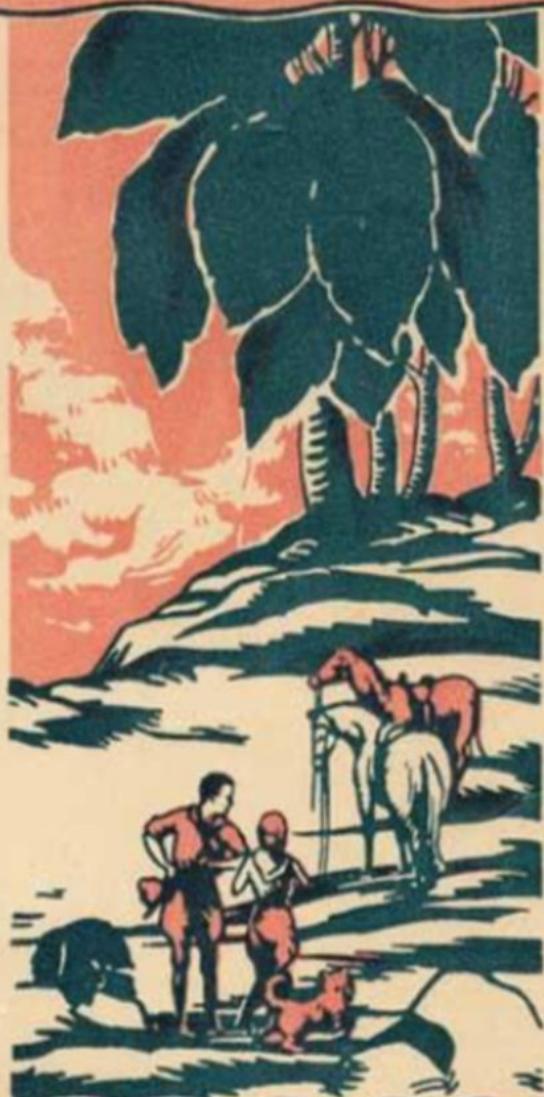


WHISPERING LEAVES



By **ALEX PHILIP**

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By
ALEX. PHILIP



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WHISPERING LEAVES

*Wind in the branches, high and sweet,
And coolness welling underneath.
Voices in the leafy June,
Two by two I hear them croon;
Once more came the breeze, and cast
Leaves upon us as it passed.
Velvet green upon the ground;
Dark green forest all around;
Skies of heavenly blue, and from a tree
Whispering Leaves tell tales to me.*

LOWELL OTUS REESE.

WHISPERING LEAVES

CHAPTER I

BRUCE ARLEN felt that he had about reached his limit. Standing at the open office window he looked gloomily out into the hurry-scurry of Vancouver's busy streets where tired, impatient humans jostled one another; all in a hunger for haste in a mad rush to gain a living, power, success and wealth.

He was sick of it all. Sick of city din and confusion; the shrill hootings of motor horns, raucous shouting of paper vendors, screeching tram-car wheels; all borne on a soot-laden air reeking with the smell of burning gasoline. He was tired of keeping up appearances; doing things he could not afford to do, things he did not want to do, things he ought not to do, because of what somebody, for whom he cared not a tinker's damn, might think about it.

There passed before his mind the disordered pageant of days to come; inchoate, intangible days of money-grubbing in stuffy, over-heated offices; nights of airless theatres, gay parties when he would drink and smoke too much; when he would have to listen to the chitter-chatter of women, men's loud, boring tones, never ceasing. He ran strong white fingers through his mop of curly brown hair, his face twisting in a grimace of disgust. How long could he stand it?

Had he known that his father's friend, John Hickman, was a dealer in farm lands rather than a tiller of the soil, he would not have sold the old farm in Ontario—a farm wrested from the forest by his ancient forbears—and become a cog in the office machine of "Hickman & Company, Farm & Timber Brokers, Mortgages & Loans."

Still, he should not complain. He had done well. Four years with the company had earned him the position of Assistant Manager with a generous salary. He had been consistently lucky in the stock market during the last few months and now he was engaged to Hickman's daughter, Audrey.

