was not quite sure just how much sense there was in my deduction. To gain time I carefully selected a cigarette, lighted it and held the match until it burned my fingers before I threw it into the river. Even then I watched it go floating down in the grip of the current until it was lost, before I answered. What a godsend to a man are the petty details of starting a smoke when he is put to it to answer a shrewd woman's questions!

"Pretty Maid," I began mysteriously, "I've been thinking about those outlaws."

“So I might guess from your muttering. But then, who hasn’t?”

I was thinking, all right, and following an idea that came to me as I spoke. It seemed brilliant, and I wanted to test it on her.

“I’ve been thinking that there isn’t any Dry Ridge gang at all.”

The stare she gave me did not speak well for my idea, or for my intelligence. I hurried on.

“There’s something I didn’t tell you that bears out my theory. Perhaps I ought to tell your father and let him follow it up—though I don’t see how he could. Still, it might be just the clue he is looking for.”

She regarded me with that same strange look. “Are you just joshing me?” she demanded slangily, yet very much in earnest.

“No, this is strictly on the level,” I replied in the same manner.

“Then, in the sheriff’s absence, I think you should tell me what it is.”

“Well,” I said, “when I saw that shadow of the robber’s face on the bank window—you remember I told you about that—there was one detail I left out. It may not mean a thing; I may never be able to follow it up, but that shadow had a familiar look.”

She gasped. “Familiar? How?”

“Just—familiar. It was a perfect profile, you know. And I saw a likeness in it to some one I’ve seen somewhere before. Where, or when, I can’t recall. It may even be some picture; a

painting—anything like that. But if it’s a man, I’m sure I’ve seen that fellow somewhere.”

“Here, you mean?”

“In Porcupine, maybe. Yes. You know Ray has done the honors of the town two or three times and introduced me to dozens of men I’ll probably never see or speak to again. He’s a gregarious soul and he seems to know everybody in the country.”

“He should. He was born and raised here.”

“Well, suppose that fellow in the bank lived right in town? Since the idea struck me, it looked pretty darn probable, don’t you think? Suppose they all live in town? If that’s the case, you’re hunting cold when you search Dry Ridge for them. It’s a good bet that your entire gang lives right in Porcupine—has lived there all the while, posing as law-abiding citizens. I know I could safely swear to the identity of one of them, if he could be located and made to throw a silhouette shadow on the wall or somewhere.”

She curled one slippered foot under her skirts, tucked a bushel or more of thin, crisp white ruffles around it in an unthinking fashion which was fascinating to watch, and stared vacant-eyed across the river. And for a full five minutes I did not call her thoughts back to me. What she was seeing within her mind I could only conjecture, but I knew that the brain under all that silky brown hair was mighty clever and would think straight to a logical conclusion, in spite of her protests against logic. So I let her alone and watched her appreciatively.

“If your guess is correct,” she said at last, without changing that adorable posture, “then my saddle string means nothing at all. It was dropped there by some cowboy watering

his horse at that spring—while he was hunting horses, we'll say. Cowboys are forever hunting horses, because they let them range free and wander off, and then when they want a certain one, they saddle another and ride it down to catch the one they want. That's a sample of your masculine logic. In my opinion, they just love to ride around and make excuses for indulging themselves."

"Thanks," I said. "I'm studying the life and I'll make a note of that."

"Do. And you may add that they often break their saddle strings, tying and untying slickers and bundles. I've seen old saddles with not a whole string on them, just because the owner was too shiftless to put on new ones when the old ones wore out. This string you found is freshly broken, as you could see by the raw leather."

"Broken early this morning, for instance?"

"Well, probably. If it had lain there a day or two, it would very likely have been stepped on by cattle or something coming to drink."

"It lay looped up in the grass as if it had just fallen there."

"Very observing, Kind Sir. That's a point in my favor. And look. I gave the dogs the scent and they took the trail from it; the trail of the saddle string. Didn't they?"

"Yes. There's no argument there."

"And they kept right on the trail, picking it up again when they lost it. And I made sure by giving them fresh whiffs now and then, when they were in doubt. Is that right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"And do you remember that they'd had a fresh smell of the string at the foot of that little slope?"

“Yes. In that patch of rocks. I remember.”

“And then they picked up the scent again and ran right into the pepper.”

“They surely did.” I laughed, remembering their performance.

“Well, then!” She gave me a look of triumph. She even got upon her knees to face me, and shook a finger so close to my face I came darn near catching and kissing it. “Listen to me, now. Cowboys don’t as a rule drag pepper bags after them when they ride the range, hunting stock!” She sat down again and curled up in her ruffles, looking as far as the moon from the girl she had been that morning.

“But maybe—”

“No, you can’t get around that fact, so you needn’t try.”

“But look here! What if—”

“Don’t tell me they just did that as a blind. If they are town men, they would be very careful to show themselves in town this morning and join the indignation meeting against the Dry Ridge gang.”

I nodded in spite of myself. I saw they would certainly make the most of their respectability right after they’d robbed the bank. That’s what they’d have their respectability for, to flaunt at such a time.

“They’re very cunning,” she went on musingly. “They undoubtedly have an accomplice in town, and he’s the one you saw. It is certain they have some reliable source of information, because—Listen, Kind Sir! The other time they robbed the bank, there had been a large sum of money in the bank, but it was shipped out unexpectedly that very day. They

only got a few thousand dollars; seven or eight—somewhere around there.

“And Mrs. Perham, whose husband is cashier, told us this afternoon that the bank had just gotten in a large shipment of gold yesterday, and the gang got every bit of it. She said they stole seventy-five thousand dollars in gold. Her husband told her so. They took it in the little sacks it came in.

“She said they seldom have anywhere near that much, but it’s been whispered around that the bank is shaky, and they got the gold as a reserve, in case there’s a run on the bank. Dad heard there was likely to be one and passed the word on to Mr. Parks, so he would be prepared. It was all kept secret, of course.

“So how would the Dry Ridge gang know about it unless they had some one in town—right in the bank, most likely—that would know the gold was coming and just what day it would arrive?”

“That shadow I saw. He’s the fellow we want to find, then.”

“Yes. And another thing I’ve thought of. That much gold would be terribly heavy, judging by the weight of four or five twenties—”

“A twenty-dollar gold piece weighs about an ounce, Pretty Maid. Twelve of them, say, to the pound—”

“Oh, let’s not bother to figure it out now. They took all that to the hills, don’t you see? They couldn’t divide it up and carry it around with them, do you think?”

“Not very well, Pretty Maid, unless it’s a large gang.”

“Dad says there aren’t more than three or four, and that’s why they’re so hard to catch. No, they hurried right out to the

Ridge and hid that gold somewhere. I don't think they'd dare leave it in town."

"No, probably not," I admitted. She was doing such straight thinking I couldn't do more than agree.

She fumbled among her white ruffles. "So there *must* be a Dry Ridge gang, you see. And some day this will be enough, figuratively speaking, to send the lot of them up for life!"

She held out her hand to me. Balanced on her pink little palm was a small tin box such as druggists use. The edge, I saw, was sealed all around with blue sealing wax. I suppose I must have looked curious, for she laughed.

"It's the saddle string. I was afraid a bottle might break," she said, "so I found this box and boiled it out thoroughly and put the string in with as little handling as possible, and sealed it up. So now we'll have it—" Her voice dwindled to silence.

"Have it when we sneak the dogs out again," I finished for her. "But I'm afraid it won't do much good, after all. We're not likely to get so hot a trail again to follow."

Her face sobered. "No, I'm afraid you're right. It looks to me as though it's a case of now or never, because they've made that big haul and Mrs. Perham says the whole town is stirred up over it. She didn't *say* the bank couldn't stand the loss of all that gold—she wouldn't dare hint at such a thing, with her husband cashier and all—but she certainly looked worried, poor lady."

I lifted myself upright and squinted through the hot sunlight to Dry Ridge in the distance, quivering in heat waves like a reflection in smooth-flowing water.

"They won't need to, if they hang onto that gold. Can't you picture them sitting up there in one of those nests of rock,

peering out through some cranny with field glasses— watching your dad and his posse wandering around over the Ridge?”

“Yes, I can. It makes me boil inside because I’m not a man. I—I don’t think they’re—I don’t admire them any more, Kind Sir. While Mrs. Perham was talking, I suddenly realized that it’s neither picturesque nor romantic to rob banks. There’s nothing admirable about it. It’s mean.”

Looking up at her from where I lounged again in the grass, I’m afraid her sudden return to normal failed to impress me as it should. She’s a very distracting young woman, especially when she’s completely surrounded with crisp little white ruffles.

“Mrs. Perham told us a lot we never would get out of Dad. For instance, she said he has deputized more than two dozen men to-day. He sent them out in posses of four or five, each group under a man who knows the territory they’re to cover. There’s a bank detective in charge at the bank and another one investigating all possible leaks outside—”

She gave me a long, introspective stare that did things to my blood. She didn’t mean it or know about it—she was too busy thinking. And suddenly her gaze grew warm and rather intimate, so that my heart turned a complete flip-flop.

“We’re tied here to the ranch, and you’re a tenderfoot and I’m just a girl, but do you know, I believe that we’ve got more of a chance to catch that gang than all the posses and Dad and the bank detectives put together!”

I tried to bring my thoughts under control. “Well, we have that piece of leather string, but we ran into pepper before we found out anything.”

“But we know just what part of the Ridge they were on this morning, and that’s more than any one else knows. And there’s that shadow—you said you’d know the man—the accomplice—if you saw his profile.”

“Not quite that,” I corrected. “The shadow of his profile, yes. I’m sure I’d know him if I saw that again.”

“And that, it seems to me, is a great deal, Kind Sir.”

She may be right. I suppose a good detective could take those two clues and land the whole gang in jail, but I’m blessed if I can see much chance of our doing it.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I QUALIFY

WE talked awhile longer. I don't believe anything we said will go in my story, but it all sticks in my mind and bothers me so I haven't slept yet to-night, and I may as well get it on paper. Maybe then I can get hold of myself again.

For a few minutes neither of us spoke, but sat looking out across the river, busy with our own thoughts. Dragonflies darted here and there over the water, hunting gnats, and in the still backwater now and then some small fish poked a venturesome nose above the water and sent tiny ripples circling from the spot.

It was peaceful as any river meadow back East, but somehow the peace did not reach within myself. I felt—well, as if something disturbing had happened. Nothing had, except that encounter with the sheriff over the dogs, and that was not worrying me now.

No, I may as well come out with it, since no one is going to read this. I felt worried and upset over the way Steve had looked at Ellie and the look she gave him back. All through our talk about the bandits, and our clues and all that, Steve's eyes and Ellie's eyes, looking at each other, would suddenly appear before me. They still do, for that matter.

So that's where my thoughts were all through that long silence, until I felt her glance coming down to me and resting speculatively upon my face. I didn't move. I almost held my breath for fear of seeming conscious of her gaze. She looked away, then back again, and this time I could not help it—I

looked up and met her eyes, clear and thoughtful, wholly unembarrassed that I had caught her studying me.

Immediately she explained. “I was just thinking, Kind Sir. You told me not to expect too much of you. Well, I don’t. You’re new to this country and you haven’t been out of college long enough to do much thinking for yourself. But I was just realizing how comfortable you are as a companion. You let me say whatever comes into my head. That’s something I never dared do before—talk at random, just to see how some of my crude ideas sound when put into words. As soon as they are out, I know how immature and untrue they are, some of them.”

“Not many,” I interposed.

“Well, enough of them to make me seem queer to any one but you, if I ever expressed myself. But if you’re shocked, you never let me feel that you are, and I do appreciate that. I’ve never had a friend before to whom I could say wild upsetting things without having all the moral platitudes thrown at me.” And then she smiled with an impish kind of humor, enjoying the thought of her rebellious moods.

I nearly spoiled everything by making a sentimental fool of myself right there, but thank the good Lord I had the wit to keep my mouth shut.

“And I do want to explain about the—why I sometimes—you see, I know the country and the people—I really don’t know very much else, Kind Sir, except what I’ve read. Dad has never let me get farther away from home than Helena. So I understand the psychology of these people. At least,” she qualified, with a smile I might call deprecating, “I feel that I do.”

“I’m sure of it, Pretty Maid,” I assisted—and caught myself lingering over the nickname, giving it a special significance I’d no business to give.

I’m afraid she felt it, for she blushed and looked away for a moment. But presently she went on elucidating her mental reactions.

“This Dry Ridge gang, for instance, bothers me a lot as a purely psychological problem. I seem to get their point of view sometimes, in spite of myself. I don’t mean that I approve or even condone their lawlessness. I’ve said I did, but it was more to shock you than anything else. Yet down inside of me I can’t help feeling sorry for them and—and understanding their deviltry. For one thing, they never have committed a revolting crime. They have shot and crippled two men, but they have never murdered when they robbed.”

“They should be grateful for your broad-minded defense of them,” I said dryly.

She frowned down at me. “Now that wasn’t necessary,” she retorted. “What I was going to say is that I have no fear of them, as a woman does fear men who are utterly outside the pale. I want to run them to earth, and I believe with the clues we have it can be done. I’m not as timid as most women, and if I were to meet any or all the gang in the hills, I should not be afraid of any personal harm. They might hold me as a hostage, however. It would be a very shrewd move on their part and if I were an outlaw, and the sheriff’s daughter came prowling near my hide-out, that is exactly what I should do—hold her and make terms that suited me.”

She must have seen in my face something of what was boiling in my mind, for she laughed and flicked me on the hand with a twig she had picked up.

“Nothing like that would happen, of course. I’m just trying to explain—maybe apologize for my natural feminine weaknesses. I don’t like to ride very far across the river alone. I need some one, Kind Sir, to give me that sense of security which we women lack within ourselves. Your masculine strength beside me this morning made me bold as forty lions, but honesty compels me to tell you I should not have gone one step by myself.”

Furiously I discovered myself trembling with an excitement absolutely unwarranted by her words. To hide it from her I laughed. “Thank the Lord I’m big and strong as an ox!” I exclaimed facetiously.

She took me seriously. “Yes. If you weren’t big and broad-shouldered and—and sort of capable, I couldn’t have felt safe over there with you. Of course, you’re green in lots of ways, but not so green as I thought you would be. You ride well and you have a nice way with the dogs. It’s really a great comfort to have you here, Kind Sir.”

For the first time I hated that sobriquet and wished she’d call me Walter. She would, if I were a Westerner. It’s that damned Eastern training, I suppose, that still makes an outsider of me. She had very sweetly managed to put me in my place, which was that of a glorified groom, as I understood it; one privileged to ride alongside and converse as an equal instead of three paces behind with my face pulled straight.

I had nothing to say, and she continued in that disconcertingly matter-of-fact way she sometimes has. “The best thing about you, I think, is your good sense. You don’t feel that you are expected to make love. I should hate you if

you did. It—it so cheapens a girl. It implies that she hasn't intelligence enough to be a companion.”

If she had thrown a glass of cold water in my face I should not have felt more completely squelched. I only hope I didn't show it. I said, “Exactly my sentiments, Pretty Maid,” and I did not linger over the name.

“I'm so glad,” she assured me with apparent sincerity. “It's a relief to know a man who can be just a good chum, without any silly compliments and—slush. I've tried to be friends with a good many, but they all turned out sentimental, except you.”

“Did Steve?” I could have bitten my tongue, but the words were out before I knew it.

I felt her stiffen. “Why Steve, in particular?” She turned upon me a look that was like a door slammed in my face.

“I—he struck me as having possibilities—”

“Why? Because he's handsome? So are you, for that matter.” Her tone brushed aside all manly beauty as a mere detail of no consequence whatever. “I never tried to make a chum of Steve Johnson, as it happens. I don't know how it would turn out; a great success, probably. Steve's the salt of the earth.”

I yielded to a savage impulse to strike back. Her salt-of-the-earth dismissal of him did not convince me for one minute. I pretended a meekness.

“Pretty Maid, chums are nothing, if not frank. Steve looked—kisses at you. And you looked—at him. Which is none of my business, of course, except that chums should be heart-whole and fancy free, to use a trite phrase. Otherwise,” I went on grimly, “they make poor companions. Who wants to ride

out in the moonlight, for instance, with a pal who is dreaming of the other fellow all the way? Or on Dry Ridge?"

That was blunt enough and brutal enough. But the girl had not spared my feelings, either. If I'm to be here three months, she's got to learn to take what she gives.

She didn't look at me—a bad sign—and her cheek and throat turned very pink, but she laughed as if what I had said merely amused her. "Kind Sir, I promise not to dream of any man, by moonlight or daylight or any other time, when we are together. Is that sufficient? I do love to ride in the moonlight, though. Quite often when the moon is full I saddle my horse and ride—guess where!" But she didn't wait for me to guess. "Down in the Big Bend, Kind Sir! You can't imagine how weird those sand dunes look at night."

In spite of myself, my shoulders gave a twitch. "Weird is the right word, I'm sure," I made dry comment.

"I never go very far," she sighed, "because there's never any one to go with me whom I'd want to have along. Chub has offered to go, but he'd just be a bodyguard and that would spoil the thrill. And—Dad would lock me up in the cellar if he caught me riding around with any of his cowboys —"

"He's quite right."

"But now you're available, so some night we'll sneak off and ride clear down to the very end. I've always wanted to, only I'm afraid of bobcats. *You* aren't afraid of bobcats, are you?"

Naturally, I said I was not. I never saw one, but I have never heard them called man-eating animals. Leaving the bobcats out of it, I still have no burning desire to ride to the tip of Big Bend at night, but I said it would be fine.

“Then we’ll go—when the moon is full and the air is soft and it seems a crime to shut one’s eyes against such unearthly beauty. We’ll ride and ride—and not talk. And I’ll forget that life is petty where it should be big with worth-while things; not cramped and cheapened by the little tin measuring stick of convention. I can imagine, at least for an hour or two, that I am no longer treading the path worn deep by millions before me.”

“Well, you don’t have to imagine that, Pretty Maid,” I told her. “Just be yourself, without any highfaluting ideas about being different from other people, and you’ll stand alone in the universe.”

She gave me a long stare full of suspicion. “Are you making fun of me?”

“Certainly not. Can’t you see that every high-spirited girl that ever lived—every boy, for that matter—gets the notion sooner or later that all the world is cheap and sordid and only she—or he—really understands the full meaning of life? Or sometimes I believe the idea is that life is a riddle which no one can possibly understand.

“I’ve gone through all that myself,” I lied. “That’s why your mental turmoils fail to shock me. I’ve known lots of girls the same way. Nice ones, with fine minds. One—” I plunged deeper “—one very especially nice. Even she thought she could make a much better job of creation than God had managed to do. Great girl, Genevieve—”

Knowing how she was watching me, I made my eyes as dreamy as possible, considering the mood I was in. After a proper interval, I sighed and returned to the subject. “Still, not one of them was in the least like you, except for their

little spells of psychological hysteria, when they sighed with sympathy for good-looking criminals—”

“Humph!” she snorted. “You forget, Kind Sir, that I haven’t the faintest idea of what the Dry Ridge gang looks like.”

“I know, I know,” I soothed; “but all the other girls—”

“Silly things, weren’t they?”

“Well, yes, they were. When all was said and done, what they really wanted was to be made love to and petted and pitied. A fellow grows frightfully bored with having to watch his cues and make a pretty speech whenever there’s an opening for one.” I was bound to make a good job of it. “One of the nicest, most unusual traits you have, Pretty Maid, is your letting a fellow off from making love all the while. So many girls expect it—”

“Did she?”

“She?”

“Genevieve. Did she demand pretty speeches all the while?” I felt malice in her smile. “I only wondered, because if she did she must have found you terribly unsatisfactory.”

I grinned. “If she were that kind, do you think I’d have found her especially nice?”

Once more I discovered her cheek and throat a shade pinker than usual, though her voice was serene, “No, I suppose not. You must excuse me. I had forgotten for the moment that you are not like other men.”

I looked at her. I wanted to know whether she really believed that. But there was no reading her face. “When you hear—when you know of my making pretty speeches to a girl, you may set me down as meaning every one of them,” I

said. “I’d have to love a girl before I could make love.” I don’t know why I had to blurt that out, but I did. It was a rather blunt way of serving notice, but she served it on me —“I’m not like Ray,” I finished, and felt like a brute.

“Oh, Ray! No girl takes Ray seriously.”

“That Johnson girl does,” I said, because I’ve thought so from the first.

“Then I’m sorry for her. Florence is too nice a girl—”

“Well, I’m beginning to think Ray is serious there, too,” I hastened to add, in common justice. “It’s the first time he hasn’t talked about his girl of the hour. To me that’s significant.”