The thought of Audrey brought a wry smile to Arlen's lips. Artificial and luxury-loving, she was tireless in the pursuit of pleasure. Dances, parties, theatres, cabarets with the attendant late hours had brought lines about her young mouth and circles under her lovely eyes. He had tried to make her believe that the quest of happiness did not lie down such devious and twisting paths, but her habits were too strongly entrenched. His counsel was unheeded.

And there was Anton Czersky. Arlen frowned angrily. Audrey was with him too much. People would talk. He was nothing but a third-rate artist. A lion with a certain class of women but nothing but a damned gigolo. One of those foreigners with a spike moustache, a tight-fitting coat, who hovered about a girl, touching her here, there, some other place with his fingertips, putting on her cloak, crooking his back in a courtly bow, kissing her hand or dashing across the room to pick up a fallen handkerchief.

Why couldn't Audrey be herself? Audrey's father had carved a fortune out of nothing on the shores of Burrard Inlet, and being a rather rough fellow had produced the silken apotheosis of Audrey. But to her mind there was nothing romantic about that. She said that Anton Czersky gave her an intellectual stimulus, a sense of romance. That he had the charming manners of the old world. Arlen's lips set in a firm straight line. He would have a serious talk with Audrey. She would have to drop this foreigner.

The previous evening he had 'phoned Audrey of a killing he had made in stocks. She had seized upon this as an excuse for another party. They had finished up at a roadhouse. Audrey had danced every dance, missed few drinks, and had distinguished herself by taking the drummer's place in the orchestra, and with Anton at the wheel they had started home in the early, rosy sunlight. He had felt Audrey's tired weight in his arms, had looked down at her lovely face and seen her eyes dull and heavy with fatigue. There had been no sense in going to bed. He had undressed, taken a cold shower and come straight to the office. He leaned his elbows on the desk and pressed his palms to his aching eyes. What a life! Arlen's gloomy thoughts were interrupted by the sound of Audrey's voice.

"Hello, old dear," she greeted him brightly. "How goes the battle?"

The girl filled the room with a heady perfume. She touched her lips lightly to Arlen's cheek. Arlen's face clouded as he saw the slender, immaculately clad figure of Audrey's satellite, Anton. Audrey held out a languid white hand.

"Cigarette, please, Bruce."

Before Arlen could accede to her request Anton was bending over her with cigarette case and lighter. She sat sidewise on a chair, one knee mounted on the other, and puffed at her cigarette.

Arlen found himself staring at her. He had never seen her look more beautiful. Her short skirt fitted snugly about her slim, graceful hips; adhered to her as though it were glued. And there were her long lashes, each individual lash curled by itself, black with mascara. The ends of her wind-blown bob curled like black commas on her cheeks, two to a cheek. Her

mouth was too red, too perfect. She was a work of art, an ornamental tempting thing.

She was so perfect that there were times when he felt that he would like to run both hands through her sleek coiffure and wash her face and lips. She was beautiful without the aid of make-up.

Arlen drew in his breath. She was marvellous. Here he was, frayed and worn, while she appeared as fresh as a newly opened flower. Yet he knew that she had slept only a few hours. How did she do it? Youth—the buoyancy of youth! That was it. He was too old for her. He was thirty-four and she was fourteen years his junior. The thought gave him a sudden pang.

The girl spoke drawlingly.

“I want you to cash a cheque for me, Bruce.” She smiled ruefully. “I woke up dead broke this morning.”

“Little wonder,” Arlen said shortly. “You were throwing money at the roadhouse entertainers.”

Audrey raised her fine brows. “Oh, was I? I must have been well spiffled.”

She pulled a small cheque book from out a gold mesh bag. Vanity case, cigarette holder and lighter clattered down on the desk. She produced a small pen from the miscellany and wrote the cheque.

Arlen, watching her with a meditative eye, saw that for all the girl’s seeming freshness her nerves were jumpy. The slim white hand holding the pen was shaky.