A change came into her face and her voice. “That only makes it worse,” she said gravely. “Dad won’t let *me* be friends with Florence, and I doubt if even Ray can win him over—”

I was honestly shocked. “But she seems such a wonderful girl!” I protested. “Surely your father can’t have any real reason for cutting her off your list of friends. And Steve—well, the whole family, for that matter, impressed me as being very likeable. Certainly not—”

“You don’t know Dad. I can’t think of any reason why the Johnson family should be socially taboo in his eyes, unless it’s because they haven’t a lot of money. But they’re not exactly poor, either. They have a good ranch and a fine lot of horses—

“But that’s beside the point. He has forbidden me to go there or to invite Florence over here. And if she and Ray are in love with each other, there will be trouble when Dad finds it out. I didn’t realize he’s been spending his time over there.

I thought—there is a girl lives over beyond the Johnsons. Miller, the name is. Are you sure he hasn't been going to see Grace Miller?"

"Never heard the name," I declared. "I'm pretty sure it's Steve's sister Ray goes to see." And right there I had a sudden unpleasant thought. "Is Steve banned too?"

She caught her lip between her teeth. "Ray never has been particularly chummy with Steve Johnson," she evaded, very cleverly, too. "Dad uses Steve now and then as a deputy, and sometimes Fred. They are good neighbors and he accepts them as such. But I'm sure he would never permit Ray to chum with any of the family."

So there I had the whole story, and nothing she can say will make me believe anything else. She's bitter against the sheriff because he has come between her and Steve. I knew there was something. What surprises me is that she will stand for any interference, she's so full of rebellion against other restraints. But that's all talk, apparently. When her dad puts his foot down, one Ellison Whitcome minds her manners.

Soon after that we returned to the house, and after dinner I excused myself and came up here ostensibly to write letters. The whole thing has given me the blues, for some reason. It's none of my affairs, and I'm a fool for taking things so to heart. If she and Steve are in love with each other, and can't see their way clear, that's their problem. They certainly haven't asked me to make it mine, so why let it ride me?

And Ray is thoroughly competent to manage his own love affairs without calling on me for advice or assistance. I suppose the sheriff has ambitions for both his kids. Wants Ellie to make a fine political match, no doubt, with some one

who has lots of money and can help his father-in-law run the county.

Well, all's grist that comes to an author's mill, they say. I'd better let it go as story material. I certainly can't afford to let it get under my skin because that girl wants a handsome young devil she can't have. She was fair enough to tell me where I stand. A nice, safe, husky escort whose most valuable attributes are a pair of ears, a fairly level head and no feelings whatever.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I TALK WITH THE SHERIFF

HERE'S something that may make good character material some day when I want to give some big gun in politics an intimate, human touch.

The sheriff returned to-day with his little posse grouped around him and the dogs trailing listlessly at his horse's heels. I wish I were an artist. I'd like to paint a picture of them just as they looked riding up from the ferry. Dusty and grimy, worn with the chase through sun and wind, sunken-eyed for lack of sleep. Their mounts were gaunt and rough with dried sweat, and there was a somber look of defeat about them, extending even to the horses and dogs. Darned striking picture it would make: a Western Waterloo—something like that.

Even Ray had very little to say and paid no attention to his posture or his Gibson profile. I'll bet his socks didn't even match each other inside his boots. His big gray hat had a dejected droop and his gray silk shirt was stained with his sweat. It was plain to me the trip had not been at all what he had expected.

The sheriff swung down before the porch and gave the reins to Chub, who came over from the stables when he saw the group was riding to the house. "Give him a good rubdown," the sheriff ordered. "He sure needs it. Ray's horse too. Hello, folks, how's everybody?"

"More comfortable than you look," Ellie retorted whimsically and put up her cheek for the paternal kiss. "What, no prisoners?"

“No, damn ’em,” he growled, and stalked into the house where his Jenny Wren of a wife was hovering just inside the doorway. Ray had already disappeared, with a nod and a wave of the hand to me. Steve Johnson and the other two deputies remained upon their horses, as if they were waiting for orders. I imagine the sheriff is quite a stickler for discipline.

Steve gave me a nod and a twisted grin, and from the corner of his eye stole a swift glance at Ellie sitting sidewise on the porch railing. If there was a definite greeting between them, I did not see it; yet all the while he was rolling and lighting a cigarette, he was acutely conscious of her presence and not much else. I know, because that’s how I should have been in his place; and furthermore, he was too careful not to look her way.

And as for her, she sat there swinging a white-slipped foot and watching them all with that amused, faintly scornful air which I had come to know so well. I noticed that when her glance fell upon Steve in passing, her eyebrows came a fraction of an inch closer together and her mouth gave an impatient twitch at the corners. Why, I can’t imagine. That certainly was not her attitude when they met five days ago.

The sheriff came to the door and called to his men. “Say, you fellows, go turn your horses in the corral and come in and eat. The lady of the house says she’s got fried chicken and biscuits all ready for yuh.”

The two deputies kicked their horses into a trot before the words were out of their boss’s mouth, figuratively licking their chops as they rode off. Steve, however, slid straight in the saddle and put his free foot in the stirrup, as he took up the slack in his pack-horse’s rein.

“I’ll have to be going,” he said, and looked at Ellie from under his hatbrim.

“Sorry you can’t stay. Good-by, then,” she answered in a sweet society tone, her eyes full of a stormy defiance.

Steve gave her a long, intent look, flicked me with a swift inquiring glance, lifted his hat and rode off. On the surface that was all, but underneath—well, something died and something else was born in that moment of leave-taking. I don’t know how else to express it.

For a moment I watched the picture he made, riding away with his pack horse trotting behind him and shaking its bulky pack, little spurts of dust rising from under his horses’ hoofs. He did not look back. I turned and looked at Ellie and surprised her in the act of scrutinizing me. For a second we were staring eye to eye, then she turned her head away and spoke to the dogs, snapping her fingers and bringing them to her with all their melancholy dignity. As plain as words, she gave me my dismissal.

She can’t pass me up like that and get away with it. I stuck my hands deep in my pockets and strolled off whistling, “Oh, tell me, pretty maiden, are there any more at home like you?” I don’t know whether she noticed the tune and caught my meaning or not, but I rather suspect she did.

I went down to that shady spot by the river and flung myself down in the grass and glowered at the water. Things seemed to be in pretty much of a muddle just then and I had some idea of packing my grips and going back where I belonged. I couldn’t see that I was doing any good to myself or any one else by staying here, and the sooner I left the better.

It must have been more than an hour after that, and I was still pretty deep in the dumps, when I heard some one coming through the grass. It was only the sheriff, however. He looked very pink and fresh—as if he'd just had a bath—and he was in his shirt sleeves and had no collar on. An old straw hat was on his head and he carried a stout bamboo rod over his shoulder. I almost laughed out loud, he looked so like an overgrown farmer boy playing hooky from work.

Without seeing me under the tree, he sat down with a grunt on the bank and proceeded to unwind his line from the pole and bait the hook with a fat white grub. I watched him until he had flung the bait adroitly into a deep hole behind an uprooted tree, and then sauntered over and sat down beside him.

“Hello,” he mumbled around the cigar he was smoking. “This beats ridin’ hell outa the horses on Dry Ridge. Kinda fishing I like. You been out, lately?”

“Not since you left,” I told him. “Miss Whitcome has promised to show me a good stream over beyond Dry Ridge. I suppose it would be quite safe, now?”

He eyed me sidelong and made a sound between a grunt and a chuckle. “Safe as God’s pocket. If the Dry Ridge gang is hidin’ out over there, they’ve sure ducked into a gopher hole and pulled the hole in after ’em. We hunted every foot of the Ridge from the river to the mountains, and every coulee and draw we could ride into on a horse—and some we couldn’t. They ain’t there.”

“Didn’t you see any sign of them at all?”

“Not a damn’ sign.” He had a bite then, and the rod bent and wove to and fro. He swung it up with a jerk and landed a half-pound perch flapping on the grass. “That’s the stuff!” He

got up stiffly to unhook it and rebait the hook with another grub. “You can have your fake flies and your four-ounce rods. This suits me, m’ son.”

I laughed and waited until he was settled again, with the bait dangling in the same deep hole. “I hear they got away with a tremendous amount of gold coin. Is that right, Sheriff?”

He gave me a sharp glance. “How’d you hear that?”

I felt myself blushing. “Why—just hearsay. Gossip. It would be hard to say just where I did hear it.” Which was perfectly true, though for a slightly different reason than my words implied. I did not want Ellie involved, or the bank cashier’s wife to be put on the carpet.

“They did make a haul of close to eighty thousand in gold,” the sheriff admitted grudgingly, pulling up his bait to look at it. “But that wasn’t supposed to get out. Liable to be a run on the bank, if it’s noised around they lost that much the second time they was robbed.”

I nodded my understanding. “I wouldn’t repeat it to any one else. What impressed me is the weight of all that gold. They’d have to hide it somewhere, wouldn’t they? Surely they couldn’t carry it around in their pockets.”

The sheriff grunted. “Not so you could notice. The hell of it is to find out *where* they hid it. That’s a big country over there, Walter. Big and rough. Like lookin’ for a needle in a haystack.”

“Didn’t the dogs pick up any trail?”

He shook his head morosely. “Thought they had once or twice, but if they did they lost it right away. Them fellows are

too slick. They don't leave anything behind a dog could get the scent from."

He stopped to maneuver another bite, lost the fish and swore softly.

"Well, you've got a game worth while, overhauling that gang," I said, with an uncomfortable feeling that I was not helping him as much as I might, perhaps. But I couldn't give away Ellie's secrets. Not yet, anyway.

He gave me a long, queer look out of the corner of his eyes. "It's a game that's played two ways, son," he said finally. "I s'pose, since you've heard so much, you've heard too that my hide'll be hung on the fence next election, if I don't land that bunch. You can be hunky-dory for years, and the first thing goes wrong, your public turns on yuh like a pack of wolves." He sat humped forward, the rod between his knees, and joggled the bait temptingly up and down.

I studied him. It seemed to me that he had aged. New lines of worry showed in his big fleshy face,—lines that had not been there when I first saw him at the station. It must be hard to serve your public faithfully, term after term, and then be cursed because you fail just once. Ellie ought to tell him what we know—or let me do it.

I decided to give what help I could without betraying her.

"I hope you won't think a tenderfoot like me impertinent, Sheriff, but did it ever strike you that they may be town men after all, and just dash out to Dry Ridge as a blind, and circle back again to their nice respectable homes?"

"Hunh? What's that, son? Town men? What put that idea into your head?"

“Well, at least one of the gang must live in town. He’d have to, in order to keep them posted on affairs.”

“Oh. Yeah, I see what yuh mean, son. Sure, they’re kept posted! The bank’s got a couple of men workin’ right now on the town end. Yuh see, Walter,” he said, with a dismal kind of laugh, “I’m just the sheriff. I’m not a detective, and it ain’t my business to go still-huntin’ around for men there ain’t any warrant out for.

“My business is to go bring in men that’s wanted for some crime. When a warrant’s put in my hands, all hell can’t keep me from serving it. If I do say it, I’ve got the name of getting anybody I go after. I’m after the Dry Ridge gang hotfoot, but when yuh get right down to brass tacks, it’s really detective work that’s needed.

“Hell, there’s never been a one of ’em identified yet. There’s never been the finger of suspicion pointed at anybody in particular. If it’s town men doing all the dirty work and laying a false trail out as far as Dry Ridge, that’s something the gumshoe men will have to figure out.”

“Yes,” I agreed hastily; “I can see this makes a lot of extra work for you, sir.”

“Extra work is right!” snorted the sheriff. “My hands are full, just bringing in known criminals. I’ve got an under-sheriff and all the deputies the county’ll pay salaries to—and that’s two! I’ve got more deputized without salary, that get paid for special jobs. Steve Johnson’s one, Fred’s another, and in emergencies like this hunt I deputize men by the dozen to go out in posses.

“But there’s just four of us on the county payroll regular—and we’re kept on the jump most of the time. Now to-night I hit the train for Butte, to bring in a man that’s wanted for a

killing out in a sheep camp north of town. He's a bad actor and I won't turn the responsibility of him over to one of my men. Then there's warrants out for a couple of second-story men burglars—robbed a big minin' man's house up on the North Side. I think I know where they've holed up and I'm sending a couple of men to bring 'em in. And a bad-check artist to round up—

“Hell, I've lost more time chasn' my tail around over Dry Ridge, huntin' that gang, than their hides are worth! They're what my wife would call pick-up work, though, to be done in my spare time. Only I never have any spare time. And some folks think all a sheriff has to do is ride around and smoke two-bit cigars!”

He landed another fine perch just then and seemed to forget his worries for the time being. But when he had settled himself on the bank, I opened the subject again, because I had promised Ellie I'd try and find out just what her dad knew about the gang. I hated to pump him, but she argued that I could get ten times as much out of him as she could, which I could well believe.

So I asked him, “Doesn't it seem strange, Sheriff, that they could make this part of the country their headquarters and still never show themselves so that any one could identify them? How could that be possible?”

That perch had put him in a good humor again. He relighted his cigar, tossed in his hook and proceeded to give me his theory, just as if I had a right to ask for it.

“Well, there's several possible reasons for that, Walter. One is that they're men, as you say, that folks know as respectable citizens. But on top of that, I've had every rancher and every cowpuncher—every man that rides the range for any purpose

whatever, investigated—in a quiet way, uh course. They’re all accounted for and they all show a clean bill of health. Most of ’em are family men and there’s no mystery about how they make a livin’. So that ain’t the answer.”

“I’m glad to know that,” I said with sincerity. “I might have known you’d have gone into all that, though.”

“Yeah, that’s about the first thing I did.” He was justified in using a patronizing tone, I suppose. “Then, they may stay close to their hangout and never show up by daylight at all. That’s possible, uh course. It’s an all-fired big country, son, and there ain’t many people in it, considering the size of it. But nobody’s seen any strangers that can’t account for themselves, so I dunno.

“Then, they *might* live in town, the whole bunch. But if they do, they sure are smooth about gettin’ in and out without leavin’ any clue behind ’em. They rode horses the other night. That much we know, because they had ’em in back of the bank. We saw the tracks. Then there’s a man claims he saw three riders leave town, along after midnight. Might not have been them, but we’ve got it pretty well established they did ride out of town, goin’ toward Dry Ridge over there, like they always have done when they’re seen at all.”

“So you really haven’t much to go on, have you?” I felt guilty that I contributed nothing, but I’d have to talk with Ellie first.

“Not a damn thing that you can get your teeth into,” he admitted. “You needn’t go and tell that to the voters, Walter. Five posses reported in to the office in the last four days, and they might as well of set at home with their feet cocked up on tables, for all they found out.

“No, there’s just one chance, far as I see. They’re liable to get too bold some day and tip their hands. When they do—” His smile was slow and had a peculiar hardness, “—then it’ll be all day with the Dry Ridge gang, and I can settle down and take life easy in my old age.”

He flipped his cigar into the river and got up limberly for a man of his bulk, and began to wind his fishline around the pole. “I’ll take yuh out with me next time I go after ’em, son. Then you’ll see just what the sheriff of Porcupine County is up against!”

“Thanks,” I said, as heartily as I could. “I’d certainly like to be in at the finish, Sheriff. I’d like to see what real outlaws look like.”

The sheriff stooped and picked up his can of bait. “Chances are you’d find they was just like other folks to look at,” he grunted. “That’s been my experience.” And he ambled off with his two fish, looking—well, more like the sheriff’s hayseed brother than the high sheriff himself.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE SHADOW AGAIN

RAY, it seemed, was not altogether subdued by his rough trip. He wanted me to ride into town with him this evening and get “something cold and fizzy”, as he put it. A cold bath, a hot shave and resplendent raiment had completely restored him to his old manner, and only a peeling sunburn remained to show he had been out hunting outlaws for nearly a week.

“Got to see what the old town looks like,” he grinned, slapping me on the shoulder. “Never have been so long in the wilderness before. Seems a month, old chap. But it was great fun—or it would have been if we had caught our men.”

I smiled to myself at his assured manner and at the way he spoke of catching “our men.” To see Ray really enthusiastic over something that didn’t wear petticoats was a novelty. What astonished me now was that he had not already gone off to see his girl. That he didn’t mention her name proves to me that he has really changed in the past couple of weeks. Always before his girls have been his favorite topic of conversation.

This may turn out to be of no importance whatever, but as a variant in a young man’s character, I’m making a note of it just in case of future developments. And I think, too, it’s a good plan to write down at night my impressions of what happens. I seem to find a good many things of interest here, and it’s best to get them on paper while I’m still in the mood of the day. The five days while the posse was out have been omitted. I’m not likely to forget them, and I see no reason why I should preserve a record of them here. What we said

and what we did are of interest only to myself personally and not to Walter Tenney, the soon-to-be author.

I told Ray of course I'd go, and looked around in all the places where Ellie was likely to be, thinking maybe she'd like to make one of the party. She wasn't to be found, and I suggested waiting until after dinner. But Ray said he knew a swell Dutch restaurant in town where he hadn't taken me yet, and we'd eat there and maybe take in a show and knock around town awhile afterwards.

I did not tell him that Ellie and I had more than once eaten at that Dutch restaurant, nor that we had seen every show in town and were waiting for the bi-weekly change of bills. Ray has as little tact as any man I know, and in the mistaken idea that he is being funny, he will blurt out things to embarrass one. I certainly don't want him pawing over my friendship with his sister. He's not the type that would understand a platonic friendship such as ours.

As it turned out, it's just as well she didn't go with us. The reason for that will appear in proper sequence, since I am writing all my notes in narrative form.

All the way in to town Ray was busy telling me in great detail all about the trip. There might be some good story material there, except for the fact that he exaggerates everything so I could not be sure any of the stuff was authentic.

For instance, he said his horse had slipped with him on a chalk hill and had fallen about thirty feet straight down (I suppose it was really ten feet or less). He was caught under the horse, he said, and only for Steve Johnson, he might have been killed. Steve had slid down the cliff and helped him out from under, and had got the horse back up on the trail.

“Great chap, Steve,” he paid casual tribute. “Make a dandy brother-in-law.” And he got out his pipe and filled it as we rode along, though I don’t know a more tiresome job than handling the thing on horseback.

His remark hurt. All the more, because the past few days had almost convinced me I was wrong about Steve and Ellie.

“Think there’s much chance?” I asked, trying to make the question sound indifferent.

Ray eyed me for a minute. “How the devil can I tell—yet?” he demanded. “If I were sure—but there are times when a fellow simply can’t ask.” He made a great fuss over lighting up, then scowled ahead at the trail. It was a relief to me that he suddenly lost his talkative mood.

So there is something between Steve and Ellie. That’s what Ray meant. He isn’t the kind to be uncertain over his own standing with a girl, or to hesitate to ask. He couldn’t have meant himself and Florence. Well, she hasn’t fooled me any of the time. And I must admit she has been fair with me and warned me off from any sentimental overtures. She’s straight, that girl. She wouldn’t lead a man on just for the fun of throwing him down. She’s so straight it’s somehow making trouble between her and Steve—not that I shall try to take advantage of that, or that it would do me any good if I did. If I’m hurt, it won’t be any one’s fault but my own. I certainly can’t blame her—she served notice, all right.

But that doesn’t belong in my notes. I’m no vivisectionist. I don’t propose to impale my own heart on a pin—Hell, there’s a regular Laura Jean Libbey sentence for you! A little more and I’ll be writing straight drivel.

Well, we ate at the Dutch restaurant, a cool, dusky, tiled place, haunted for me with Ellie’s whimsical gaiety so I

couldn't enjoy the meal. Ray hauled out that pipe again and sat smoking and talking until I wanted to hit him in the jaw. Vanderhausen's belongs to Ellie and me. We have our own special table back in a corner under an electric fan, where I like to watch her hair blow while we talk. Makes it seem alive....

Anyway, I thought I never would pry Ray loose from there. Then he wanted to go to a show, and I sat through a slushy melodrama that Ellie and I had turned into a comedy for our own amusement, laughing where we were expected to shed tears. It was awful, sitting through it with Ray, who thought it was great.

After the show, Ray wanted to play a game of billiards. We walked down a block, turned into a street given over to saloons and pool halls and cheap boarding houses, and strolled up that, Ray having in mind a certain flashily magnificent beer hall farther along.

We were just passing one almost as large when the thing happened. The place was one of those with plate-glass doors and an office enclosure adjoining the vestibule decorated with palms. The office window was frosted, like that window in the bank, and as we walked past, I glanced at it mechanically, as one does in passing along the street.

This may sound fishy in a story, and it will be up to me to make the thing convincing if I ever use the incident. But the fact remains that there was that same profile silhouetted on the glass, as distinct as I had seen it on the bank window the night of the robbery.

I stopped in my tracks and stared. Ray took another step, then turned back and caught me by the shoulder, bringing me out of my trance.

“What’s the matter, Walt?” he laughed. “Want a drink all of a sudden?”

“Darn right!” I jerked out, and dashed in through those swinging doors as if the devil was right at my heels. In the vestibule Ray grabbed me again, real alarm in his voice this time. I suppose I did act crazy, tearing inside like that. So I stopped and pulled myself together, and asked Ray if he couldn’t take a joke.

While he still eyed me doubtfully, I sauntered up to the bar, pulling a letter from my pocket as I went. Ray was known there, fortunately. The bartender nodded and smiled at us both and left a customer to serve us when we came up.

“Mind if I step into the office and address this?” I asked him casually.

“Sure, sure!” he grinned, and nodded again, tilting his head toward the office. “Help yourself.” Any one with the sheriff’s son was all right in his eyes, evidently. Moreover, that office was nothing more than a semi-public writing room, with a desk and two or three chairs. I suppose many a private business deal is closed in saloons, and a place is provided for such things.

This one was built in behind the bar, with the door opening just around the corner. Beyond that were card tables, and pool tables in the far end, with reading tables next the street windows, potted rubber plants setting off that space, which had a red carpet and a few red plush chairs. They do themselves proud in some of these Porcupine saloons, I’ve noticed.

I didn’t see all this at first. I whipped around the end of the bar and into that office as if it were a matter of life and death that I should address that old envelope within the next

minute. I stared pop-eyed around the room, scarcely able to believe that the office was empty. The desk had lately been used, for I tried a pen lying there and found the ink was wet. My man with the big hat and the profile was gone.

To rush right out again would be to brand myself a lunatic in the eyes of more than Ray, so I leaned an elbow on the desk and studied what I ought to do. The man was in the saloon, I was sure of that. No one had passed us in the vestibule, and he would not be likely to go out the back door, wherever that was. When I had plunged into the vestibule, he was still there at the desk, bent over it writing something, the desk light throwing a perfect shadow on the window.

He must have left the office during that moment while I paused at the bar—it was a wonder I hadn't met him face to face as I went in! We had just missed each other, and I still don't see how I failed to see him. Then it struck me that he might leave the saloon while I was in the office, so I hurried out again.

Ray was coming after me, a highball in either hand. I hadn't been gone more than a couple of minutes, but he acted as if I ought to be reported to the police as having mysteriously disappeared. Ray's a pest when he does pull his interest away from himself.

“Are you crazy, Walter, or just plain foolish?” he demanded, whirling me around to the end of the bar. “*You* didn't want to address any letter.” He pulled the envelope from my fingers and looked at it with lifted eyebrows. “Walter M. Tenney, Porcupine, Mont., Care of Big Bend Ranch,” he read, and gave it back to me. I slid it into my pocket and gave my attention to the highball.

“What’s up, old man?” he persisted. “You might let a fellow in on it. You’re acting blamed mysterious, do you know that?”

So I pulled his head down close—and since this is not for publication, I’ll put on record the explanation I gave. I whispered, “Don’t let the sheriff get wise to this—but I had a bite where I couldn’t scratch in public!”

“You go to the devil,” Ray growled, considerably let down, as I intended he should be, and turned his back.

I don’t think he more than half believed me, and yet what else could he think? The way I’d dashed off—well, anyway, it shut him up, and that’s the main point.

I was tempted to tell him the whole thing, but I had promised Ellie I’d keep our clues a secret. I paid for the drinks, but that didn’t mollify him and he stuck up his chin and walked off. Just as well, I thought, for it left me free to make my search of the place.

I sauntered over among the card tables, trying not to stare at the players as I passed, yet making it my business to have a look at every man’s profile. Several times I paused to look again, almost ready to swear I’d found my man. But I couldn’t be sure, seeing him with his hat off or with other features to bother me. I always went on, shaking my head mentally over the job I had given myself.

Ray had gone sulking outside, but I couldn’t make up my mind to leave until I had seen every man in the place, so I continued my prow. I’m glad I did, though it didn’t help my search any, for I ran into Dade McArthur and Steve and Fred Johnson over in a far corner playing pool, and when I told them Ray was just outside, Steve went and got him, and we stuck together the rest of the evening.

I'm afraid I was not very good company, however. That shadow was in my mind all the while and I kept staring at every man who turned his face sidewise to me.

Right here I want to record the fact that it's amazing how many profiles look alike. Let the nose and chin be of the same general type and it's darned hard to say offhand just which one would make a certain silhouette.

Why, I even got a side view of myself in a couple of mirrors in the corner, and with my hat on I could easily have thought I was the fellow I was looking for. There was the same nose almost—It startled me so I actually turned my head to look at the man who made the reflection, and then discovered it was myself.

So then I decided I'd had about all the highballs and all the shadow searching I needed for one night, and dragged Ray off home. We all rode out together to where this Big Bend trail turns off. Ray and the boys had a great time, talking and laughing about people they know. That let me out, and I've been thinking about that shadow until I'm woozy.

I'll tell Ellie first thing in the morning, if I get a chance to talk to her alone, and see what she thinks of it. She'll call it a hot clue, I suppose. Anyway, it proves that at least one of the gang is in Porcupine right now. By Jove, it would be great if Ellie and I could run him to earth!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

WE SHOP FOR A SHADOW

THERE'S no fooling Ellie. I purposely refrained from hinting anything when I met her on the porch this morning, and all through breakfast I gave my attention to her mother, who happened to be in a particularly chirpy mood. Yet when we rose from the table, Ellie twitched my sleeve and beckoned with a tilt of her head which in another girl might look flip, but is graceful and flattering when she does it.

"You're elected to help feed the dogs," was the reason she gave. But when we were well on our way down the path her keen discernment manifested itself.

"Well, out with it, Kind Sir," she unexpectedly commanded. "You've been fairly bursting with information all morning. I was really afraid to have you try to bottle it up any longer, for fear you might blurt it out before every one. What's the news?"

She sat down on a rock just outside the kennel yard and tossed two dog biscuits one after the other over the stout wire netting. I sat down beside her and watched the dogs catch the biscuits in their mouths and lie down to gnaw them like bones.

"I don't see how you knew," I said, feeling rather disgruntled at such perspicacity. "I know I'm rather ingenuous, but I really didn't suspect that I am so transparent as all that."

"Not to others, perhaps. To me you are. It's the Dry Ridge gang, isn't it? What happened?"

“Nothing, only I saw that shadow again. On a saloon window.” And without setting it all down here, I’ll simply say I told her all about it.

She finished feeding the dogs, and then led the way down to that shady nook by the river; only it was not shady at the time, for the morning sun shone in on the grass. But we sat there, anyway. Not until we were comfortably settled did she open her lips.

“So he’s still in town!” was her first comment. “Well!” She looked away to Dry Ridge, the sun lighting her eyes. “Are you *sure* it was the same man?”

“I’d stake everything I have in the world it was the same shadow,” I declared. “Certainly the same man must have made it. Chance brought him between the window and the light, just as he was in the bank. He was bending over the desk, and he wore the same hat; a wide straight brim, tilted down over his nose. Like this, as nearly as I can make my hat resemble his.”

I was wearing an old Panama which is light and cool for hot days, and I straightened out the brim and pulled it down over my eyebrows, turning my face away so that she could get the profile effect. She took her time about studying it, I’ll say that.

“Hm-m-m,” she considered, her head tilted on one side like a bird. “Very sinister, I must say. Live up to that expression and you’d make a good outlaw yourself, Kind Sir. I’m aghast at the possibilities you are revealing.”

She loves to devil a fellow, I’ve discovered. I flipped the curl back into my hatbrim, ran my fingers through my hair and set the hat back at its customary angle, I could have boxed her ears for the way she was laughing at me, but I

merely sat with my hands clasped around my knees, and smoked and said nothing. So presently she sobered and came back to our problem, as I knew she would if I left her alone.

“And you couldn’t pick him out of the crowd in the saloon—with a hat like that?”

“No. He may have left while I was in the office. I think now that’s about what happened. Aside from the hat, there were a dozen men with the same type features, who would show about the same profile. I couldn’t very well ask them all to kindly pass between a light and the wall, so that I could see what their shadow looked like, could I?”

“Ooh, what a temper, so early in the day! No, of course you couldn’t. But the hat as you describe it, seems rather distinctive. I’ve seen shepherders wear straight-brimmed hats, but they’re usually shaggy and need haircuts. How about the back of his neck, Kind Sir? Was his hair down to his collar, or couldn’t you tell?”

“He had a very clean-cut look, so far as I could tell. Straight features, chin didn’t slide back into his collar or stick out front—no hump or hook in his nose, though it was a good strong-looking beak, at that. No thick lips—”

“Just an ordinary, good-looking guy like yourself.”

I gave her a quick look, suspicious for a minute that her powers of divination extended to my getting excited for a minute over my own face reflected in a mirror. But she was pulling up grass blades beside her and studying them absently while she pondered.

“He was in town last night and he will probably be there to-day. He must feel very secure, to show himself in a place like the Klondyke. Well, for that matter, there’s no reason why he shouldn’t. I wonder—”

She stripped three blades of grass in complete silence, then abruptly she shook the bits from her dress and sprang up.

“Kind Sir, we’re going to town and see if we can’t find that man who wears a high-crowned hat with a straight brim. That doesn’t sound much like a bank clerk, does it? They are very dressy as a rule. He’s probably one of the real gang. Come on—I’ll have Chub hitch King William to the stanhope and we’ll drive, for a change. That will give us a chance to wear civilized clothes.”

She’s a precipitate young woman, once she makes up her mind to do a thing. Before I could formulate a convincing argument against the trip—not that I tried very hard—we were seated in a smart, rubber-tired stanhope with basket panels at the side, behind a high-stepping black horse in a tan-colored harness to match, I suppose, the reed panels just mentioned.

You can bet I was glad I had togged myself out in the conventional blue coat, white trousers and shoes, and had, on my carefully brushed head, my best Panama. I saw Ellie look me over from the corner of her eye as I got in, but she made no comment. Nor did I. If she thought I was going to lose my breath over her Fifth Avenue turnout, she was badly disappointed. That girl may have me bound to her chariot wheels but that’s no reason why she should know it. If our very platonic friendship goes on the rocks, it won’t be because I can’t take punishment.

If I do say it, we were a pretty nifty-looking couple, with the sheriff’s daughter looking eligible to any fashionable place I can think of. I wondered if she ever considered the kind of clothes a rancher’s wife wears, and how she’ll like riding to town on the spring seat of a Democrat wagon—

whatever the deuce they are. But I guess if she marries Steve she'll be game to live his kind of life, and ride to town in a hayrack, if necessary, holding her head just as high as she does now. She's that kind of a girl.

Once in town she held King William down to a walk and told me to watch for that hat among the people on the street. If I spotted the hat I could see about the profile later. It was still rather early for town people to be out, but we made a pretty thorough job of it, just the same.

I saw Ellie's reason, now, for her choice of conveyance. Without being too conspicuous for good taste, that turnout was noticeable, and passers-by wanted a second glance; which gave me time to take a good look at every man who could by any possibility fit the description. More than that, she could drive past the saloons and on streets where she would not want to walk. Oh, I saw what a clever idea it was, even if I did feel somewhat like a goldfish in a glass bowl, sitting up there dressed to kill.

We drove all through the business section, and I didn't see the man I wanted.

"It's too early," I suggested at last. "It's too hot for men to hang around outside in the forenoon. If it were along late in the afternoon, Pretty Maid, he might be loafing on some shady corner. As it is, I'm afraid we're wasting our time. He's probably asleep in one of these lodging houses, but I can't quite see my way clear to taking a census of profiles and hats. What do you think?"

"Well," she sighed, turning down a side street to avoid a street car which King William both hated and feared, "I've heard that criminals sleep all day and prowl at night. We might kill a little time by driving down to the falls, but

you've seen them. How would it be if we shopped for awhile? We haven't tried the stores yet."

I said that sounded all right, but what should we buy? She replied that would depend upon what sort of store we were investigating in, and we'd stable King William first, and plan our campaign on our way back to Main Street. Which we did.

This afternoon should be written up by a master pen, for never, I am sure, will I ever spend another like it. Ellie decided that I should look at profiles more particularly, because our man might be wearing a different hat. Men did, she said, and gave mine a critical glance. Her part was to study the shop windows while I was studying a man's face as unobtrusively as possible.

I am sure my eyeballs will ache for some time, they are so unaccustomed to being rolled in their sockets as I was forced to roll them to-day. Covert glances sound very well in a sentence, and occasionally I have used them to good purpose in actual practice. But to make a day's job of looking out of the corners of one's eyes is more of an ordeal than one would believe.

We would loiter along, apparently indifferent to our surroundings—though I was supposed to keep my eagle eye on all men without beards as they passed—until we reached a shady spot where men were lounging against some wall. Then we would slow down still more, Ellie gazing raptly into the store window nearest, while I scrutinized the men.

At noon I persuaded her to knock off while we retreated to our Dutch restaurant for refreshments. The curse of our quest dogged us even there. Having started eyeing men, I could not stop, and Ellie was nervous as a witch from trying to read success or failure from the expression on my face, and her

eyes gradually acquired the haunted look of a drunkard's wife who expects any moment to dodge her husband's fist.

We had signals. If I wanted time for a more careful examination of a suspect's features, I was to drop my match case, whereupon she would very naturally stop and wait while I recovered it. I have no idea how many times I dropped that match safe on the pavements of Porcupine, and since it happens to be sterling silver, it is now dented beyond all hope of straightening.

Once, I know, we were opposite a little hole-in-the-wall shoe-repairing place. Ellie went in, while I loitered outside, ostensibly waiting for her. The man I suspected went into a saloon and I followed. When I finally emerged and went back after Ellie, she had shoestrings wrapped in a piece of old newspaper. Another time, a hardware store claimed her while I watched a man mount a bony saddle horse at the curb. She came out with carpet tacks, which I put in my pocket along with the shoelaces.

For my part I bought cigars, matches, cigarettes and chewing tobacco before the day was done. The pockets of my best blue sack coat bulged until my arms could not hang straight down, but I must crook my elbows like a hen hovering chicks. I suggested that one of us purchase a suitcase next, and Ellie's laughter had a note of hysteria. But she did sail majestically into a harness shop soon after and come out with a beaded buckskin bag capable of holding nearly a peck of small articles. Which it presently did.

By four o'clock that afternoon, we had canvassed all the stores, including one plumbing shop, and Ellie was growing shrewish. We had trailed one high-crowned, straight-brimmed hat for more than three blocks before he turned and

we could see his face. He had a great walrus mustache which we both saw would bulge out forward like a sausage under his nose and be his most prominent feature in a profile silhouette.

My hand on Ellie's arm slowed and halted her on the corner of the little back street where our quarry had led us. "That settles it," I told her firmly. "There's the Fashion Stables, over in that next block, where the red horse is prancing on the roof. We are going to load this plunder in the rig and go home, and end this nonsense. If anything more is said about men's profiles, I'll swear I never saw a man's shadow in my life."

She stood there and looked at me, and all at once she began to laugh. "Oh, if your f-friends—back East—could *see* you!" she gasped in explanation, when I was just about at that point where I would drop all my packages in a heap on the sidewalk and give the girl a good shaking.

Her own arms were so full she could scarcely hold her ruffled parasol over her head, but she managed somehow to free one finger long enough to point. "Kind Sir, what is that dripping?"

As best I could, I craned over my load to see. "I'm not sure, but I think it's the sauerkraut," I told her shortly. This was not an exaggeration on my part. Two or three hours back she had come out of a butcher shop with a carton of bulk sauerkraut, and I had put it in the bottom of the beaded buckskin bag. Above it an alarm clock bulged and ticked quite audibly. On top of that I don't know what all was stuffed into the bag. I know it was confoundedly heavy, with odd-shaped protuberances here and there.

We turned and started toward the livery stable, and while I can see now that it was funny, I had no sympathy with Ellie's spasms of mirth at the time.

One thing remains to be jotted down before I drag my weary frame to bed!

At the stable we met Ray, just ready to mount a magnificent sorrel horse of the peculiar bright shade that shines like burnished copper in the sun, and silky mane and tail that crinkled as if it had been done with a woman's crimping irons. Ellie's laughter froze to an amazed silence before she almost pounced upon her brother.

"Ray Whitcome, what are you doing with that horse?"

I had never heard her use a tone like that before. Peremptory, yet not loud at all—I can't think of the word I want to describe it, but it halted even Ray in his tracks. He took his foot out of the stirrup and turned, on the defensive—Ray, who never bothered to defend himself or his actions.

"I'm taking him home, if you want to know. Dad was here a few minutes ago and he bought him for me."

"Dad *bought* him for you?" Ellie's face was white by then.

"Why, sure! Anything wrong with that?" And Ray proceeded to mount and ride away, the sorrel dancing along like a circus horse, when the band begins playing. But he was gentle for all his prancing. One could see that he was merely too full of life to make his feet behave. "See you later," Ray called over his shoulder as he went.

Ellie's face was calm but her eyes frightened me a little. She didn't speak until we had crossed the second bridge on the way home, and then she drew a long breath and looked at me.

“You say Dad doesn’t play favorites. Well, a month ago I almost went down on my knees to him, begging him to let me buy that horse. That, Kind Sir, is Golden West, a Kentucky-bred gelding with a bluegrass pedigree I just wish you could see. His owner died and the widow is selling everything here, wanting to leave this country. Golden West she’s found it hard to part with, but last month she decided to sell him, and asked three hundred and fifty dollars. At the price he’s a bargain, if one can afford so fine a horse.

“I told her I wanted him, and she said she’d hold him for me until I could see Dad. And Dad nearly took the roof off the house. He said he couldn’t afford it, and wouldn’t if he could, and he called me extravagant and said I’d drive a man to the poorhouse—And I saw where maybe he was right. That *is* a stiff price to pay for a horse just to ride around, I admit.

“And then the widow changed her mind and said she wouldn’t sell Golden West for less than five hundred dollars. She’d ship him back home to Kentucky first. And it began to look as though he wasn’t going to be sold. And now—you see who gets him!”

I did my best to comfort her, but after all the fact stands out like a signpost and words can’t help very much. One would suppose the sheriff would realize how absolutely unfair he’s been, and how she must feel about it, but I’m beginning to see that my big, busy and sometimes jovial host does not greatly concern himself with what his family is going to think about his doings. I’m probably wrong. I’m too dead tired to think straight about anything, except that I can’t bear to see my little pal hurt as she is to-night over that sorrel horse.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE SHERIFF SAYS NO

I SEEM to be having enough story material thrown my way to write a highly sensational two-volume novel, if I had the bad taste to use it just as it unfolds before my eyes—yes, and ears. But I couldn't very well do that without completely disguising all the circumstances, so I'll just stow it away as character stuff and some day use the essence without the form.

This morning I arose to a strained atmosphere in the house, which I naturally attributed to Ellie's resentment over the horse Golden West. But it wasn't altogether that, as I shortly discovered quite by accident. It was what probably amounted to the first clash of wills that had ever occurred between Ray and his father.

As I see it, Ray has been pampered all his life and had everything he wanted, until it never occurred to him that his dad would deny him anything. He never had struck that hard-rock streak of stubbornness in the sheriff which Ellie has had to cope with all her life. And his mother, I've discovered, has mighty little influence in this home. She's just the twittery Jenny Wren, sweet and motherly and lovable, but she wouldn't dream of standing up to the sheriff and fighting for her rights or her children's.

The sheriff is literally the master of his house. I think too his official position has spoiled him and made him more arrogant than he might otherwise have been. Get behind that affable good nature of his and you run up against the despot whose word is law—and he makes the law.

(I hope I'm not criticizing my host too much. Personally I like him when he is his genial self. But since I am studying the people and the country around me, I think I am justified in being frank in setting down my opinions and observations. Otherwise this daily record would not be worth the effort of writing it.)

Well, I was standing on the porch gazing at Dry Ridge and thinking about yesterday's abortive attempt to find my outlaw, when I became aware that the sheriff was at home and was just inside the living room talking to some one in a harsh, grating, dominating tone, such as I can imagine him employing with refractory prisoners.