“Audrey,” he said abruptly, “you’ve got to cut out this crowd you’re associating with. Give up drinking and smoking so much and get to bed at a reasonable hour.”

She smiled with studied languor. “Is that a command?” she exacted.

“Yes, if you want to put it that way,” was his curt reply.

She sat silent a moment, as though she were giving the matter serious consideration. But when she looked up at him there was a humorous gleam in her dark eyes.

“All right, Bruce, I’ll do just that little thing for you. I’ll listen to the bedtime tales and then toddle off to my little bed.”

“Don’t be flippant,” he retorted with a sharpening note of impatience in his voice. “I’m serious.”

The humorous light left the girl’s eyes. Her red lips tightened. “Be yourself, Bruce. You’re talking nonsense. You know very well that I can

never go to such an extreme.”

“I’m through,” he solemnly asserted.

“Don’t be silly,” she reproved him. “After all, we haven’t only ourselves to consider. We’d have to give up all our friends and all social life. How could we do that?”

“Easily enough,” he replied sharply. “There are thousands of people who lead sane and sensible lives. Why stay in a rut? Why be like a flock of sheep? I’m fed-up!”

The girl’s display of temper was short lived. She laughed gaily.

“Hope you don’t start on the straight-and-narrow right away. As you know, we are invited to the Hewart’s tonight and when they entertain it’s *some* party.”

Arlen flung out his arms in a gesture of disgust.

“Good Lord! Another night. I’m not going.”

His eyes rested on the slender figure of the immaculate Anton who sat with gloved hand caressing a malacca cane, a smile of lofty tolerance playing about his thick, red lips.

That smile, which was almost a sneer, aroused an unreasonable anger in Arlen. He gestured toward the foreigner. “Take your little retriever with you and count me out,” he foolishly said.

Owing to Czersky’s limited command of the English language he did not catch the full import of Arlen’s remark, but he knew that something derogatory had been said about him and a dangerous glint flashed momentarily from his dusky eyes.

Audrey got to her feet, a heightened colour showing beneath the rouge.

“Bruce, what’s wrong with you today? You’re not only stupid, but you are positively rude.”

Suddenly she became aware that Arlen looked tired and careworn—positively ill. She noticed the harassed look in his eyes, the colourless face, the hard lines about his mouth and the droop of his broad shoulders.

Arlen felt Audrey’s soft arms about his neck, her warm body close to his own. “Bruce, dear,” she said gently, “you’re not yourself. Let’s not quarrel, please.”

He looked down into the lovely eyes that held a trace of tears. Certainly she was a sweet thing when in this mood. A lovely adorable thing. He had been a boor.

She pulled his head down and kissed him. “You’ll go tonight, won’t you, darling?” she implored.

“All right, all right.” Arlen surrendered listlessly.

Audrey picked up her bag from the desk. “Come on, Anton, let’s go places. See you tonight, old dear,” she added over her shoulder to Arlen.

Bruce sank wearily down to a chair by the window. Across the street a tiny park, bordered with trees, its green sod clipped to a velvety smoothness, shimmered under the rays of spring sunshine. An errant breeze set the leaves rustling and charged with the perfume of opening buds drifted through the open window. The young man’s nostrils drew in the sweet air lovingly.

Whispering Leaves!

The sound of clicking typewriters and the roar of city traffic seemed to fade, and swiftly a mental panorama unfolded. He saw the big poplar trees on the crest of the hill by the old farm; himself, a lad, stretched on his back under the canopy of spreading limbs, gazing up through the tracery of stirring leaves at the sky above. Hither he was wont to come for solace from boyish worries, real or fancied. In his visioning he saw himself in later years when the death of his father had forced him to give up an agricultural course at college. He had lain at the foot of the old tree, and, as in the days of childhood, the witchery of whispering leaves—like the counsel of a gentle friend—had proved an anodyne to his saddened spirit.

Yesterday he had taken his bi-yearly physical examination. His doctor had told him what he already knew. Exercise, fresh air and more sleep.

He would go away, he told himself, let the work go hang, get out of the turmoil and the rut in which he had placed himself—go somewhere away from everything.