"Don't let me hear another word on that subject! I've told yuh what's what, and I ain't goin' to tell yuh again. Why, damn yuh" (he used a stronger expletive than that) "I'd turn yuh out and let yuh rustle for yourself if you was crazy enough to go ahead with it. As for—"

I turned so short my heel scraped the paint on the porch floor. I thought he was speaking to Ellie, and sheriff or no sheriff, I was going to tell him what I thought of him. But to my astonishment it was Ray's voice that answered him—Ray surprised, puzzled and highly indignant that his dad would refuse him what he wanted.

"But Dad, what's biting you? You expect me to marry and settle down *some time*, don't you? You've always said you expected me to have this ranch and live on it and follow in your footsteps when you get too old to work. You've always talked about how I'd have to pick out the right kind of a wife —"

"Yeah, and by so-and-so, I'm goin' to see that yuh do!"

“But Florence *is* the right kind, Dad, and you know it. Her folks live right here and you know all about them. You knew her mother. Florence is a dandy housekeeper and a fine musician and a well-read girl—just the ideal wife for me if I’m going to live here on the ranch—”

“You’ll never set foot on this ranch again if you let that girl rope you in to marryin’ her!”

“Rope me in! Good Lord, Dad, I’ve been begging her on my knees! Ever since I came home I’ve been trying to get her to say yes, but she never did until last night.” He gave the sudden, shy laugh I knew so well, the laugh that always made me give in to him. “It must have been Golden West that did the business. I promised her she could ride him, so she finally said yes.”

The sheriff swore terribly. “If I thought that was it, I’d shoot the damn’ horse down in his tracks!”

That made Ray furious. “Well, I’m going to marry her, and you can keep your damned ranch and your damned money, if you’re such a tightwad. I’ll borrow five thousand dollars from some one else, and make a home for my wife, and work and pay it back. I don’t ask any help from you.”

“Oh, hell!” exclaimed the sheriff, his rage unexpectedly collapsing under the weight of his love for his son. “It ain’t the damn’ money, and you know it. But I’d rather see you laying *dead* than married to that girl!”

In the blank silence that followed, I came to myself and stepped off the porch, embarrassed at being an eavesdropper. Still, these people are making me so like one of the family that I can’t help feeling the same interest in Ray’s affairs that I would if he were my brother. It has always been that way since we roomed together in our freshman year, I suppose

because I'd never had any one but Uncle John—who certainly never made himself seem any closer to me than the money he paid over on the first of every month.

I'd always craved a brother, and so I adopted Ray as one. I've been sort of waiting to see if I couldn't adopt the sheriff, too, in my own secret mind, as a sort of father. But I guess not; at least, not until I have gone in back of that twinkle in his eyes and found out what's there. I've decided one thing, however. That twinkle is mostly a matter of wrinkles. His eyelids sort of pinch up at the corners, as if he were all the while just going to laugh. Also his bluff good nature, I'm beginning to suspect, is more or less a political manner; what he gives his constituents. In the bosom of his family he can be a tartar, just as Ellie has hinted to me. And if this is base treachery on my part, at least it is impersonal, simply a matter of analyzing an interesting character.

They brought sullen faces to the breakfast table, both of them. In fact, I could see all the makings of a real family row at that table. Ellie had the remote look of a brooding goddess temporarily withdrawn from earthly affairs. In other words, I guessed she was still secretly lamenting Golden West and at the same time trying to devise some new scheme of detecting our outlaw. Mother Whitcome sent fluttering glances from one to the other, her eyes terribly anxious. A thoroughly uncomfortable meal.

After breakfast Ray asked me to take a ride with him, and somehow I felt what was coming. Though I must say I did not expect to have it hurled at me before we were outside the gate.

“Walter, will you lend me five thousand dollars and take my note?” Just like that. No prelude, no excuse, which was

very unlike Ray.

“You bet I will. Ten thousand, if you want it,” I replied promptly. I’ve got more than I need, and I’ll be earning a lot more when I publish a book and my royalties start coming in, so I’d be willing to make Ray a wedding present of the money, if I thought he’d accept it. He’s always borrowing from me, but he’s very touchy about paying it back.

“Thanks, old chap. So that’s all right.” And then he dove straight into his real worry. “Walter, I’m going to get married, and Dad’s gone on the rampage—”

“I was on the porch,” I told him. “I heard part of it. Did he tell you his reason?”

“Reason!” Ray exploded. “He hasn’t any reason and he knows it. Between you and me, I think he’s about half batty because he can’t catch the Dry Ridge gang, and he knows his goose will be cooked next election unless he does. That’s in November, you know. He certainly has been queer lately—”

“He bought you that horse.”

Ray looked down and stroked the crimply mane. “Yes, and after the way he talked this morning, I wish to thunder he hadn’t. I know Florence won’t get on his back when she knows how Dad’s pawing up the earth over our marriage, so I thought maybe—” He looked at me, not quite liking to ask.

“I’ll give you five hundred dollars for him, right now,” I said quickly, while it was in his mind to let the horse go. And I pulled out my wallet, thanking my stars I’d ducked into the bank yesterday and cashed a draft Uncle John had sent me. “You can give me a bill of sale later, Ray.”

I don’t know what the horses thought about our swapping saddles right there in the road, but that’s what we did. Ray

was grinning, more like his old self before we were through.

“I’ll just hand this money back to the old man,” he said, when we were mounted again. “Now I can tell Florence we won’t take any favors—I’m going to buy a ring and take it over to her. Two rings, because I’ll get married right away, now, just to show Dad I’m my own boss.”

We rode along after that more calmly, and Ray opened up and told me what was on his mind.

“I can’t see what’s got into Dad all of a sudden,” was the way he began. “He never acted this way before, even when I got all het up over a waitress, when I was about eighteen, and thought I wanted to marry her. Dad just laughed and kidded me out of it.”

“Your Florence seems a mighty sweet girl, Ray,” I told him.

“You’re darned right, she is. Florence is different from other girls, Walter. I’ve fooled around with girls since I was out of knee breeches—but she’s the only one I ever really believed I could settle down with and be contented. Mother likes her. She’s known Florence all her life, almost, and she says she never heard a whisper of gossip against her.

“She can’t see why Dad’s taken this attitude, unless it’s just some mental twist he’s got. She says he has been working himself to death, these last two or three years; on the go all the while and never giving himself a rest.

“Take on this trip: I never saw any one hit the pace he did. Seemed like the rest of us just tagged along. It was Dad took the lead, always. He was the first one up in the morning and the last one to crawl into his blankets at night. He acted as if his very life depended on rounding up that gang.”

“Yes,” I said, “he told me his goose is cooked, unless he catches them.”

“Well, maybe I just struck him at the wrong time,” he tried to cheer himself. “When he’s had time to think it over, and sees I mean business this time, he’ll change his tune. And even if he doesn’t, it won’t stop me. I know where there’s a nice little ranch a few miles up the river that I can get for almost nothing. It’s got lots of hay land. I can get some cattle on shares and have a nice start in five years or so.”

It certainly sounded strange to hear Ray talk about hay crops and winter-feeding cattle, and so on. But he was in earnest, all right, and I saw that he does know all about ranching; a good deal more than I ever suspected. He’ll settle down, I do believe, and make a real rancher. And I’m glad. I’ve been more or less worried about his future—since he has consistently declined to consider it seriously himself.

He got his rings and I arranged at the bank for the ten thousand. I knew he’d need all of that to make a real go of a ranch proposition. Ray was stepping on air, with that diamond solitaire and the gold band in his pocket and his capital going to be available within ten days. I wasn’t feeling so blue myself, with Golden West dancing along under me and the thought of how pleased Ellie would be. I’ll manage somehow to let her have him without putting her under an embarrassing obligation to me. Much as I’d like to, I’m hardly privileged to make her a present of a five-hundred-dollar horse. But I’ll manage that somehow.

On the way home I was not at all surprised when Ray pulled up at the fork of the road and observed rather sheepishly that he thought he might as well ride on over to Johnson’s, if I didn’t mind. While we sat there on our horses

talking, the sheriff came galloping up to us, coming from the ranch. I think Ray would just as soon have avoided the meeting, but we didn't see him until he was quite close, and Ray wouldn't turn tail then and ride off. I don't blame him. I wouldn't have done it myself.

The sheriff looked in an ugly humor, as if he had received bad news, or was still angry over Ray's affairs. The twinkle was gone from his eyes and he had that set, hard look which a man with fleshy jaws sometimes gets. I'd have backed off from an argument, I believe, but Ray doesn't seem to know the meaning of prudence or diplomacy.

He shouted, "Hello, Dad," as the sheriff rode up with his eyes fixed upon the sorrel. "I sold Golden West to Walter for the same amount you paid for him, and here's your money back. Thanks just the same for buying him for me, but I've decided I don't want him. So you aren't out anything on the deal."

The sheriff gave me a look which I could not ignore. I nodded good-by and told Ray I'd see him later, and rode on toward the ranch, hurrying to get out of hearing before the storm broke. Some distance down the road I looked back and saw Ray waving his arms as he does when he's excited. And the next thing, here he came galloping after me. He overtook me just as I was swinging the big gate open.

I've never seen Ray so white as he was when he rode up. He had that set, stubborn look of his father, and he spoke in a hurried tone, as if important matters pressed upon him.

"Can you let me have fifty dollars just as a personal loan till that other comes through? I spent my last dollar on those rings, and I'd starve before I'd ask Dad for a dime."

“Why, of course,” I told him; “but what’s gone wrong now?”

“Nothing, only I’m going to pack my belongings and get off the ranch. I’ll stay in town until I can put the deal through for that ranch, and I’ll get married to-morrow, if Florence cares enough about me to live in an apartment for a couple of weeks.”

I pulled up and got out my wallet again—only I made it a couple of hundred. Ray’s not the lad to live for ten days or two weeks in town on fifty dollars—especially with a new wife. He stuffed the bills in his pocket without looking at them.

“Thanks, old man.”

“But aren’t you rather hasty?” I tried to calm him down, for he was shaking as if he had a chill, he was so angry. “You wouldn’t want your mother and sister—”

“This has got nothing to do with them,” he said shortly, sliding out of the saddle at the stable door. “This lies between Dad and me. He—he ordered me home as if I’d been a kid of ten! He said he’d thrash me if I didn’t stop going to see Florence! Do you think for a minute I’ll stand for that? I’m twenty-two. I’m my own man, and he’ll find it out.”

This was serious. “If you go,” I said, “of course I’ll go with you. Remember you’re the one who invited me here.” I admit I hated the thought of leaving and I hoped that would bring him back to reason.

He’s got a streak of his dad in him, all right. “You can’t do that, Walter,” he said fiercely. “I won’t have it. You have nothing to do with this, and Mother and Ellie would feel awful if I dragged you away. You’ve got to stay and keep

them from worrying themselves sick. It'll help a lot, having you there."

I can't flatter myself he's right, but he certainly put up an argument I wanted to accept. I may as well be honest and say it would be damned hard to leave just now.

I said no more about going. Before the sheriff returned Ray was gone, with Chub driving him in the light wagon with his trunks and stuff. He seems to be in deadly earnest. But such is the reticence of well-bred families concerning their private troubles that no one mentioned the matter to me. They acted just as though Ray had gone off on some pleasure trip and would be back soon.

But Ellie's eyelids were pink when she came to dinner this evening, and Mother Whitcome didn't have a chirp left. They were game, though, and we kept up a rattle of meaningless words—I don't even remember what we talked about. But I do know this much: The sheriff never spoke to a soul but glowered at his plate all through that horrible meal.

I believe he made the trip home for the express purpose of seeing whether Ray had defied him and gone off to the Johnson's, and I am practically certain he doesn't know what he is going to do about it, now that Ray has actually moved out I can't see how he can do anything at all. Ray is of age. He can disown him, and that is about as far as his displeasure can reach, I should think.

I wonder if he really will go that far.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

WE RIDE IN THE BEND

I SEEM to be getting a touch of the wild and woolly West into my experiences here, but for sake of continuity practice I shall try and not run ahead of my story and say why, before I come to it in its natural order.

Last evening, which I spent in my room writing my record and a few letters until bedtime, was really the quietest time I have had since I came here. I sat up quite late, smoking by the window, and watching the moon high up in the sky and looking like a huge ball brightly gilded. I was depressed, which was perfectly natural, since Ray's troubles always do seem like my own and, moreover, I hated to see Ellie and her mother worried.

Never mind about that now. I'm not likely to forget the mood that held me, and I mention the fact merely because I fell under the spell of that moon, and would have given anything I possess for a ride with my Pretty Maid in the moonlight.

All day to-day I was on the lookout, watching for a chance to ask her if she would go this evening. But Ellie stayed close beside her mother and I had given up hopes and was on the point of joining Ray in town, thinking the women would be pretty well satisfied with my absence, when she came out to the porch. I was sitting on the steps, smoking and thinking I'd ride Golden West in and spend the night in town, where the damned moon wouldn't be quite so obtrusive on my consciousness.

She leaned against a pillar, and I felt her looking down at me. “This is just the kind of night we’ve been waiting for, Kind Sir,” she said, when the silence was growing pronounced. “Cool enough for pleasant riding, and still, so that all the little night sounds will come to us from the black shadows, and bright, so the sand dunes will look ghostly and weird. Kind Sir, will you ride with me down to the tip of Big Bend?”

My cigarette stub made a reddish arc in the white moonlight as I flung it away.

“Yes, Pretty Maid, I’ll go if you’ll ride Golden West,” I replied, getting up and looking down at her.

So far as I could tell, she did not move a muscle, yet I felt as if she had withdrawn to the other end of the porch, her voice was so cool and distant when she spoke.

“Oh, thank you, Kind Sir, but I never ride any horse but my own.”

“Pardon me, then.” I tried to make the words sound casual and indifferent, but if she had slapped my face, I should not have felt more taken aback.

The subject dropped into oblivion right there. I rode the brown horse Ray had turned over to me on my arrival—Ray’s own property, so I felt no compunction about using him now—and Ellie did not ask me why I left Golden West in his stall. For the time being, it was exactly as if we never had heard of a horse called Golden West.

We led out the two horses, I closed the big door and we mounted and rode away, our black shadows sliding along beside us on the ground. I did not realize how late it was until Ellie looked at her watch in the moonlight and gave a little laugh.

“We’ll be there at the eeriest hour of the night, Kind Sir, just as I’ve always wanted to be. It’s half-past ten this very minute. If we don’t ride too fast, we can see how the tip of the Bend looks at midnight.”

“If it’s as bad by moonlight as it is in the day, you’ll get all the shivers you want.”

“Oh, I’m hoping it will be worse—much worse,” she said lightly, and then she dropped all pretense and turned to me her look of frank friendliness.

“I think I should have gone crazy if I had stayed in the house another hour,” she said. “It’s like a tomb since Ray and Dad had that awful row. I had to get out where I can breathe.”

“I know. I’ve felt the same way,” I told her. “I only stayed because Ray insisted that I should. But if I’m in the way, or anything like that—”

“Of course you’re not—unless you really mean that *only*.” She gave me a sharp look. “If you do, of course I can only assure you that you needn’t feel bound to stay just because he asked you to. Since Ray has chosen to move out, he has no right to dictate to any of us. You’re to do exactly as you please, Kind Sir.”

“Then I shall do whatever you say, Pretty Maid.”

She pretended to consider the matter. “Well, perhaps you’d better stay. I think Ray will be back, socks and all, before the week’s out. Dad will give in and hand him a lot of money to call it square. They’re both pretty stubborn, but Dad can’t stand it to have Ray turn against him. Besides,” she added, as if it had that minute occurred to her, “I need you to help me follow up our clues. Do you think it would be playing fair, Kind Sir, if you should forsake me now?” In the moonlight her eyes held unfathomed depths.

There's no understanding her, most of the time, but I knew that was as close as she would ever come to saying she would miss our comradeship. So I told her I would never think of throwing up the bandit hunt, so long as she and her mother would have me. If I wanted to say more and didn't quite dare, she never suspected it, I hope.

We rode up over the hill that shuts off the Bend from the cultivated ground, and before I could forestall her she wheeled her horse to the gate, opened it and rode through, holding the top carelessly with one hand until my horse had passed her. Then, as easily as she would rein around a bush, she pushed the gate shut, her horse following with his breast against the bars, turning a little as it struck the post so that she could throw the chain over the top.

It was as pretty a bit of maneuvering as I had ever seen; much more skilful than Ray's gate-shutting, though naturally he's an expert alongside my own clumsy attempts. Properly speaking, I should have done it, being a man. But she took the lead so as a matter of course, and did it with such unthinking ease, that I should have been ashamed to show her how awkward I am at such things.

We went slowly down the lighted slope toward the shadows, and I felt her spirits were lifting with every step our horses took.

"I do hope we meet something wild, even if it's a bobcat," she said eagerly. "You brought that funny, patent bullet-pusher, I hope—didn't you, Kind Sir?"

I grinned at her slighting designation of my automatic. "I did. And if it's necessary, I think I can promise that it will push a bullet into the most effective place," I retorted. "But I rather hope we won't meet anything more deadly than a

bobcat; a saber-tooth tiger, for instance, while perfectly in keeping with the scenery, might be too much for the bullet-pusher.”

“Ooh, a saber-tooth tiger! We *could* sort of make believe they’re down among the dunes, couldn’t we?” She played with the idea whimsically and gave a very convincing shudder. “In this tricky moonlight we could almost see one, don’t you think?”

“Or a mastodon,” I bettered her play. “And it wouldn’t surprise me a bit if the ghosts of our cave-men ancestors prowl in here on moonlight nights, Pretty Maid.”

She laughed at that, but she reined her horse closer to mine as we rode down into the hollow. Here black, distorted shapes stood all about us, brazenly denying that they were merely rocks and gnarled bushes. Side by side, our horses walking softly in the loose sand, we followed the dim trail in silence.

For while cool reason knew that this was only wild pasture land and that nothing frightful could possibly rise up in our path, the place has a darned spooky atmosphere even in daytime. To-night it was a place of sinister beauty that stopped our mouths and set our pulses beating faster. At least, mine did. And after a half mile or so of silent riding, I noticed that her stirrup was touching my leg now and then, she kept so close beside me.

I must be getting a damned sentimental fool. Every time her stirrup touched, an electric current shot clear through me, and for the life of me I can’t see why it should. Thrilling to the touch of her hand—that I’ve got to make up my mind to endure. But why should un sentient wood thrill me like that, just because her foot—? Lord, what a fool I am!

“It’s awfully comfortable to have a man along, Kind Sir,” she owned in a breathless undertone, while I was fighting a crazy impulse to reach over and clasp her hand and lift it to my lips. “I wonder if the leader of the Dry Ridge gang feels shivers running up his back when he’s out in the dark alone? I—I do hope we don’t—meet—anything—” She was whispering that last, but whether it was put on for effect, or what, I couldn’t tell.

Just then some animal squalled in a thicket a little way up the slope from us. Our horses squatted at the suddenness of it and gave a snort, and Ellie leaned toward me, her eyes big and shining with the start it had given her.

“They—they won’t *really* attack a person,” she said, with a little laugh to hide her nervousness. “But they do sound—sort of scary, don’t they?”

“Like a cat on a back fence,” I said matter-of-factly, just to steady her a bit. I didn’t want her leaning like that. I’ve pretty good control of myself, but there’s a limit.

“Oh, why spoil the effect?” Like a dash of cold water on a spell of hysterics, it brought her out of her half-real trepidation. “I was just getting nice and shivery.”

“Sorry,” I made laconic apology. “I didn’t know you enjoyed having your hair stand on end.”

“Well, I was enjoying it, just the same. It’s so long since I’ve been afraid, Kind Sir. And any real emotion is worth while, don’t you think? It’s so—stimulating.”

If she really meant that, she certainly was stimulated during the next hour or so. We rode slowly and for the most part silently. We crossed bright places where every stick and stone stood out sharply, unnaturally white in the moonlight. We plunged into hollows so black we could scarcely see each

other, and must leave it to our horses to find the way out. I could only hope they had sense enough not to lose their way.

When first we struck one of those dark pockets in the little hills, I suggested taking a more open way and turning back soon. But no, she had started out meaning to ride straight through to the river at the very tip of the Bend; and to the river she would go. And after that first little panic she insisted upon the spookiest places we could find.

So I thought I would let her have her fill of shivers for once, and turned deliberately in the direction of the dunes, white as bleached bones, with the stunted trees standing deep in the sand and whispering as if they were plotting together secretly.

As we rode in among them, we cast furtive glances here and there. I too, though I kept telling myself there was no danger. No one ever came this way except when the cowboys were after cattle, and the ranch was empty of them just now, since they were off somewhere on roundup. Certainly no stranger would ever come prowling down in here, and yet I had to keep reminding myself of our perfect security. Which proved my own nerves were none too steady, I suppose.

On three sides, as I knew very well, we were hemmed in by the river, wide and deep and swift—and at the other end lay the ranch. A safer place, I told myself, it would be hard to find for night riding. Absolutely, there was no danger. And yet those ghostly dunes, with the eternal hiss of sand trickling down their steepest slopes; those stiff-branched trees always whispering, and the black little hollows with their mysterious sounds and furtive rustlings gave me an unpleasant, creepy sensation I hoped she would never suspect.

I pulled up finally, my hand on her saddle horn to hold her quiet. For a long minute we sat there, listening to the night. A faint swashing, gurgling sound came to my ears out ahead and I lifted my hand from the horn and pointed that way.

“You’re at the tip of the Bend, Pretty Maid. There’s the river, and if you lean a little and look through those branches, you can see the hills on the other side. You’ve had your thrills—now, let’s go back.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

AND BULLETS HUM

BUT Ellie had recovered her courage and she was not disposed to rob herself of one moment of her adventure if she could help it. She looked at her watch, then at me with that mocking light in her eyes.

“ ’Tis the hour when churchyards yawn and graves give up their dead, ’ ” she chanted in a solemn undertone. “Let’s just wait in the shade of these rocks, Kind Sir, and enjoy all this eeriness. There’s no churchyard to yawn—oh, let’s ride over to the edge of those dunes there! They look like graves, don’t you think? Do you suppose a specter of some cave-man ancestor will rise from them if we wait awhile? A wraithlike form in a luminous white hairy robe, maybe—”

We had reined our horses over toward the dunes and now, as she talked her nonsense, we pulled up beside a big, gray rock which was like the prow of a ship parting the billowy drift of white sand.

“Cave men didn’t wear robes, Pretty Maid. I doubt if their ghosts do,” I said, matching her own low tones. The place and the hour somehow made ordinary speech impossible. Just as one instinctively lowers his voice in a church or in the presence of death, we were almost whispering while we sat there knee to knee, our horses motionless as the bronze steeds of some historic monument. I felt then, and I still believe, that they had caught our mood and were enjoying this little adventure as much as we were.

So the sound which tore apart that silvered silence was magnified by the very suddenness of it and the explosive

contrast it made. My horse shrank toward Ellie's and I could feel his flesh quivering, as he stood there staring toward a shadowy thicket down beyond the moonlit slope. Ellie's hand went out to meet mine, and as I clasped it close, she gave a sigh of nervous apprehension. We looked at each other speechlessly and then I gave a soundless chuckle.

"Did the cave men ever have hay fever?" I whispered in her ear.

"Was—it *was* a sneeze, wasn't it?" she whispered back, staring fearfully down the slope.

"Absolutely," I nodded for further emphasis. There was no mistaking it, in my opinion. Some man had sneezed, down there—one of those loud and unexpected explosions which men who have never been taught the little conventional restraints give way to when they feel a sneeze or a cough coming on. In that deathly quiet the sound was as shockingly out of place as it would have been at a funeral or in the most solemn moment of a wedding.

In the edge of the shadow cast by the big rock we waited, expecting something more; a rider, perhaps, though I could think of no reason for any one being down there.

"It couldn't have been a sneeze. How could it?" argued the girl, still whispering. "Who would be down there at midnight? Dad stayed in town to-night, and Ray's gone, and Chub always goes to bed at dark, winter and summer. It was some animal. It must have been. Kind Sir, let's ride down there and see what it was."

Pluckily she started, and I was right alongside. We had little more than left the shadow when there was a spurt of orange fire and something whined low over our heads.

Almost at the same instant there came the loud pow-w of a gunshot.

I happen to know a little something about guns. I know that was the voice of a forty-five six-shooter, such as is so popular out here in the West. I could tell too by the hum of the bullet. Some one down there was either a damn poor shot or else he merely fired to warn us back, because in that white moonlight he should have been able to hit one of us; or if not us, then a horse.

I reined in front of Ellie's horse, forcing him back and into the protection of the shadow. Not content with that, I forced her back up around the big rock, where a bullet could not reach. There was another shot just as she made it, and this time I felt the wind of the bullet in passing.

Swinging my horse around behind the boulder, I drew my own gun and dismounted, handing my reins to Ellie. If it came to a gun battle, I wanted no lunging horse to destroy my aim. And when it came to that, I wanted no bullets coming this way. So I started back down the slope, keeping close to a fringe of bushes for the shadow they cast. The moon, I was thankful to remember, was behind us, sliding down the western sky. The shadows lay long to eastward, which was in my favor now.

But Ellie's frantic whisper called me back. "Walter! Come here! Don't go down there!"

Startled, I stopped and turned to look at her. She was off her own horse and sliding down to me—thank God, in black shade. She caught my arm and hung on, her breath coming fast and uneven with a terror that had no room for make-believe.

“Come back and take me home!” Her words were tumbling out in a breathless whispering.

I whispered back, “Get on your horse and start for home! Ride straight back up over the dune, behind the rock. He can’t see you, if you keep the rock in line. Take my nag along and I’ll follow you—”

“You won’t! I’ll not let you go marching down there just *asking* for trouble!” I’m not sure, but I think she was close to tears.

“No—I’m not going far—just want a sight of him. I’ll follow right along. Just cover your retreat, is all.”

“I won’t go one step without you! If you *must* go down there, I’m going with you.” She spoke between clenched teeth. “And if you don’t come back right now, I’ll scream. We—we haven’t anything to fight about, Kind Sir!”

Well, there was only one thing I could do with a girl as stubborn as that. I took her by the arm and marched her back to the horses, going as cautiously as possible. In dead silence—thank the Lord that white sand completely muffles any hoofbeats—we led them back over the crest of the dune, mounted in bright moonlight again and went ploughing down to the bottom.

Now the dune was between us and that mysterious shooter. Keeping to the narrow winding gullies between the dunes, we spurred our horses into a heavy gallop until we were well away from there. Not until we were back in the trail, a mile or two from the place, did we pull our horses down to a walk and let them get their wind.

“Now, who do you suppose that was?” I wondered aloud. “And why would he want to shoot us?”

She shook her head, looking back over her shoulder. “I can’t imagine. But I do know I’d much rather do our speculating and guessing back on our own porch.” She looked at me and smiled tremulously. “I feel very much like a mere woman right now, Kind Sir. I—one can think of how it would feel, being shot at, and—I always told myself I wouldn’t be frightened at all. But when it actually does happen, it’s different, isn’t it? I—don’t want any more thrills to-night, t-thank you!”

She spurred her horse into a gallop again, and neither of us spoke until we topped the last slope and the gate stood safely below us. Once more she rode ahead to open it, and I will say she gave a marvelous exhibition of speed and skill.

At the stable she sat her horse a minute before dismounting and stared back up the slope to the gate, beyond which lay a somewhat sinister mystery.

“Kind Sir, if we knew just who is down there among those dunes, and why he shot at us—” she swung down and hooked a stirrup over the horn out of the way while she loosened the cinch “—why, we’d be a lot wiser than we are now, wouldn’t we?”

“I should rather hope so,” I retorted dryly. “And if you had done as I asked you, I’d know more about him right now than we do.”

The more I thought of it, the more I felt a dull rage that any one should shoot at Ellie Whitcome, and that I should ride off and let it go at that. I had a sense of having been betrayed into showing myself a damned coward—though it was fear for her that made me turn tail and run.

As she pulled the saddle off—I was still working at my latigo strap—she laughed again. She could afford to laugh

now, with Chub in the bunkhouse and the dogs close by and the enfolding safety of the stable yard and the house just beyond. There was no danger here. Whatever there was lurked down in the Bend.

“Well,” she said cheerfully, “we didn’t see any bobcats, did we? But we had a real adventure, just the same. I was born here and I’ve lived here all my life—and never heard a bullet come whining over my head before! It certainly is funny, when you stop to think of it.”

“That,” I said stiffly, for I was still pretty much disgusted, “indicates a rather perverted sense of humor, don’t you think?”

“Well, perhaps that’s what ails me. Because I certainly do think it’s funny. I was scared to death at the time, but now I feel bold as a lion. I think it was the unexpectedness of it that threw me into a—a momentary panic. Now that I know some one is down there ready to take a shot at any one who comes along, I feel like going back and finding out what it’s all about.”

“I think you’ll have to content yourself with not knowing,” I told her, and refrained from reminding her again that she was to blame for our ignorance in the matter.

She walked along beside me to the house, giving me a quizzical glance now and then. “Sometimes, I think it’s rather convenient to be a girl. You see, being a girl, I’m not a bit ashamed of running. I can enjoy the thrill of the adventure without feeling I should have galloped heroically into battle with that fellow. It must be awful to feel you’ve got to demonstrate your courage all the while.”

We were at the porch by then, and I put my hands on her shoulders and gave her a shake. “Pretty Maid,” I said, “some

day you're going to badger me a shade too much. And then —" I pulled up in time. "Why can't you be like other girls?" I finished weakly.

"Well, no other girl would have let you go pelting after that fellow," she said tartly, running up the steps and standing there at the top, looking down at me. "It was a crazy thing to attempt. There you were—you'd have had to walk out into the moonlight to get over there, and he was in the dark and could have shot you down like a—a rabbit."

"Not at all. I'd have kept to the shadows. He was trying to shoot you like a rabbit, if you'll remember—"

"Oh, you're taking those first shots altogether too seriously!" she exclaimed impatiently. "He was shooting over our heads, just as a polite hint for us to move on."

"Such politeness doesn't endear him to me. The first shot, maybe, was a warning. The second, when we were getting back out of sight, meant business."

"Well, perhaps it did. But that was no reason why you should stay and shoot it out with him. Why not look at it as I do, Kind Sir? As just the final fillip of danger which fitted in with the eeriness of the Bend at midnight, when the moon is full. Really, it's something one can look back upon and still feel a prickling of the scalp—"

"Being a man, I'd much rather have made his scalp prickle," I told her. "Any man who would deliberately shoot at a woman as he did—"

"But he didn't know he was shooting at a woman!" she argued rather hotly. "How could he? All he could possibly have seen was a couple of riders coming down toward him. He may have thought we were sworn enemies of his. Probably he did think we had followed him into the Bend. It

isn't a place where one would be likely to go, just to be riding somewhere. Of course, he thought we were after him, so he was really shooting in self-defense. Don't you see?"

I did not see, but what's the use of trying to argue with her? If she wants to throw the glamor of romance and adventure into what was in reality a pretty close call, I'm perfectly willing she should.

If she hadn't been determined upon arguing against what I knew was the fact, I'd have liked to sit there in the hammock for a while and—well, just talk things over. But she's in one of her most perverse moods, so I told her good night and came upstairs. I haven't a doubt she's built quite a romance around the affair by this time.

But it isn't a damned bit romantic to me. All I can think of is how close she came to being shot.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

WE INVESTIGATE

I LAY awake through what was left of the night after I wrote up my record. It's a good thing, I think, to write down while it's fresh everything that happens. It gives me a clearer picture when I read it over, as I did before I crawled into bed. But I must say it was not conducive to sleep.

That shooting down there wants a lot of explaining, and the more I think of it the less explanation I seem to find. Cattle thieves don't seem to me to be the answer. There are cattle down there, it is true. But not so many, and what there are seem to feed mostly at this upper end.

I know we did not see any at all after we crossed the first hollow beyond the gate, and certainly there were none down there at the lower end among the dunes. Cattle, I imagine, don't do much roaming around just for fun. They stay where there is grass and water, and while the river is there, I couldn't recall anything much for a cow to eat. So the idea that it may have been some one rustling cattle doesn't seem plausible to me now, and it didn't while I lay awake thinking about it.

That would leave poachers to reckon with, if one were in a more thickly settled country. But there is too much waste land and mountains within riding distance of here. To think a hunter would trespass on Sheriff Whitcome's land to shoot game just as easily to be had outside the Bend is arrant nonsense. It couldn't have been a hunter. That's practically out of the question.

It certainly couldn't have been Chub, who was asleep in the bunkhouse long before we left the stable. The sheriff stayed in town, and Ray—and all the cowboys are off on roundup. That lets out all who might have a right to be down there, and leaves only some one who has no legitimate business in the Bend—and proved it by shooting at the first riders he glimpsed and by keeping back in the dark and never showing himself.

I got up and smoked two cigarettes by the window and considered the possibility that some one might be hiding down in there. Some criminal, perhaps. It took me a long while to admit to myself it was possible, and yet I could think of nothing better.

That brought me, of course, to the Dry Ridge gang—cunning, bolder than most, always disappearing completely after they reached Dry Ridge. Might it not be possible for them to cross the river and hide in the Bend, right under the sheriff's nose almost, until the posses were tired of searching for them?

I felt mildly excited over the idea. If they could cross the river, I thought the very nerve of such a move would make it feasible. The Bend is big enough and wild enough, with any one from the ranch very seldom going down into it very far. It occurred to me that I had never seen Chub ride up the slope to the gate but once in the time I've been here, and then he went to fix the fence where a post had been struck by lightning one night.

I don't suppose the sheriff rides down in there once a year. It made my blood jump to think that nowhere in the country would he be less likely to look for the gang. It would be a joke on him—and a grim one indeed—if the Dry Ridge gang

chose for their hide-out some nook down in there, on the sheriff's own ranch! His goose certainly would be cooked to a turn with the voters of the county if that were true and the news ever leaked out.

The more I thought of it, the more it seemed to me that it might be true. No one would ever dream of searching the Bend, and if they did, it would be almost as hard a task as Dry Ridge. That day when Ray and I rode in there, it would have been perfectly simple to keep out of our way. Green as I am, I could have done it myself with no trouble at all. Or any of the cowboys, riding and yelling at stock, could just as easily be dodged.

But Ellie and I had been riding so quietly, and the hour was so unlikely a one to expect riders to be out, that we had probably come upon one of the gang unawares. And if that were true, it was lucky for us he had contented himself with firing a couple of shots and letting us go. The more I studied it from that premise, the more plausible it became.

Then, I tried to picture their next move, supposing the gang really was down there. It seemed to me they would scarcely risk staying, after those two shots were fired. They'd probably guess that the Bend would receive some attention from the sheriff. They might even suspect that we were two of a posse sent in there to investigate. But probably the sheriff has left men still scouting around Dry Ridge, and it might be risky crossing back until more time has elapsed and the search has died of inanition. And at the same time it would be risky to stay in the Bend, unless—

Right there I dropped my cigarette and burned a small hole in my pajama coat. It had struck me that if I had been in that man's place, I should have followed the two riders and found

out who they were and what they were doing in there at that time of night. It was the logical thing to do, and any man cunning enough to belong to the Dry Ridge gang would be able to trail us back to the gate without any trouble at all.

So after all the gang might not be greatly alarmed. It was not a flattering thought, but I had to acknowledge the fact that a girl and a dude tenderfoot—which would, I believe, be my technical rating among them—would not be considered dangerous.

And then, it might not be the Dry Ridge gang at all. My impression of the river there at the lower end of the loop was that it could not be crossed, especially by men on horseback. And if they couldn't get across the river, that knocked the whole theory into a cocked hat. The gang would have nerve enough to camp in the sheriff's back pasture, I had no doubt. But it just wouldn't be possible with that swift-rolling river barring the way.

Before the east lightened to dawn, I had decided upon one thing at least. I meant to have a look down there by daylight. And in view of my suspicions and the danger that might be lurking down there if my theories happened to be correct, I meant to go alone this time. Ellie would sleep late after her ride, I hoped, and breakfast was never very early. If I started at daybreak, I could be back by breakfast time and she wouldn't be any the wiser. I wouldn't even tell her I had gone unless she chose to be too darned patronizing.

Tiptoeing down the stairs and outside in the cool, gray dawn before sunrise was to me as adventurous as that midnight ride. Even Chub was nowhere about. I had my rifle along, because I knew just what I might be "up against" as Ray would put it. If that really were one of the Dry Ridge

gang last night, and if he were still there, he'd be pretty touchy over a second call. But I didn't propose to blunder on him unawares the second time, and I've always held a pretty good score in rifle club matches, so I wasn't much concerned.

I'll swear I got downstairs and out of the house without a sound. I was tempted to saddle Golden West, but thought better of it and took the brown I rode last night, because he knows the Bend by now and wouldn't need much attention from me. I rode him out of the yard at a walk, so as not to disturb any one, and up the slope to the gate.

There I got down and looked all around for fresher tracks than ours coming out of the Bend. It seemed to me that if the fellow had followed us out, there wouldn't be much use in going on down there. But if he hadn't come out this way, then I certainly wanted to examine the river bank and see for myself whether it would be possible to cross and get to Dry Ridge.

There were no tracks but our own, however, nor any sign that any stranger had come through. I led my horse through the gate and turned to close it, when here came Ellie, her horse running like a scared rabbit to overtake me. I swung the gate shut between us and scowled at her across the top.

"You'd better go on back to the house," I said coldly. "I am merely going to look around a little, and it isn't necessary for us both to go."

She laughed in my face. "Let me through, Kind Sir. It's my father's gate and I have as much right to use it as you." Her tone sounded highly amused.

"No. The Bend is no place for a girl just now. We found that out last night."

“Don’t be stubborn. The Bend is no place for a little boy from the East—we found that out last night.” And when I put up my chin at that, she added gently, “He’s inclined to take chances which a Westerner would avoid.”

We stared at each other across the gate, each with a hand upon the topmost bar. But her eyes were dancing with mischief—and I’m afraid mine told tales out of school, for a warm glow spread from cheeks to brow and she looked away from me.

She nearly got herself kissed right then. I saw my hand trembling on the gate and I was afraid she might notice it too, so I swung the gate open rather than let her know what a fool I am.

“You’re putting a heavy handicap on me, Pretty Maid,” I told her, when I was in the saddle again. “There may be no danger this morning, but I’d feel much better if I knew you were safe at home.”

“You needn’t worry about me. I’m not hunting thrills this morning, Kind Sir. I have a theory about that man and I want to put it to the test.” She had dropped her teasing and was very businesslike. “Look.” She turned her body and lifted her right arm, and I saw a holstered gun. “I don’t expect to need that, but I’m prepared.”

“Still, I’m sorry you followed me.”

“I didn’t. I was on my way to the stable before I knew you were awake. Then I saw you up there nearly to the gate, and hustled to overtake you before you got down in here and mistook me for our night prowler.”

I believed her, but I could think of nothing to say at the moment. We rode down into the slope to the hollow where no mysterious shadows lay now. I felt her looking at me. I can

always tell when her eyes and thoughts turn my way, even if
my back is toward her.

CHAPTER TWENTY

WE HAVE NO ADVENTURE

“DON’T you want to hear me expound my theory, Kind Sir?” she asked coolly, when we were through the hollow.

“Why, yes, certainly, if you have a theory.”

“I thought about that man all night,” she said. “I half believe the Dry Ridge gang are somehow mixed up with him. He might even be one of them. If they could cross the river, they couldn’t ask for a safer hiding place, do you think? It is practically inaccessible, except through our ranch. Why, even Dad never has dreamed of looking for them down in here.”

“No. I thought of that.”

“You did? Well, I suspected that’s what started you back down here this morning. To-morrow, or some day soon, I think we had better ride over on the Ridge again and see if there isn’t some way of getting down to the river opposite here. Wouldn’t it be great if we could actually stumble on their hide-out?”

“I certainly wouldn’t want to stumble on it,” I stated firmly. “After last night I prefer to know what I’m likely to run into. And your theory—which I must tell you I thought of myself last night—makes me wish all the more that you would go back.”

“Well, I’m not going, so there’s no use arguing. If down here is where they have their hide-out, we should be able to see some sign of it before we run right into them. But I don’t believe it would be right down there at the tip, where we jumped that fellow last night. He may have been going across

the river, or something like that. We'll just search the river bank and see if we can find some feasible landing. They'll be lying pretty close in daylight."

I never saw such a girl. She was as cool as any man, and I had the feeling she was darned near as capable. She certainly had done some straight, clear thinking, if I'm any judge, and in a pinch, except that I'd be scared to death of her getting hurt, I'd as soon have her along as any man I know, except maybe Steve Johnson. But the thing was getting pretty touchy for us two, and there was only one way I could think of to insure her safety.