He was planning, sitting there, feeling sick and empty and yet filled with intolerant anger with himself and everything in general when a heavy hand fell on his shoulder.

“Snap out of it, young feller!”

Startled, Arlen sprang nervously to his feet.

A thick-set, muscular individual, wearing a frilled buckskin coat, a wide sombrero in his hand, grinned amiably up at him. In age he was perhaps thirty-five or thereabouts. His grey eyes were wide set, his skin a deep brown, his nose uptilted, together with his protruding jaw lent him an undeniable air of pugnacity. He was a type of man dangerous to cross, Bruce decided in his first quick inventory. The smell of liquor emanated from the stranger.

The visitor jerked his thumb toward the counter.

“Girl told me that the head Shylock was out—that you’d look after me.” His appraising eyes swept over Arlen’s tall form. “Great hulking hop-toads!” he ejaculated. “You’re sure a husky guy to be a swivel chair dude. You’d ought to be holding a plough or swinging an axe. Ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

Arlen flushed. He was about to make an angry retort when he saw the twinkle in the warm grey eyes and the smile on the wide, kind mouth.

“Maybe you’re right,” Arlen agreed.

The man in the buckskin coat held out a thick, muscular hand. “Shake,” he invited with a friendly grin.

Arlen looked down at his own hands. Hands once as thick and brown as those of the man standing before him, now soft and white as a woman’s.

He drew out a chair for the visitor. “What can I do for you?”

“My name’s Tom Logan. What I want to know—. Gosh, but it’s hot in here.” He wiped his perspiring face with a soiled red handkerchief—“What I want to know first is if there’s been a big, red-headed guy in here with a long snoot, an Indian face long enough to eat out of a nose-bag and eyes like a rat?”

“I don’t think so,” Arlen replied, smiling broadly.

“Good! I got ahead of him then. I beat it out in a hurry. Great thundering gosh how I did travel.”

“Here’s Mr. Hickman,” Arlen announced.

The head of the firm crossed the floor to his private office. Logan’s eyes followed the corpulent figure until the door closed.

“So that’s old money-bags,” he chuckled. “Funny that most all them guys with plenty of dough have bay windows. He looks like a big, fat toad that’d just filled his tummy.” He came to his feet and braced his shoulders. “Well, here’s where he swallows another gnat. Can I go into the lion’s den? All right. I’ll leave the door open so’s he can kick me out.”

Arlen stared moodily out of the window. Farm loans. He hated the words. They were ominous words—words that brought sleepless nights and lines of care on the faces of the hardy tillers of the soil. Day after day he had seen weather-beaten, horny-handed, stoop-shouldered men nervously awaiting their turn to enter the office where Logan now sat. They entered with an air of eager hopefulness but many emerged crestfallen, despondent, eyes filled with apprehension.

Through the open door of the inner office voices came above other sounds. Hickman was talking.

“Hasn’t been any sale for timber in there for years. Why do you want it now?” he asked shrewdly.

There was no guile in Logan’s make-up.

“There’s tie camps opening up and they’ll soon be coming into Cayuse Lake ’cause they’re running short of tie timber along the railroad,” was the honest answer.

Hickman sat for a while in meditation.

“I’ll tell you what I’ll do,” he said finally. “It’s so far away that I don’t want to be bothered with collecting as the timber is taken off, but I’ll sell it all for cash.”

“How much?” Logan asked anxiously.

Hickman named the sum and Logan’s face fell.

“I can’t do it,” he said disconsolately.

Hickman came to his feet. “Well, it’s the only way I will dispose of it. It’s no use—”

Logan interrupted, his voice eager.

“See here now! Sit down a minute. I want that timber. I’ve got two-hundred and fifty bucks. I’ll give you all I make trapping next winter, which will be six or seven hundred dollars, and I’ll give you a mortgage on my ranch and give you ten per cent and—”

Hickman held up a restraining hand.

“Where is your place?”

Logan leaned over the map spread on the desk. Hickman placed a pudgy finger on the spot the trapper indicated.