"Pretty Maid, would you listen to me if I should ask you something very—serious?"

She gave me a quick look. "Good gracious! You aren't by any chance going to propose, so early in the morning?"

I made a most ungallant retort, simply because she had jabbed me in a sensitive spot.

"Have I given you any reason to think that I intend to propose, this early in the morning or at any other time?" I laughed. "Let me assure you as quickly as possible that nothing is farther from my mind." And that, of course, was a barefaced lie.

She colored and bit her lip. "Then, for heaven's sake, cut out the usual preamble," she snapped. "I've always found a man getting ready to be silly when he starts off warning me about how serious he is going to be. However, what is it that's preying on your mind?"

"Just this. I have unlimited faith in you, and I'm willing to do all I can to help you run down the Dry Ridge gang. But it strikes me that we are getting in over our heads."

“Can’t you swim?” she interrupted maliciously.

“Not well enough to save a foolish maiden who persists in going deeper. I wish you would listen seriously, however. We have managed to stumble upon two or three important clues, and if they could be followed up systematically and with organized effort, I believe they would lead to the capture of the entire gang.”

“Well, have you just begun to realize that?”

“I realize that this thing is getting too big for us to handle alone. Since last night, I’ve seen that we ought to tell the sheriff and let him get busy. He’s had experience in running down clues of all kinds. It’s his job, you see, and he’s been working at it for a good many years now. He’s efficient and he knows all the tricks of the trade. He’s got the machinery—the organization to work with. And we’re just amateurs, after all. With the best intentions in the world, and, well, say we’re—you’re clever enough to do it, we simply can’t get right down to business the way your dad can and does. So—”

“So you’re getting cold feet!”

“You know better than that. But we are taking a great responsibility when we keep our clues to ourselves and make a game of hunting these outlaws down. It isn’t just a game, Pretty Maid. Your father’s reputation, and probably his job, hang on capturing this gang, to say nothing of the crimes they’ll continue to commit so long as they run free. Your father will have a right to blame us—”

“Why will he? He’s had the same chance we’ve had—”

“That’s beside the point. Take this fellow who shot at us last night. That may mean more than all the other clues put together, except perhaps the shadow I saw. And you must see

that, if the gang's hide-out should prove to be right here in the Bend, it would take a good-sized posse to capture them.

“There would have to be several men posted across the river, probably in several places; certainly wherever it would be possible for men to swim their horses across. They would have to be bottled up in here, which could be done, with men enough on the job. And it would probably mean a fight before they were captured. They certainly aren't going to surrender if they can help it.

“I really think we are doing a real wrong, Pretty Maid, by trying to go on with this ourselves. We have a moral responsibility toward the law and toward the people who are due to be robbed and maybe killed if the gang is not captured. We must tell the sheriff about this down here, just as soon as he comes home.” It was said, and I braced myself for argument.

She rode along for several rods without saying a word, and I could not even guess what her reaction was going to be. Then, just when I was on the point of adding something to my plea, she turned to me in perfect calm and seriousness.

“Do you think we are making any particular blunder right now, riding down here to see what we can find?” she asked. “They certainly are not likely to think it was us down here last night, and if we should meet any of them face to face, we'll just say good morning and pass on, as if we thought nothing about it. They could only assume that we like early morning rides and just happened to come down this way. Is there anything wrong about that?”

“Well,” I told her rather diffidently, now that she was so sensible about it, “of course we may not see them, nor any sign of them. And they *might* see us, and they might suspect

that we are not down here just to enjoy the scenery. Remember, Pretty Maid, they must have watched us trying to trail them with the dogs, the other day. So if they have any sense at all, I think they will immediately move their headquarters—and I doubt very much if they will leave their change of address behind them.”

She laughed a little, but followed her laughter with a frown.

“One reason why I don’t want to tell Dad is because he will belittle every one of our clues. He doesn’t think women have any minds of their own and they can’t possibly tell him anything about his business. And you’re also incompetent, Kind Sir, simply because you are a tenderfoot—and a city man in the bargain. So we couldn’t *possibly* know anything about the Dry Ridge gang!

“If we told him, he’d refuse to do anything about it. He would feel it beneath his dignity to follow any clue we gave him. You see, I know Dad. And after his performance with Ray, you should begin to see that I am right. Perhaps the thing is too big for us, Kind Sir—but it looks to me as if we will just have to grow up to its size.”

That silenced me more than her hottest anger could have done. I saw where she was probably right and I told her so. And once again I said that I’d do all in my power to help her.

We did not talk much after that, but studied our problem from all sides—at least I did—while we rode to the place where the shooter had hidden himself last night.

With the morning sun streaming into that hollow, warming the sand dunes and touching the great rock benignly, we still were careful not to show that we were especially interested in the place. Instead, we rode straight through to the river bank

and loitered there, talking of trivial things while we covertly studied both shores. They were as empty and untouched, apparently, as though man had not yet been created to ride back and forth, lawlessly or otherwise.

The whole place seemed absolutely deserted except by ourselves. Our horses bore me out in that belief, and so did the birds that flew from the bushes beside us and alighted in the thicket where the gun had twice flashed last night. When I pointed this out to Ellie, she gave me an approving nod and we went over there.

I had the place pretty well located in my mind, and sure enough, we found the plain imprint of a boot, and saw the trampled grass and sand and the hoofmarks where a horse had been tied. But that was all, though we made a thorough search of the place. Why he had been there or why he had stayed so long, there was no means of knowing. We could only take the fact and make of it what we would.

“Well,” said Ellie, as we turned toward home, “I feel in my bones he was one of the gang. So there must be a crossing somewhere around this point, and this Bend must hold their hide-out. But—”

“It’s much too big a place for us to search it before breakfast,” I hinted. And she laughed at that and admitted she was hungry, too.

We galloped nearly all the way home and were properly scolded for keeping breakfast waiting. A tame finish to as exciting a twelve hours as I have spent in some time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

WE AID AN ELOPEMENT

I'VE got to get this all down just as everything happened, and then close my record and quit. I don't believe I shall ever make a writer. I'd want to be realistic, and reality—Well, here goes to finish the thing and be done with it:

After my sleepless night and all that it held of excitement, I shamelessly retired to my room and slept for several hours. When I awoke it was with the thought that I should ride into town and see how Ray was making out, and whether anything new had developed between himself and the sheriff. A reconciliation, perhaps. To cheer Mother Whitcome, I told her where I was going and asked her if she had a message to send.

“Just tell Ray that Mother understands,” she said quietly, “and tell him I hope he will do nothing in anger. And he must come home just as soon as he can feel right about coming.” And she added to me, “His father never meant to drive the boy away from home. He has a temper and he's stubborn.” Which of course I knew.

After a good deal of hunting around town I found Ray coming from the courthouse—and I thought I could guess what had taken him there. He blushed like a girl when he saw me, and grinned and caught me by the arm.

“Say, Walter, I wish you'd go up and tell the preacher—Methodist—lives right up there alongside that white church—to be ready for a wedding ceremony at two o'clock, will you? I've got to go and reserve a section on the three-thirty train, and get a rig and drive out and get Florence—”

“Making history to-day, are you?” I swung into step alongside him. “Certainly, I’ll see the preacher and make your reservation too. So hop along and get your girl.”

He was heading for the livery stable where we always left our horses, so our way lay together for a block. His gratitude was almost pathetic—I guess his row with the sheriff had given him a pretty hard jolt, as if his world had tumbled about his ears.

“Gee, Walter, you’re a swell pal,” he sighed. “I’ve had one hell of a time. Florence’s folks have been making as much of a fuss over her marrying me as Dad has about my marrying her. I don’t see what’s got into everybody all at once. We’re going to get married and pull out to-day, before they make up their minds what they are going to do to stop us.”

“Too bad. Your mother and Ellie are all for you, Ray.” And I gave him his mother’s message. “It will blow over,” I added to cheer him.

“Well, Steve’s pretty white about it, too. He told me to go ahead, and he wished me better luck than he’s had. You know, he’s wanted Sis for the last three or four years, but I think Dad nipped it in the bud—warned Steve off from asking Sis to marry him. It’s a damned shame.”

Not being able to agree with him there, I said nothing. We reached the corner while he talked, and he was torn between his haste and his desire to tell me all about it.

“Well, you turn up this street, Walter. I’ll see you at the preacher’s, won’t I? I want you for a witness. Like to have Sis, but I wouldn’t want to give Dad a down on her too. He’s out of town—he’s expected back on the night train, though. That’s why I want to be married and gone. Florence’s father and both the boys are gone to-day too, so—You be sure and

tell him two o'clock, and if he can't make it, get some other preacher." He whirled and was rushing off when I called him back.

"You might tell me where to buy your tickets to," I said dryly, keeping my face as straight as I could.

"Oh. Well—" I could see he hadn't settled that.

"All right," I grinned, "leave it to me and get going, Lochinvar." And he gave a shamefaced laugh and hurried off.

The minister I finally found agreeable to a two o'clock marriage ceremony was not Methodist but Presbyterian, and very stern and cold. Ray had not told me where to meet him in case the Methodist wasn't available, but I knew that he would have to return the hired rig to the stables, so I went to wait there for him; and I was still half a block away when I saw Ellie driving up.

She telephoned her mother about Ray, and just then they came, so Ellie and I stood up with them in an empty church where the preacher's measured tones gave back a hollow unearthly sound from the arched roof. I don't know about the others, but my knees were knocking together before it was over.

We saw them safely off on the train bound for St. Paul, for no particular reason except that it is a beautiful city to visit, and there would be no changing cars on the trip. Then, feeling rather depressed after the hectic afternoon, I told the hackman to drive us back to the stables, so we could start home.

"There's going to be an awful row when Dad finds out about this," Ellie remarked, as if she were merely saying that she thought it was going to rain.

“Yes,” I agreed, “I rather think so.”

“I know a way to divert some of the lightning from Ray, poor boy,” she went on. “I’m going to take the dogs down into the Bend to-night, and put them on that trail.”

“You’re not going to do anything of the kind,” I exclaimed in some trepidation, though I was pretty sure she would. I had thought of it myself, as a matter of fact, and was only held back by the fear that I would not be able to give her the slip; and I certainly would not take her along. “You’re going to stay at home, where you belong.”

“Am I?” Her mild tone forewarned me of trouble if I crossed her.

“You are.” I lowered my voice so the driver wouldn’t hear. “Next time, they won’t bother to shoot over your head or mine.”

“Oh. Are you afraid?”

“Yes,” I said boldly, “I am. I can tell you right now, and save argument, that I shall not go one step with you. And you know very well you won’t go alone.”

I thought that settled the matter. She said no more, and since she drove the stanhope and King William home, and I rode Golden West, we did not meet again, at least to be alone, until after dinner, when I went out and found her on the porch.

“All the same, I’m going down there this evening, and I am going to take the dogs,” she said calmly, just as if there had been no interruption to the argument. And she got up and left me before I could think of any bright retort.

Just to show her I am not easily bullied, I was in the hammock before she had started up the stairs. There I

swayed, with a defiant creak of the ropes under my hundred and eighty pounds, in perfect physical comfort and a seething temper. Just in case she might return unexpectedly, I lay back smoking a cigarette and staring up at the clouds, shifting the blue pattern between and trying to feel as untroubled as I hoped I looked.

Two cigarettes, and she passed me, going down the steps with the plain intention of carrying out her threat. As she went by, she glanced over toward the hammock, held up a small round object so that I could see, and put it into her pocket again.

“Oh, where are you going, my pretty fair Maid?” I murmured, and she laughed and started on, then turned to laugh again. For the object she showed me was the little tin box with the blue sealing wax—the box which held the saddle string.

She meant it, then. Or she was trying to bluff me into thinking she did. But she had gone the wrong way about it. If she had pleaded, she would have found me like modeler’s clay in her fingers. She should know that by this time. But she was bluffing, I could have sworn to that.

From the living-room window her mother chirped after her, “Where are you going *now*, Ellie?”

And Ellie’s voice came back, louder and more cheerful than was at all necessary, “Oh, just for a ride, Mother. The dogs need exercise.” And the way her voice lifted on that last sentence, she meant to make sure I heard it.

“I thought I heard your father tell you not to take the dogs out again, Ellison.”

“Oh, he was out of sorts that day. Besides, he isn’t here to take them out himself, and they do need exercise.”

“I should think you’d had enough riding for one day,” her mother tacitly yielded the point. “But you can’t be content unless you’re on a horse. You ought to have been a boy.”

“Well, being a helpless girl, I’ll only go down in the Bend, Mother.”

That was for my benefit, but I lay quiet and blew smoke rings. If she wanted me along, she could ask me decently.

Reflected in the window beside me, which was like a mirror with the dark room behind it, I saw Ellie turn and give me a long look. Then she went on down the path out of sight. By the joyful baying I knew that she was putting the leashes on the dogs and leading them out. She took longer than she had the other morning—probably waiting for me to weaken. I didn’t, however.

It was several minutes before she rode off up the trail to the Bend gate. Through an opening in the morning-glory vines I watched her go, expecting every minute to see her swing off away from the gate for a short ride within sight of the house. She did not. She opened the gate, rode through with the dogs at her horse’s heels, closed the gate and went on out of sight over the hill.

I waited through half an hour of torment. I argued with myself, using cold logic at first. She wouldn’t go far. She knew it was absolutely insane to think of going alone to trail that man. She was only trying to give me a scare and make me gallop after her, so she could give me the laugh—or the haughty chin. There was no telling which.

A hundred times I told myself she would never dare to go down in the Bend alone. Just as many times I remembered that she would dare anything, once she had made up her mind

to it. And through it all, I knew that I would not stir from the porch to go after her.

I was still telling myself that, while I was getting my gun and hurrying down the stairs and outside. I had Golden West saddled and was galloping smoothly up the trail to the gate before I admitted to myself that the girl had me worried. By the easy swing, by the lift of his springy body, I knew the horse would jump, so I put him at the gate. He rose like a swallow, went over without breaking his stride and on down into the first hollow, skimming over the ground.

As I rode, I kept watching out ahead, expecting at every turn to meet her coming back. She wouldn't go on—she wouldn't dare! But I said it without conviction. I knew she would dare anything, if she struck a certain mood.

On the farther rim of the hollow I pulled the sorrel horse down to a walk and listened. The Bend was silent, eerie as ever, though the sun was only just now setting. The dogs were not making a sound—but then, they never did more than whimper when they were trailing. Silent hounds. All the more to be feared when they were tracking down a man. So it was useless to listen for them.

Fear took hold of me then. I loosened the reins and the sorrel swung into his long, effortless gallop again. We rounded a clump of bushes and my horse gave a sidewise leap clear of the trail and snorted. He had nearly run over the dog Texas, nosing the road at the end of his leash. On the other side of the trail Ellie was sitting on the grass beside a bush, holding her horse and the two dogs, a picture of serene patience.

She looked up at me, smiled and rose without haste while I glared down at her.

“You sure took your time,” she drawled. “It will be dark before we know it, and I think we’ll have better luck if we have some light at the start.”

She mounted, gave one of the leashes to me and smiled again with perfect composure.

“Wouldn’t it be great, Kind Sir, if this should happen to be our man who lost the saddle string?”

What could I do? Once more she was having her way in spite of my judgment that it was going to be risky business for her. There was no use in being disagreeable about it, so I turned it off as a joke.

“You might have waited while I finished my smoke,” I grinned, and rode along beside her, wishing I had a dozen pairs of eyes looking in different directions at once, to guard her from her own recklessness. Having one pair only, I was forced to trust the dogs to warn us if an enemy came near. I own that I was horribly afraid to ride down among the dunes with Ellie.

I tried at last to make her see the danger and the foolishness, but she would not listen. Nothing would stop her or turn her back.

“In all my life,” she said, with an eager sort of defiance, “this is the first time I’ve ever really given my whole heart and soul to a thing. I feel as a race horse must feel when he’s using his last ounce of energy, converting it into speed. It’s the first time I’ve ever felt that I was drawing upon all the intelligence I possess, and all the courage. Why must I drop back to commonplaces—to nice conventional mediocrity—just when I’m on the edge of accomplishing the biggest thing I ever set myself to do?”

I looked at her and could find no answer worthy her ardent spirit.

“If I were Ray,” she added bitterly, “you wouldn’t have a word to say against it. You’d think it was fine and manly and you’d be right with him every step of the way. You aren’t afraid—not for yourself. You simply want me to be afraid, because I’m a woman, and women are not expected to have any nerve—only nerves. A girl is supposed to stay in the house and coddle her complexion and have some man do everything for her except breathe. You’re just like all the rest—so near to the savage that you don’t want a woman to do anything—”

“Savages aren’t so careful of their women,” I pointed out. “It’s only the highly civilized—”

“Oh, you can’t sidetrack me,” she cried fiercely. “I just want you to stop being scared on my account. Give me a horse and a gun, and I’m just as capable of taking care of myself as you are, Kind Sir. Down in here I’m more capable, because I know this Bend country better than you do. And I think, for all I haven’t been to college, I may be just as wise!”

“Except,” I retorted, “that you aren’t wise enough to see this is likely to get too big for us to handle alone. I realize it very keenly, but somehow you fail there in your wisdom.”

“I shall handle it alone, even without *you*,” she gritted, “if you say another word about it!”

And because I knew that in her heart that wasn’t true—and because I knew she might run headfirst into danger to prove to me she had no fear, I did not take that dare but rode beside her in complete silence, while the soft dusk like a darkening veil settled softly around us.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE DOGS TAKE THE TRAIL

THE crimson was fading to purple in the sky, and all about us were mysterious shadows creeping under trees and bushes. We came to the big rock and pulled up there, peering all about.

It may have been foolish and without reason, but I think we both felt that the great shiplike boulder was somehow related to the Dry Ridge gang, since there was where the bullets were sent. I know I even wondered if this were not a sort of meeting place, with their hide-out close by, within calling distance. An impractical fancy, as I immediately saw. They'd meet at their headquarters, of course.

"We'd better take the dogs down there where that horse was tied last night," Ellie said at last, speaking under her breath. "I've heard Dad say that they can follow a scent twenty-four hours old, if it's distinct at the beginning. This one is fresher than that, you know."

"I assumed that's what you had in mind," I said in a perfectly neutral tone. Since it meant so much to her to do this, I had no wish to be other than a bodyguard, letting her take the lead and use her own judgment. And I think she sensed my attitude, for she gave me a grateful glance.

"I suppose I'd better give them a whiff of the saddle string—what do you think? If I do, and those tracks down there have none of the saddle-string scent, they'll just nose around trying to pick this up."

"So it's a gamble. Can't you persuade them to change trails?"

“Maybe Dad could, but you know the great point about this breed is that once they’re on a scent, they’ll follow it to the bitter end.”

“Bitter end it is, then, Pretty Maid,” I said, to help her decide. “Why not put them on the trail down there and then show them the saddle string and watch how they react to it? You should be able to tell whether it’s the same.”

“How stupid of me!” She gave me her friendliest look, which was too distracting for my peace of mind. “We’ll just let them sniff the trail, and then the string. They ought to know then what we want of them.”

We rode down the slope which was beginning to creep under the dusk. Ellie dismounted and took both the dogs to the spot, I remaining on my horse to guard against any possible attack. With a stone she broke off the sealing wax from the box, pulled off the lid, sniffed and wrinkled her nose.

“Leather and sweat—the odor is stronger than ever,” and she led the dogs over to where the boot tracks were deep beside the trampled hoofprints, and let them sniff around the spot. And then, when they showed a whimpering eagerness to be gone, she held the open box beneath the nose of first one, then the other.

“Here, Texas—and Bannock,” she muttered commandingly. “Go seek ’em!”

I had to smile at the avidness of their quivering nostrils, the tilt of their heads and the whining rumble when they smelled that broken leather string. They remembered it, all right. That, or else the scent of the track was the same.

She looked up at me inquiringly. “I’m going to turn them loose,” she said. “They can’t get far from home, here in the

Bend, and even if I can't call them back, they'll go home by themselves. Running loose, we won't be right on top of our man when they come up with him."

"Good thinking," I approved. I had been worried about those leashed dogs dragging us Lord knows where.

The dogs were back snuffling at the tracks the moment she put away the box. Ellie unsnapped their leashes and mounted hastily. "I believe it's the same scent!" she gasped. "Go find 'em, Tex!"

With a subdued yelp—more of a whimpering cry—Tex started off, Bannock close at his heels. We gave each other a look and went after them.