The buckskin-clad figure sat down opposite the owner of the timber and spoke animatedly. “It’s a dandy place. I got over three acres cleared and two slashed and a cabin and—”

“Why, man alive!” Hickman interposed. “Your place must be over one hundred miles from the railroad and you want me to loan—”

“Yes, I know,” Logan interjected. “But they’ll extend the motor road in there some day.”

“How long have you had this place?”

“Five years.”

“How much could you sell it for right now?” Hickman questioned sharply.

“Don’t believe I could get much for it right now,” Logan gloomily admitted.

“There you are,” said the man behind the desk, with an air of finality. He leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands across his ample stomach. “What’s the matter with you fellows,” he went on rather testily. “You’re all pretty much the same. You’ve been on this place five years and have only cleared three acres. Why don’t you get out and hustle and clear your land?” He tapped the map with his finger. “That land of yours isn’t worth three dollars an acre.”

For all his belligerent appearance Logan was, ordinarily, of a bashful and retiring disposition, but when under the influence of alcohol he became utterly transformed. When sober the mere thought of entering Hickman’s big offices would have given him inward qualms. As Logan said of himself: “When I’m sober I hate to ask for my mail, but when I’ve had a few shots I’d kick the Premier off his seat and make a speech before the House.” When in his cups the point between cheerful grins and flaming anger was dangerously balanced.

To Hickman, Logan’s ranch was simply an infinitesimal spot of land on the map of the Cariboo. But to the owner it was a home. A loved spot on God’s green earth on which he had lavished years of torturing labour. Pulling stumps, digging ditches, trapping through the long cold winters, working at odd jobs for other ranchers, scrimping, saving, while he dreamed of wide fields, snug farm buildings and lowing herds of cattle.

Logan sprang to his feet, overturning the chair.

“Three dollars an acre!” he blazed, his eyes twin points of flame. “Get out and hustle, you say. Why you—you pot-bellied hippopotamus, I’d like to see you put in a year at it! If you were a younger man I’d—” He flung himself angrily from the room.

“Well, that’s that,” Logan grunted. He slumped dejectedly to a chair at Arlen’s desk and mopped his perspiring face. “By gorry, but the air in here is awful,” he complained, then relapsed into a gloomy silence, calloused fingers twitching and eyes staring into nothingness.

Logan’s evident distress touched a responsive chord in Arlen’s heart. “You’re not very diplomatic,” he gently chided him.

“I’ll tell the cock-eyed world I ain’t. I’ve sure scrambled the eggs. But a feller can’t stand everything.” He sprang to his feet and began pacing the

room excitedly. "Holy mackinaw, ain't it hell! That guy is going to get ahead of me. I'd turn yegg if I thought I could stick up somebody with a wad of dough."

"Sit down and tell me all about it," Arlen suggested.

"It's the timber on a part of the Lee place—Lightning Creek Ranch," Logan began earnestly. "It's one of the oldest and was the best ranch in the Cariboo, and the Lees are old-timers. Been there since the early days. It used to be an up-and-coming place, with store, post-office and the finest bred cattle and racehorses in the country. Jim Lee and his wife both died and since then the place has gone to the devil. Old man Lee—Jim's father—is nutty over mining. Putters away at a hole in the mountains and has been selling the land piece by piece to buy dynamite and grub.

"This man Hendricks—that I was telling you about—has only been in the country a few years. He's got pots of money and is trying to grab everything in sight. Wants to be king over all of us. He bought about a quarter of Lightning Creek Ranch for a song and pretty soon he'll bamboozle old man Lee out of the whole place.

"He's the guy I been trying to get ahead of on this tie timber business. There's the finest bunch of tie timber on the Lee place that I ever saw. Old Lee sold it for almost nothing and somehow Hickman got hold of it, and now I suppose Hendricks will grab it off."

"What's the soil on the Lee place, and how much is cleared?" Arlen asked interestedly.

Logan's eyes sparkled. "The richest soil you ever stuck a plough into. There was about five-hundred acres cleared but some of it has gone wild. There's lots of good pasture with all kinds of Government grazing land if you want it. She's some country," Logan went on enthusiastically. "A lake forty miles long with lots of fish, and there's all kinds of game in the hills." His face glowed. "Prettiest country God ever made."