"It *is*—I know it's the same—the saddle-string trail!" cried Ellie, beside herself with the excitement of the chase. "Oh, if they can just hold it—if it doesn't lead to the river! If it does, we'll just ride around opposite the place in the morning, and pick up the trail from there!"

"We really ought to get some one—"

"And let them muddle the whole thing? It's our job. I'm going to finish it. Just think what it means, Walter! The trail we found away over there by that spring, and it led us into pepper. And now, away down here, the man who made the same trail shoots at us twice to warn us off! Can't you see what it means? We're on the trail of the gang—one of the gang, anyway. The leader, maybe. Oh, if anything happens so we can't catch him, I—it would just about break my heart!"

I felt a chill creep up my spine. "Don't talk like that!" I warned her harshly. "Broken hearts are not easily mended, Pretty Maid. You give me the shivers."

“Oh, well, I didn’t mean that literally,” she said more rationally, and gave her attention to the dogs.

They had been nosing along, doing a great deal of doubling back and forth, as if the horseman had ridden aimlessly—or perhaps had been hunting some certain landmark. But after a few minutes of circling, they nosed their way around a belt of larger timber and started off toward the river, just as we had feared.

“He’s going to cross, and we’ll lose him!” wailed Ellie, in a fever of anxiety. “And we were keeping right on his trail, too. He never thought to cover his trail down here. If he does cross the river, we’ll have to mark the place as plainly as we can and take up the trail from the other side—by moonlight, if you’re game.”

“You should be sheriff instead of your father,” I evaded banteringly. “You’d have had them rounded up before they got fairly started on their career of crime.”

Because the way was narrow there and she could not bear to follow anything but the dogs, she was riding a pace in front of me. She looked back.

“Have you just awakened to that fact?” she asked coolly. Now that the dogs had told us plainly our quarry was not close, we could talk in our accustomed tones—and hers was rather sharp. “I’ve always known I would make a good sheriff; better than Dad at catching criminals, if I were a man.”

“You’re likely to knock the spots off him in this case, anyway. At this rate, you’ll take them into camp before they know it.”

“Of course I shall. Why do you suppose I’ve been lying awake nights, thinking until I’m nearly crazy, if I didn’t mean

to take them into camp? They're giving Dad the laugh, but they won't laugh at me, I promise you!"

Before we realized that it was so close, we reached the river. When she saw it glimmering in the dim light, I'll swear Ellie was ready to cry.

"He crossed!" she cried tragically. "Now we'll have to lose time getting around opposite, because I certainly am not going to swim that river. Oh, dear, the scent will be growing colder every minute!"

The dogs went right up to the bank, sniffed around there and started off along the grassy ridge that edged the sloping drop-off to the water. At any rate, he evidently had not crossed just there. We followed them hopefully.

It was growing dark so fast that the farther shore, vaguely to be seen when we first came out to the water, backed slowly into the shadows and disappeared while we were there in sight. Off to our left was the gray glimmer of water, and the dim shore line with trees swaying lonesomely in the breeze that had come with the setting of the sun.

Somewhere an owl hooted lugubriously—"Who-o? Who-o? Who-o?" with melancholy insistence. Behind us a coyote yapped querulous reply, and out in front the dogs gave an occasional yelp as they found fresh scent along the trail. They were not so silent now that they were running free, I noticed. The other day, on leash, they had not yelped once.

I don't think it was fear, exactly, that brought all my old dread of the place surging to the foreground of my mind. I believe that even then I had a dim prescience—And it grew as the moments passed.

I began to listen and to strain my eyes into all the shadows, though I knew well enough the dogs would instantly warn us

if any one were lurking about. I tried to keep close to Ellie, who was leaning forward in the saddle, helping her horse over the rough places, keeping her eyes on the dogs nosing out the trail ahead of her.

I don't believe the girl gave me a thought after we turned up along the river bank. She seemed wholly absorbed by the chase, for I spoke to her several times and got no answer.

I was just beginning to wonder at the course we were taking and to suspect that the dogs were off on a wrong scent, when it seemed to me that I heard some one coming along behind us. I listened, heard the sound again, spoke warningly to Ellie, and then pulled up to wait and find out what was whipping the bushes aside back there. If riders were coming, the girl would have to go on with the dogs and leave me to handle the situation in my own way.

Evidently she had heard nothing but the sounds in front, or thought what noise there was behind her I was making with Golden West. She had not answered me or looked around, but kept straight on.

That suited me exactly. I slowed gradually until she was well ahead, then drew off a little to one side where the shadows would wrap me kindly, and waited, with my automatic in my hand and my eyes searching the gloom out of which we had just ridden.

I heard one of the dogs yelp, straight ahead. I heard them swerve to the right, and then go on, and I knew that Ellie was close at their heels, out of the way of whatever danger might be behind us. And that was a vast relief to me. Still waiting, I heard the galloping of a horse. Before long I suspected that there were at least two more and that no thought was being given to the noise they made.

I shall not attempt to write down all the wild conjectures that raced through my brain while I sat there stroking the sorrel's neck and whispering to him soothingly to hold him quiet. He was quivering with nervous excitement, but his training was perfect. He stood and watched and listened and was as quiet as I.

The pound of hoofs came closer, hesitated, trampled uncertainly. Close behind us a horse snorted with a loud, trumpeting sound. I moved Golden West cautiously to where I could look over a low clump of bushes, and saw what it was that followed us.

A small group of loose horses stood huddled together, staring—I could see their heads plainly against the gray shimmer of the water beyond. And as I appeared in view, they snorted again, turned tail and fled back the way they had come. I think I cursed them as they went, I was so relieved. And then I started on after Ellie.

Before I had gone far I knew that I had lost her. The wind was blowing from me toward where I had last heard the dogs, and if they gave cry I could not hear them. I could only guess at the general direction they were taking, and ride on in the hope that I would soon come within hearing again.

So I pounded along in the dark until Golden West planted his feet upon the edge of a black streak on the ground and halted so abruptly I came near going off over his head. I dismounted to explore, and found that I had all but ridden over the edge of a deep gully with straight-cut sides. In daylight I might have been able to cross it, but it was madness to attempt it in the dark.

This, I suspected, was the reason why the dogs had veered to the right. I mounted again and turned that way, somewhat

comforted by the thought that we were supposed to be following a horseman, and that he certainly would not ride where we could not follow.

After all, it was rather a simple matter of riding around the end of that gash. I turned back down the other side, for I seemed to remember hearing the dogs come back to an approximately straight line from where I had waited beside the trail. But if they had done that or not I could not tell, for now I heard nothing of them and could only guess and ride on. One encouraging fact was that the sorrel wanted to go that way, so I more or less gave him his head and let him pick his own trail. I have always had great respect for the sagacity of a good horse.

By then it was as dark as it would be until the moon rose, which would not be long, I felt sure. The Bend was not so very wide, that was one comfort, and if the dogs turned and went trailing back down to the lower end, the wind would bring me the sound. And I thanked the good Lord Ellie had not kept them on the leash which silenced them on the trail. Cold comfort, but it was better than nothing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE SADDLE-STRING TRAIL

By the occasional sound of flowing water off to my left, and by the ghostly white blur of sand dunes which now and then loomed close by, I knew that the sorrel was going north, out of the Bend. There was no use in trying to guide him in this direction or that; he knew as much about it as I did, and I had an idea his ears, being many times keener than mine, could catch the sound of the dogs on the trail and even of Ellie's horse. At any rate, he seemed to be in no doubt of where he wanted to go.

While I rode, a new theory hatched itself in my anxious brain, and the farther I went, the more plausible it seemed to me. It seemed probable that my man of the shadow, the town accomplice, had ridden into the Bend, maybe to signal his gang across the river. I could see how easily and safely that could be done. A regular system of torch signals could be used, and who would ever see, save those for whom the message was intended?

Riding into the Bend at night would be perfectly simple, too. From the house or any of the ranch buildings, the gate itself was not visible, because the slope was wrinkled in little ridges, and the gate stood in a slight depression. A man could ride out from town in broad daylight and, keeping well to the westward of the road in to the ranch, would never be seen at all until he was through the Bend gate and riding up over the brow of the low hill. Even that glimpse could be guarded against, if he followed the fence west for a few rods.

It seemed to me the most logical explanation. It would keep the gang in touch with the sheriff's movements without risking the ride from Porcupine straight out to Dry Ridge. Who would ever suspect a man riding toward Sheriff Whitcome's ranch of being one of the Dry Ridge gang? The sheriff himself would think nothing of meeting him, unless, perhaps, he met him inside the ranch gate. And at night it would be no trick at all to avoid a meeting.

That theory seemed to be proving itself now. His trail, granting it was his trail which the dogs were following, seemed in a fair way to lead us toward town, if not actually into its streets. I began to hope that this was going to be the solution to the mystery. If the dogs trailed him into town and to some place where I could manage to identify him, then one member of the gang at least would be caught. I was all the more anxious to overtake Ellie and tell her what I thought, and be with her at the finish.

She wouldn't stop to wait for me, of course. She couldn't. She would have to follow the dogs and keep as close as possible. I went on and on, listening for that occasional yelp and worrying because I did not hear it. Worrying because I was pretty sure the dogs would find our outlaw, and Ellie might have to face him alone.

I came upon a wire fence which I knew must be the boundary fence across the neck of the Bend, rode down it a little way because the sorrel insisted, and came upon a dimly seen gap which I knew for a gate left open. I saw the posts on either side, as Golden West leaped through.

I pulled him to a stop, dismounted and went back to see if other horse tracks showed. It isn't easy to make a match burn with a clear flame when a wind is blowing, and I nearly

emptied my matchbox before I accomplished the feat. Even then I could not be certain, though it seemed to me there were hoof marks there other than the ones my horse had made.

The gate, I saw, was a simple contrivance of wire fastened to stakes, which might be pulled across and fastened to the post. I left it lying there where I had found it. And as I remounted, I distinctly heard the gurgle of the river close by.

The trail had taken the dogs and Ellie out of the Bend, through a gate I had until now known nothing about. My theory was showing itself to be a fact, then. I wondered if Ellie had seen what it meant. Our man had taken every precaution against being seen by any one on the ranch, and he certainly was headed toward town. If Ellie had been beside me, I should have felt almost jubilant.

The sorrel horse seemed to think he was going back to town, to the stall and feedbox he knew best. He pulled on the reins so insistently that I let him out a little, though now of course I could not trust him to follow Ellie and the dogs, and had to depend for that upon myself. And then it occurred to me that if I rode fast enough, I was sure to overtake her on the way in. I let him take his own gait.

He went like a yellow streak across the Whitcome pasture, still keeping close to the river. He slowed for another gate, but that too was lying on the ground, pulled to one side for easy passing. He made sure of that, cautious beast, leaped through and was on his way again. Head up, he galloped across the level ground, making for the main road.

The moon was brightening the sky a little to the east, and when the sorrel struck the ranch trail, I could dimly see it as a darker line drawn across the prairie. The horse had barely picked up his swift smooth stride however when I pulled him

in again to listen. Coming down the wind from the west I heard the yelp I had come to recognize as Tex's voice.

They had swung off from the direct trail to town, and where they went, Ellie would follow. It came again, the unmistakable trail yelp—I could not call it baying, exactly—of the lead hound. Half a mile or more away, I judged from the faintness of the sound—but if I knew Texas, he had the scent and, running free, was letting us know.

Somewhat to Golden West's disgust, I thought—though he would never openly rebel against the rein—I wheeled him short out of the trail and for the first time touched him with my heels. The response I got was a sensation of soaring rhythmically through space. Ellie had told me he had speed, but I had never really tried him out. Now for the first time I saw just what she meant.

He struck some sort of trail that was fairly smooth, pointed his nose into the wind, and ran in long smooth leaps that never stirred me in the saddle. I leaned to the wind that his swift pace raised to a gale. My hat went sailing and the wind lifted my hair. For a moment the joy of flying through space made me forget even Ellie and our man hunt.

But the yelping of the dogs grew nearer, more insistent, and I knew then the scent had suddenly grown hotter and they were nearing the end of the chase. The sorrel's feet drummed the earth as we hurtled down a hill, rounded a thick and half-familiar grove and heard the deep, bell-toned baying that told the quarry had been run to earth and the hunt was ended.

Just where, did not concern me so much at first, so long as it brought me to her. Until I knew that she was with the dogs and safe, I had little thought for anything else. Under my firm

pressure on the reins, the sorrel slowed to an easy lope. Then, as a house showed just beyond the grove, I pulled him to a walk.

The trail ran past the front and on to vague buildings behind it, where the dogs were making a clamor. But I forgot them completely, as one forgets the noise of breakers on the sand when a man is drowning in the riptide off shore.

Even now I feel that same cold horror—One room in the lower corner of the house was lighted and a cheap, light-colored blind pulled down over the window facing the road. And on the blind, plain as could be, was that profiled silhouette I had seen twice before in Porcupine.

It was like snapping on a light in my brain. I knew that profile now—knew it so well I was amazed that recognition had ever escaped me. I was stunned, paralyzed, staring at that shadow, knowing what it meant, and yet refusing to accept the knowledge. And while I stared and could not look away, the sorrel horse carried me past and brought me to the stables.

The dogs were there, baying their triumph over a successful hunt. As I slid from the saddle beside them, I saw that Texas was bellied down beside a saddle on the ground, one paw resting across it with a proprietary air that might have been amusing at another time.

So that was it. I did not need to look, yet I walked over to them, slapped at Texas as I spoke his name, and felt his snapping teeth graze my hand as he backed growling away. What I was looking for was easy enough to find. Right under my hand was the proof, in the strings I took in my fingers, drawing them through my hand. One broken off halfway down—somehow I knew it was the one.

So this was the end of the saddle-string trail that Ellie had been so eager to find. Here, of all places! My knees bent under me. I felt sick—sorry for him, sorry for her. And as for myself, I called myself a Judas because I had helped her hunt him down.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

END OF THE HUNT

THE house door facing toward the stable was open, just as she had left it, I suppose, when she burst in upon him with her bitter knowledge. I walked up in the darkness to the open door and saw her there, standing backed against the table, her gloved fingers gripping its edge. She looked at bay, and yet she was a white accusing angel of retribution, I thought.

I had meant to go in, but now I felt that my place was out there in the dark, watching over her and yet leaving those two alone. Steve had his back to me, facing Ellie, so I could not see his face. But I was taking no risk for her. No telling what a man may do when he is desperate—when he knows what he has lost. My gun was in my pocket until he spoke; then instinctively I pulled it out and held it in my hand.

Steve's voice had a mocking devil in it, the devil of recklessness, of despair—and of that kind of braggart courage that will laugh in the face of death itself. I watched him like a hawk.

“Yes,” he taunted her, “you’re shocked to death! You never dreamed a man could love you and still rob banks, did yuh? You’re mad clear through because you’ve been fooled all this while—but you’re madder because I won’t tell yuh how sorry I am, and ask yuh to forgive me and I’ll be a good boy and never do it again. You’d like to save me from myself, wouldn’t yuh, lady mine?” His tone roughened. “I’ll bet, by God, you’d even marry me to reform me!”

“Oh, I *hate* you, Steve Johnson!” Her voice was low, but it must have stung him like a whip. “I’ve respected you,

admired you—even imagined I loved you, like a fool!—and all the while you’ve been just a common thief!”

“Not common, Ellie girl! Don’t say that—you hurt my pride! I’m one of the bunch that’s kept the whole country guessing, and I don’t consider that common—not by a damn sight! Not after the way I’ve hazed the Dry Ridge gang from hell to breakfast, helping trail me and my pardners down—”

He laughed, and something gripped me in the chest. I knew just how his white teeth shone, how his eyes squinted up with laughter, how like a handsome reckless boy he was looking.

She saw it too and closed her eyes, as if she could not bear the sight. But she was game and presently she opened them again and looked at him coldly.

“Well, you’re at the end of your trail now. You’re uncommonly cunning—smart—but you see, you’re caught just the same! And I’m the one who’s been a little smarter than you are, Steve Johnson.” And then, before even I who was watching her every expression knew what was in her mind, her gun was out and pointed straight at Steve.

He chuckled. “Caught yourself an outlaw, have yuh, lady mine? Now, what you figure on doing with him?”

“I figure,” she said, “on turning you over to the sheriff. What did you suppose?”

Steve’s mocking laughter filled the room. “Sure! Sure! Run tell the sheriff, lady mine! He’d love that. Why, you damned, adorable little fool, ain’t you caught on yet? Turn me over to your dad, and you turn me over to the ringleader—the big chief of the Dry Ridge gang! Why—”

“You—*lie!*” I hope I never hear her speak in that tone again.

“That’s where you’re away off. Why, hell, the Dry Ridge gang ain’t ever been caught, has it? Why do you reckon your dad fell down and busted his record all at once, of always getting his man?” He shook his head as if her denseness was beyond his understanding.

“Why, he’s the one that started me off and trained me to be a good outlaw!” He gave a snort of bitter mirth. “Had me over on Dry Ridge, huntin’ a horse thief—got him too. We got to talkin’ about how easy it would of been for him to stay on the dodge—” His hand flung out, dismissing the matter as of no moment now.

“The sheriff’s a damn smart man,” he drawled. “Almost as smart as his daughter! He’s done the plannin’, the fixin’, and we—I—did the work. You’d be surprised how slick he is, Ellie girl. That’s where you got your brains, so don’t go and turn up your nose at him now. Smart enough to cop most of the winnings for himself, I notice—always said he had to square fellows in town. I expect he did, at that.”

His mood changed. From the hot color in her cheeks, I knew he was looking her over. “That’s a new ridin’ skirt you’ve got, ain’t it? I expect Wells Fargo paid for that, lady mine. And them gloves—they likely come out of that first haul we made on the Citizens’ Bank. Say, don’t yuh think you’re in a kinda poor position to raise a howl, Ellie? You and Ray sure have dipped your paws pretty deep in the boodle, if I’m any judge.”

He reached into his shirt pocket, got out his tobacco and papers, and rolled himself a cigarette, while she watched him as a bird must watch the snake that’s going to swallow it in a minute.

“Yuh know, I can’t for the life of me see how you’re going to make anything by going to your dad about this,” he drawled, lifting a foot and scratching a match on the sole of his boot. “I ain’t scarey, as a general thing, but I sure would hate to take a chance on bawling him out about bein’ leader of the Dry Ridge gang. I sure would.”

“Well, I wouldn’t!”

His voice softened to a tender kind of impatience. “Why, girl, he’s the *sheriff*—don’t yuh know it? He’s got political strings he can pull—why, it would be pickin’s to have you committed to the asylum as a lunatic, if you went to him with what you know. And don’t ever think he wouldn’t! I’m afraid you don’t know your dad as well as I do. I wouldn’t put anything past him, if it’s to save his own neck; not even murder.”

Ellie seemed scarcely to be listening. She laid down her gun, pulled off her gloves, looked at them as if they were fouled and flung them across the room.

“He got them last week!” Then she pulled herself together, her eyes blazing but her voice calm and cold. “I don’t believe a word you’re saying,” she said. “You’re just trying to scare me off from telling Dad about you. He isn’t a thief! He isn’t even a political grafter like all the rest. Don’t I know how bitter he is against all that? It’s a very clever bluff, Steve, but it doesn’t go with me. You’ll have to prove it.”

I heard the sharp breath he drew. “All right, I will.” There was no banter in his voice now. “We’re old, reliable neighbors, perfectly respectable, as far as any one knows. Your dad ain’t a snob, except where he’s got to protect himself. Now listen, Ellie. *You* know when I fell in love with yuh—*don’t* yuh?”

“Y-yes—” It was no more than a gasp.

“It was after we got organized and started in workin’ the country to a fare-you-well. You remember, all right. You was ready to meet me halfway. Well—I told the sheriff before I told you—told you in so many words, I mean. He put his foot down. He said I couldn’t drag you in with me. He couldn’t help it if you’re his daughter, but you didn’t have to be a highway robber’s wife, and take a chance on me spendin’ twenty or thirty years in the pen.

“Well, I saw the point, all right. I did love yuh, Ellie, and I still do, if that’s anybody’s business but my own. If I wasn’t livin’ outside the law, I’d of asked yuh long ago to marry me. I’ve been holdin’ back, thinkin’ when we got a big enough stake, maybe I’d have the nerve to tell yuh, and we’d pull out and live in some other country, and nobody’d know the difference. You—sometimes you talked like you wouldn’t think it was such a terrible thing to marry an outlaw—”

“That,” said Ellie with stiff lips, “isn’t proof.”