Bruce Arlen felt the contagion of Logan's enthusiasm. Love for the soil was a heritage handed down to him by his pilgrim fathers. Five hundred acres cleared and going to waste! He felt a strange ferment in his blood; a restless stirring, a warm glow that brought a surge of colour to his cheeks.

Logan spoke wearily. "It's hell! I wouldn't care so much if it wasn't for the little girl. She's killing herself trying to keep the place going."

"A woman in the case, eh?" Arlen asked quizzically.

Logan's tanned face took on a deeper colour. He fumbled nervously with his wide hat. "It's Anne—Lee's grand-daughter," he replied.

“How much will it take to buy this timber?” Arlen asked.

There was a look of hopelessness on Logan’s face as he named the sum.

Arlen tilted his chair and gazed meditatively at the ceiling. Why not? He trusted this man Logan. It would be a good investment. It was a cinch that if he kept on gambling in the stock market he would sooner or later meet with disaster. He could not keep winning forever.

For an interval there was a wordless silence. Logan rolled a cigarette with thick but deft fingers and took a deep inhalation. “Well,” he sighed resignedly, “guess I better beat it for home.”

Arlen held up a detaining hand. “Wait until I come back.” He reached for his hat and hurriedly left the room.

Twenty minutes later he was back at his desk. He glanced about him, drew a package from his pocket and slid it across to Logan.

“There’s the money to buy the timber. Have the papers made out in your name and you can transfer to me at another time.”

Logan sat with mouth agape, astonishment written large on his features. He stared at the package, then at the man opposite him. His eyes suddenly narrowed.

“Why in the name of sanctified sanity are you doing this?” he breathed.

Arlen met the boring eyes squarely. “I’ll be darned if I know, unless it’s because I think you’re on the square and that I don’t want this man Hendricks to get it.”

The hard look in Logan’s eyes faded. “By gorry,” he muttered, his voice vibrant with suppressed excitement. “By gorry—” He stuck out his hand and Bruce winced under the pressure of Logan’s powerful fingers.

Logan picked up the money. “Won’t have to leave the door open this time,” he chuckled.

He returned a few minutes later, his face beaming, and placed a receipt on the desk.

“Was afraid that the old man wasn’t going to let me in, but when he saw that wad of bills I was more afraid that he would kiss me. Look here, when you coming up to see our country and look over your timber?”

“It won’t be long. I want to get away for a holiday.”

“Good!” Logan said heartily. Then with words tumbling from his lips he talked glowingly of the wonders of the Cariboo.

Over Logan's shoulder Bruce saw a big, swarthy man enter. After a word with the girl at the counter the newcomer advanced towards Hickman's office. At once Bruce recognized the man as Hendricks. Not that Logan's description had been accurate—far from it. The man was undoubtedly of striking appearance.

He was powerfully built, huge shoulders, thick limbed, and he carried himself with an arrogant air of self-confidence. His eyes were black and close set, with peculiar rings around the iris that gave to them a wild look. The hooked nose and high cheek bones gave his face a hawk-like expression. Aggressiveness was his dominant characteristic.

As Hendricks came nearer Arlen stared in astonishment. The man's hair was almost red while his skin and eyes were as dark as an Indian's. He had never before seen such a peculiar combination.

"Yes, sir," Logan was saying, "I'll show you a country that'll make you think you're dreaming. A country—"

Hendricks gave a surprised start as Logan turned.

"Hello, Logan," he said shortly.

Logan stiffened. His eyes were like steel but his face broke into a mirthless grin.

"Well, well, if here ain't the self-announced King of the Cariboo. Come for your little pound of flesh, eh?"

Hendricks' rimmed eyes narrowed. "Got some of your booze courage," he growled, then passed on to Hickman's office.

The big man returned almost immediately. His face flushed with anger he strode to the desk and stood glowering down at Logan.

"Logan, I don't like you and never did like you. I've let you alone because I like bigger game when I fight, but now that you've butted into my affairs I'll put you on my list. I'll get you for this. You knew that I was coming down to buy that timber."

Logan stood up. He shook a wrathful finger close to the big man's nose.

"It'll take more than a chechako like you to pin the Order of the Boot on me or any of us old-timers in the Cariboo." He snapped his fingers derisively. "You'll get me, eh? Why, you ain't got guts enough to stick a can-opener into a tin of bully beef. I'm not big enough game for you to fight? Slipped it over on you today, didn't I? And just to show you that I ain't the dumb-bell you think I am, I'll ask you a question." He moved

closer to Hendricks. “How’s everything in *Blind Gulch*?” He gave the last two words a queer emphasis and there was a dancing devil in his eyes.

The effect on Hendricks was electrical. His shoulders hunched together; one of his eyelids drooped wickedly. He rested his hands on the desk—enormous, hairy hands, and glared at Logan.

There was a little silence, the men eyeing each other like dogs before they spring. Office sounds ceased. All eyes were upon the two belligerent men. There was a scraping of chairs and the murmur of voices.

The big man spoke through his teeth.

“I know why you bought this timber. You’re struck on the girl. And you won’t open your yap about this other matter for the same reason. I’ve got the old man under my thumb. And,” his voice was venomous, “from what I hear about her she’s lucky to have you. A drunken, five-acre squatter will make a good mate for her.”

Logan’s thick body shook with passion; his eyes flamed.

“You’re a dirty cur and a liar!”

Bruce leaped to his feet but before he could intervene Logan’s right arm cut the air in a terrific upper-cut. Hendricks threw up his arms in a posture of defense—but too late. The smaller man’s fist struck him full on the mouth and while the huge arms were still raised Logan’s left caught him fair on the jaw and sent him staggering.

Girls shrieked and there was a rush of feet. Hendricks righted himself with a curse and charged his adversary like a bull-moose. With the speed of a wildcat Logan sprang forward and hurled himself at the oncoming man. They met with an impact that sent the smaller man reeling against the desk which overturned with a crash. Following up his advantage Hendricks swung viciously with his right and missed. With a straight, diving tackle Logan threw his arms about his opponent’s legs and Hendricks’ huge body hit the floor with a thud that shook the room.

At the first sounds of combat Hickman ran from his office in terrified haste. He now stood with upraised arms in the centre of the room and in an outraged voice called upon his staff to separate the fighters.

In a writhing heap the combatants collided with a table, sending wire baskets, letters and desk equipment to the floor. A hat-rack toppled against a typewriter which fell with a thumping clatter.

By this time Bruce and a half dozen clerks were upon the struggling men and by sheer force of numbers tore them apart.

With two men clinging to either arm Hendricks ceased his struggles. His lip was laid open in a ghastly cut from which trickled a crimson stream. He glared at Logan who was being propelled toward the hall by two men.

Bruce felt a faint prickling at the base of his skull, a feeling curiously akin to fear when he saw the mad light in Hendricks' eyes. There was murder in those glittering orbs.

"I'll—I'll fix you for this!" Hendricks panted.

Logan swung his head. His lips parted in a sneer.

"You've put me in the big game class now, eh? You big brute! You've got a yellow streak a yard long. You know where to find me when—" The rest of the sentence was lost as he was forced into the hall, and the door closed.

Near closing time Bruce Arlen again sat down by the open office window. He drew in a great breath of fresh air. He wondered if he had forgotten what a hayfield smelt like, opening buds of poplar on opaline country air sweeping through the tops of pine trees.

The afternoon sun slanting down from the British Columbia heavens cast a reddish light over the small park. The trees now stood straight and silent in the stirless air.

He swung his eyes to the north. There, beyond the mystic haze that heralded the coming dusk, lay that far-famed and romantic land—the Cariboo. Five-hundred acres cleared and going to waste! A struggle with the soil! The call of the land—adventure. An upsurge of elation swept over him. He would do it. Whirling about, he hurried to Hickman's office.