Steve winced. I could feel him harden, fight back to his old devilish taunting. “All right, you can have proof enough to last yuh a lifetime. The sheriff is due here any time now. He’s coming after his share of that last haul. Ask him about it yourself, if you’ve got the nerve—but don’t blame me if he kinda gets up on his ear. He might raise cain about you havin’ the dogs out again! It’s just possible,” he added laconically, “if you’re willing to live up to the way you’ve pretended to think, he might be willin’ to cut you in on the next job!”

The blood surged up into her white face, and her eyes left him and looked away. Of course she was remembering those revolutionary ideas she was so fond of expressing—ideas which did not after all bear the test. She wasn’t finding Steve

attractive as an outlaw, or picturesque or romantic. She did not look pleased and proud to hear that her own father was that bold and cunning leader of the Dry Ridge gang—though it was Steve, his trusted lieutenant, who actually did the work, of course, and kept the posses guessing.

No, she wasn't pleased and she wasn't proud, or anything but horrified, to hear the truth. And it was the truth. I could see it all now, and so, I am sure, could she. There had been a ring in Steve's voice that was terribly convincing.

Because her glance was wandering away from Steve—remembering with shame her false and immature ranting against the lawful order of life—she caught sight of me standing there in the shadow of the house, just outside the doorway. She let go the table, pushing her gun to the floor. And she came with a little rush, her two hands held out to me for help and comfort.

“Oh, Kind Sir, it's Dad—and Steve! The Dry Ridge gang—it was Dad all the while!”

“I know,” I said, and stepped in and took her in my arms. “It will come out all right, somehow, if you don't weaken. Brace up, Pretty Maid, and take your medicine like a man!” Sorry love-making, but I had to stiffen her courage first of all.

My eyes met Steve's across her head, and in the long, searching look he gave me, I read hopeless acceptance of defeat and failure.

“You win,” he said stoically, and twisted his handsome mouth into a bitter smile. “I guess,” he added, in his laconic fashion, “I won't get to take you fishin', after all.”

That shattered whatever antagonism the truth had raised against him. “I'm sorry, old man—”

“Oh, that’s all right,” he brusquely repelled my sympathy. “I played a chancey game and I knew it. I didn’t have to. Nobody had any strings on me—at first. I was out for the coin. And the excitement.” He blew smoke carefully. “I guess I’ve got no kick coming, whatever happens. It sure was fun—while it lasted.”

I believe he lied. I think he was talking for Ellie’s ears, trying to rouse her resentment and disgust; trying to make her hurt less hard to bear. He stood back, leaning against the wall, with his booted feet crossed in a fine pose of indifference.

But Ellie was standing within the circle of my arms, her face hidden on my shoulder, and she was crying. And Steve might play the stoic all he liked—he couldn’t hide the suffering in his eyes, or keep the pain from showing at the corners of his half-smiling mouth, or steady the twitching of his fingers. He was going through hell while we waited, that boy. And I had nothing for him but pity and a compassionate sort of understanding.

I’m glad of that.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE END OF THE GANG

LEISURELY hoofbeats approached the house, passed it. Presently the sheriff walked in among us. Big, placid, half-smiling—and then I caught that wary gleam behind the twinkle in his eyes, and for the first time knew what it meant. Fear! The unsleeping vigilance of the thief who has his guilt to guard. His eyes bored into mine, rested sternly for a minute upon Ellie, who had lifted her head at his entrance but obeyed the pressure of my arms and stayed where she was.

“Well! Well!” The sheriff paused inquiringly. Plainly he was waiting for some explanation of our presence there and jumped to the most obvious conclusion. “What’s the matter here? Ellie hurt or something? Her mother sent me over, soon as I got home. She—” He must have seen that he had blundered, for he gave us a sharp glance and let his sentence hang there unfinished.

“Yes, she’s hurt. Terribly hurt, Sheriff,” I said. “She has just found out about the Dry Ridge gang. We had clues—one of them the dogs trailed here.”

“Yeah?” The sheriff turned to Steve, then gave us a look that chilled my blood. His hand moved stealthily backward.

Steve’s hand dropped to his gun. “I wouldn’t, if I was you,” he drawled. “You got to remember who they are.”

The sheriff gave him a venomous glance. “How much is your doing?” he snarled.

“None of it, except I’m the one they trailed.” He waved a hand toward me. “Ask your dude friend. I guess his word’ll

go farther than mine, right now.”

“Steve couldn’t help it,” I said firmly, and yet with haste. I felt the sheriff was dynamite, with the fuse burning, just then. Capable of murdering us both, if that was the only way to save himself.

“What tomfoolery you two been up to, anyway?”

“Well,” I told him, “in the first place, I was in the alley when the bank was robbed, and I saw Steve’s shadow on the frosted glass. I didn’t recognize him, though. Then you weren’t home when the president ’phoned his bank had been robbed, so Ellie and I took the dogs and went over to Dry Ridge, thinking we might pick up the trail. We found a piece of saddle string on the ground by a spring, and the dogs took the trail from that and ran into pepper—but Ellie saved the string.”

“Did, huh? Damn foolishness. Anybody might drop a piece of saddle string.”

“Yes,” I countered, “but only thieves would cover their trail with pepper.”

“Huh.”

“At any rate, we were riding down in the Bend last night, just for the moonlight ride, and some one took a couple of shots at us. So this evening we took the dogs down there—and the saddle string—and the dogs brought us here.”

“That ain’t evidence. Any lawyer—”

“But that isn’t all. I got left behind, and Steve and Ellie were talking in here when I rode up. I saw his shadow on the blind, there, and knew at once he was the man in the bank that night. That, it seems to me, is pretty conclusive evidence.

Moreover, he confessed. I think,” I finished steadily, “that about clinches the case.”

The sheriff looked from us to Steve and back again, and I could fairly see his thoughts racing, weighing my words and his chances. He turned at last and frowned at Steve.

“Well, Steve, I must say I’m flabbergasted. Here I been usin’ you as special deputy—”

“It’s no use, Sheriff,” I broke in before those two could clash. “Ellie threatened to turn Steve over to you, and to save trouble, Steve told her exactly where you stand in the matter. Confidentially, as he supposed. But I was outside and heard it all.”

That was a touchy moment. The sheriff thought of murder. I know it as well as if he had spoken his thoughts aloud. But there was Steve, watching him like a cat and saying nothing, but with his hand on his gun. The moment passed.

“Wel-l,” he drawled at last, “seems to me you’ve learned most too much to be healthy. What yuh going to do about it? Swear out a warrant in the morning?”

I looked at Ellie, and she looked at me, and I saw she was just a woman and wanted her man to bear the brunt of things, as is perfectly right and proper, in my opinion. But it was a hard decision to make, and I won’t say I decided according to law.

“I don’t like the idea of letting my father-in-law serve a long term in the penitentiary,” I told him shortly. “You both ought to get what you deserve. But I’m a selfish brute, and I don’t want my wife worrying—”

She pulled away from me. “No! You can’t—I won’t marry you, ever! My own father a—”

My hand went over her mouth and stopped the words, and I gathered her into my arms by force. "I'll have something to say about that, Pretty Maid," I whispered, and turned to the sheriff. "I wouldn't want to see Ellie and her mother and Ray disgraced before the world—"

He wilted at mention of Ray. "My God, Walter, don't let Ray know!" I never before saw a man go white and trembling in a breath. "Don't let the boy despise his father! I wouldn't let him marry Florence, just because she's the daughter of a ___"

"Look out, there!" Steve's gun was in his hand, and I saw another lightning transformation which amazed me. Bandit, outlaw—fighting man he was, in every line of his face, every glance of his fierce blue eyes. "You and me, we're in it up to our eyebrows—but God damn yuh, if you pull in anybody else, I'll spread your brains all over the damn place!"

Even the sheriff quailed before him. "Oh, all right—all right," he mumbled. "Keep your shirt on, can't yuh?" He gave me a quick glance.

"You and Steve are the gang, apparently," I smoothed the moment over. "It may be we can keep Ray and his mother from knowing. I'm sure Ellie would be willing, provided—"

"I'm willin' to do anything you say, only so this don't get out. I've quit, anyway. Steve can tell yuh this was our last haul. Steve was plannin' on pullin' out and leadin' a different life, and I—I been going to resign and settle down to ranchin'. Give us a chance—"

"You'll have to disgorge that gold and return it to the bank. That goes without saying. And any other plunder you may still have in your possession." I had a sudden thought. "I

wonder, Steve, if that gold isn't buried somewhere near that big rock, and if that isn't why you shot at us last night?"

Steve's glance flickered, wanting to look at the sheriff and afraid it would betray him. "I never thought about it being you two," he parried, and grinned a little.

But I wouldn't be put off. "Well, you two will have to show us where it is, and the bank will have to be notified that—that the sheriff and a deputy have found the gold. Or we'd better say that Miss Whitcome and I had the dogs out for exercise and—and the dogs dug up the money. That ought to pass muster."

"Pretty slick," Steve made dry comment, watching the sheriff.

"Never mind about motives and—and all that. You men will have to go straight from now on, and if any one else is involved, they'll have to turn honest and work for what they get. Do you give me—us—your word on that?"

"It's better 'n we deserve," the sheriff said meekly, not looking at me but at Steve. "I'd be willin' to take my medicine, but the thought of disgracin' my family—"

"We won't go into that. It won't be anything strange if the Dry Ridge gang suddenly decides to remove itself from the country and is never heard of again. It may cost the sheriff his election—"

"Oh, I'll resign, anyway," he said dispiritedly. "I wish I could do something more—"

"Oh, let's go home!" cried Ellie, as if she could bear no more. "Come on, Father. The more we talk about it, the more horrible it seems!"

“Yes, there’s nothing more to do here.” I looked at Steve. “It wouldn’t be a bad idea if the gang did leave the country. Not too suddenly, but as soon as it can be arranged.”

“That’s what,” Steve nodded acquiescence. “I’ve been wanting to pull out, anyway. Only there was Flo—”

“You needn’t,” I said, “worry about Florence. She and Ray were married this afternoon, and they’re on their way East. They won’t know anything about this. Or if they do, it will be your own fault.”

I believe that lifted a load from Steve’s mind, though he only nodded. And he had the grace to turn his head away when Ellie and I went out. We waited while the sheriff lingered for a few words with his henchman. Not even a band of outlaws, I suppose, can dissolve their organization without a word. He wasn’t long, however, and when he came out he walked ahead of us to the horses, whistling the dogs to him and fastening on the leashes Ellie silently handed him.

The moon was up by then, and I could see the sheriff, a broken, and I hoped a penitent man, riding before us with his chin sunk on his chest and the dogs like mournful shadows at his horse’s heels. As we passed the house, I saw Steve, tall and silent, standing in the doorway, watching us go.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

STEVE SETTLES IT

No one spoke on that silent ride, and I did a lot of thinking. It struck me unpleasantly that, except for ropes to bind his arms perhaps, the sheriff might have been our prisoner. He rode sagged in his saddle, staring down over his horse's ears, adroitly keeping the length of his horse ahead of us. I got to watching him and trying to read his thoughts. He looked utterly crushed with humiliation and remorse, and in spite of his systematic thievery and his hypocrisy, I was sorer for him than I had ever been for any one before, unless it was Steve. And yet I knew the sheriff was a dangerous man; I half distrusted his complete surrender and I rode prepared for almost anything.

We went straight to the house and left our horses standing beside the porch. Mother Whitcome luckily had gone to bed. And since she confessed to a deaf ear, and claimed to have a habit of turning her good ear into the pillow, so that she could sleep in peace while her restless family roamed about the house, I had no fear that she would ever know.

I made straight for the telephone and picked up the book.

"I'll call up the bank. What's the name of the president? Parks, isn't it? And the initials?"

The sheriff had produced a cigar and was inspecting it with pursed lips. "P. C. Parks," he said. "I think his number is Red two-one-eight. Hell, you goin' to rout him out of bed and get busy *to-night*?"

"We may as well," I said, and called the number. And all at once I knew that haste was of prime importance, though I

could scarcely have told why.

A rumbling voice answered me almost at once and admitted that P. C. Parks of the Citizens' State Bank was speaking.

I spoke rapidly. "Mr. Parks, this is Mr. Tenney, house guest of Sheriff Whitcome. You may recall that his son introduced me—yes, but it isn't about that draft I'm calling. I wanted to tell you that this evening, as Miss Whitcome and I were out riding, we were fortunate enough to find that gold which was stolen from your bank—"

"Whu-*what*?"

"You'd better ring off and call up the cashier," drawled the sheriff in my free ear. "Parks was in on that deal. Put me wise and was to take his cut when the dust settled. I kinda wanted him to hear the news."

I slammed the receiver into its hook, cutting off a babble of questions. "We're losing needless time here," I snapped. "Are you sure the cashier isn't another accomplice?"

"Now, now, don't get excited," he soothed me. "Parks' wife is sick and I kinda wanted him to get the news—just so he can git out from under, in case anything drops. Call up John two-three-two. That's the cashier. He'll be tickled to death."

The cashier, Mr. Perham, was brisk and businesslike and seemed highly elated. He wanted particulars and I gave them very convincingly, I thought.

"Is Sheriff Whitcome at home? He is? May I speak to him, please?"

I looked at the sheriff and he came forward, holding his lighted cigar out to one side. A peculiar grin was on his broad

smooth face.

“Whitcome. Yes, I guess it is—I just heard about it, after I got in. Sure. Well, I don’t know. We’ll spare no effort of course—Wait. I’ll ask Tenney.”

Without covering the mouthpiece, he turned gravely to me. “He wants to know if you saw anything of the robbers. You just found the cache, didn’t yuh?” He was looking at me intently, and swung his eyes significantly toward the mouthpiece. His face, oddly enough, still wore its placid, good-humored expression.

“Just the gold,” I lied distinctly. “The dogs were nosing around the place, and we got curious and investigated.”

The sheriff nodded approval as he turned back to the ’phone. “Tenney says—Oh. You heard him, eh? Yes. I’m callin’ my office. Sure, you better keep it quiet. If they don’t get wind it’s gone, they’ll show up there sooner or later...” He listened, frowning. “Well—can they keep their mouths shut?—Yes, sure. About four miles from here—good trail all the way.—Yes, right on my land. Nervy, all right—Well, three or four will do. Tenney and I will go along—Sure, come armed. Half an hour—an hour ’ll do. G’by.”

He hung up the receiver, looked at his cigar and placed it in the corner of his mouth. “They’ll be out here in an hour or so to go dig it up,” he remarked casually.

Ellie stared at him, and suddenly her eyes were full of tears. “Dad, whatever else you are, you—you’ve got nerve,” she paid tribute, and left the room before he could reply.

“Go tell her I ain’t had any supper yet,” he said to me. “It’ll give her something to do. No use routin’ out the cook. Tell her coffee, and whatever there is in the icebox ’ll do.”

I hurried out, and I found her sitting in the dining room, her head upon her folded arms. Only for the moonlight streaming in I would have passed her by unknowing.

“Well, what is it now?” she asked dully, when I lifted her up and led her on into the kitchen.

“He wants coffee. Wait—I’ll be back.” And I walked on my toes to the door leading into the hall, found it ajar and shamelessly put my ear to the crack.

“Rural double-two?” I heard the sheriff murmur. “Yeah. I got to speak low. They’re goin’ after it to-night. Waitin’ now for the cashier’s bunch ... ’bout an hour—then another from here.... N-no, they’ll keep their mouths shut—or—Oh, all right. G’by.”

Before he had hung up, I was back in the kitchen. I had the table set for him there and was slicing bread when the sheriff came in.

“I oughta get hold of Perham again,” he said. “Catch him before he leaves, mebby. Come along, Walter—make sure I don’t pull nothin’.”

I laid down the bread knife and followed him into the hall, waited until he got his number and listened to the conversation that followed. It was all perfectly straightforward, the sheriff thinking of the job in hand and giving his instructions.

They’d better bring an extra horse along to pack the gold, he said. No telling how much loot they might uncover—no, the kids only waited to see what was in the cache. They didn’t stop to look it all over. Ought to be quite a haul—And he named the jobs the Dry Ridge gang had done and how much had been taken in each robbery. You can’t, I gathered, cut a sheriff short as you might a common man.

Perham was to go somewhere and get a certain horse, a little buckskin mare belonging to Ling. And he was to get in touch with Morgan, and the sheriff would call his office and have Pat Ellis come out with a couple of men. You couldn't, he said, take any chances with a bunch like the Dry Ridge gang.

The sheriff ate a hearty supper of cold chicken, bread and butter, cottage cheese, coffee and custard pie. His face was placid as ever, but his manner was much subdued and he seemed to be engaged in deep cogitation most of the time. His manner toward Ellie struck me particularly, it was so deprecating, so almost placating.

The girl did not seem to notice, she was so dazed and sort of incredulous. But she showed very plainly how much she depended on me, and I was able to comfort her a little, out on the porch waiting for the crowd from town, while the sheriff sat inside and smoked a fresh cigar.

Then they were here, and there was some talk and a little mild confusion, and the three of us mounted and led the way down into the Bend.

No one thought it strange that the sheriff took the lead. I suppose they took it for granted we had shown him the place. Ellie and I tried to hurry, but he managed to set the pace himself without seeming to do so. I hope no one is going to wonder afterwards at the sheriff's lack of haste.

We had nearly reached the big rock when Ellie suddenly spurred her horse forward. "Some one's there—after it! Oh, hurry!" she cried. I jumped my horse ahead and caught hers by the bridle, forcing it back. The others got in one another's way at first, I think, but it all happened so quickly it is difficult to be sure.

I know the sheriff gave a shout and spurred far out in the lead, firing as he rode. By the big rock a gun flamed again and again, and the sheriff toppled, clung to the saddle with both hands, then slid off and lay in a heap, so that our horses nearly stumbled over him.

Just that quickly it was over. By the big rock Steve lay on his face, dead with a bullet hole in his heart. The sheriff too—And if that is drama, I want no more of it. In reality, it is just grim and ugly. I had never seen men die before.

They called the sheriff a man of iron nerve, for riding out ahead like that to take the risk. Ellie and I—well, we are letting it go that way. After all, he will rob no more banks.

But there is one thing I was determined upon, and I think I put it over very well, in the excitement. It was about Steve. I couldn't quite stomach the sheriff dying a hero and Steve going under such suspicious circumstances, so I did a little lying on my own account, with Ellie to back me up.

“Steve Johnson,” I told them all, “was deputized to come over here and guard the place. He was warned to watch that gold, in case the gang should come before the sheriff's crowd arrived to move it. Miss Whitcome and I both heard her father 'phone the instructions to Steve, but the sheriff did not make it clear that we were coming right away. I was tempted to speak to the sheriff about it, but hesitated because I thought I had heard him wrong.

“Poor Steve,” I added, “evidently mistook us for the Dry Ridge gang.” Just why the sheriff had mistaken Steve for one of the gang, I did not attempt to explain. But when the coroner's inquest is held, Ellie and I will have our stories ready. We certainly are not going to betray Steve.

For one thing, Steve must have shot the sheriff just to make sure he didn't try somehow to make away with Ellie and myself. I feel sure of that, because he had been given plenty of time to move the cache, as they call it. I think he and the sheriff arranged that when he stayed behind to speak to Steve. And that secret 'phone call of his was to Steve, telling him to hurry and get down there right away, because the bank was sending men out as soon as possible.

Steve went, all right, but he did not touch the gold or do more than make it look as if dogs had been digging there and had uncovered the box where the sacks of coin were piled. It certainly would not have taken him two hours to do that.

And there is another thing that looks very strange to me, and also to Ellie. The sheriff is—or was—a very good shot, they tell me, but still it would take a superhuman marksman to shoot at a man who is standing in deep shadow and put a bullet through his heart. And I distinctly remember a shot by the rock while the sheriff was falling off his horse. So, unless it develops at the inquest that no powder burns were found, I shall always think Steve shot himself the moment he had made sure of the sheriff.

The inquest is to-morrow, and after that the funeral. I am taking charge of everything as well as I can, in the absence of Ray, whom I advised Ellie and her mother not to try to locate just yet. If they read about it in the papers, that cannot be helped. But I don't suppose they will do much reading for a while or be interested in the news.

As soon as the funeral is over—within a day or two, I hope—I expect that glum Presbyterian minister who married Ray will have another ceremony to perform. And then we'll take Ellie's mother along and go and try to find Ray and Florence

in St. Paul, and after that—well, it will be whatever the women want us all to do.

THE END

[The end of *The Dry Ridge Gang* by Bertha Muzzy Sinclair (as B. M. Bower)]