CHAPTER II

BRUCE ARLEN got to his feet as the train jarred to a stop and carried his duffle bag, guns and fishing rods to the door, where a brakeman, shouting a contemptuous “Horse Lake! Horse Lake!” from the corner of his mouth, seemed to penetrate his errand and ridicule him for it.

He was disposed, as he lowered himself from the awkward height of the step to the worn planking of the tiny station and surveyed the desolate country, to ridicule himself for this venture.

A few whites and several Indians standing about eyed him with a sort of distrustful curiosity, and one of them, in answer to Arlen’s query, jerked his head towards a dilapidated car at the end of the platform.

There was a brief delay while a mail sack and several parcels were transferred, then the decrepit old car rattled away from the railway station, scuttled up a steep hill like a fly up a wall and swung sharply to a level stretch on the left. Bruce Arlen, sitting in the front seat with the driver, turned and looked below.

A rim of low, rolling hills, covered with poplar and stunted conifers, encircled the small valley. In the distance through the half-light of early morn, loomed peaks of grandeur, their lower stretches shrouded in mist. The sun thrust its curved red disc over the shoulder of a mountain, transmuted the rocky summits in the west to a golden splendour, made glowing jewels of each tiny dewdrop, climbed higher and, with a kingly gesture over all, swung up to yellow radiance.

The driver, a slack-mouthed, garrulous individual, clad in overalls, soiled buckskin shirt and the usual wavy-brimmed hat of the country, kept up a running fire of talk.

“You ain’t a travelling salesman, are you?” he questioned, casting his eye over this passenger’s sportsmans attire.

Arlen replied in the negative.

“Goin’ to visit Hendricks?”

“No. I’m going into Cayuse Lake.”

“Fishing?” the driver persisted.

“No. Just looking around.”

Again the driver shifted his eyes from the road to his passenger. “Ain’t been a game warden or a policeman in here for a long time,” he stated slowly, studying Arlen’s face.

Receiving no response to this, the driver continued.

“Sorry I can’t take you any further than Hendricks. The road goes about eight miles further but I ain’t got time. S’pose you’ll be hirin’ horses to pack you in?”

“No, I’m going to hike. I need the exercise.”

“Some hike. Take you a day and a half. Goin’ to camp out at the lake?”

“I’ve brought my camping outfit but I will probably stay at Lightning Creek Ranch with the Lees.”

The driver shook his head. “I’ve never been there, but from what I hear you won’t find it much of a place to stay at. They’re up against it hard and the place is gone to blazes.

“Old Lee came in here about sixty years ago and put a lot of money into a mine at Cayuse Creek. He put up some swell buildings and cleared a lot of land thinking that the Cariboo Road would swing his way, but when the mine went flooey the road didn’t come in.

“The old feller thinks that they didn’t sink the shafts in the right place in the early days and claims that he’s located the original bed of Lightning Creek, and all alone he’s driven a tunnel into the side of the mountain. He’s ___”

The driver threw on his brakes and squawked his horn as several steers, with bovine stupidity, left the safety of the roadside and crossed in front of the car.

“They say,” the man prattled on, “that the old man’s got labour troubles in his think factory and that his grand-daughter waits on him hand and foot. I never seen her only once. She can’t be more’n twenty-four, five, but she looks like she was older on account of workin’ so hard. I feel sorry for the kid.” He leaned toward Arlen with a confidential air. “Don’t say nothin’ about it but they say that she fell for a slick-looking guy that come up to the races six, seven years ago and he took her down to Vancouver to marry her but they never did see a minister. She come right back after a few days and never said a word to anyone.

“They say that she used to be full of life before that happened; used to come down to the stampedes at Pinchbeck and to the dances at Cayuse Creek. But some of the folks sort of snubbed her and now she comes once in

a while to the store at Cayuse Creek but she ain't never been out to Pinchbeck."

The battered contraption rattled along level stretches, laboured up barren hills, slid down into fertile valleys where meadows enclosed by old-fashioned snake-fences sloped gently to slow-moving streams. They passed deserted ranches, the roofs of the buildings sagging and the windows boarded.

Bruce interrupted the driver's tattle.

"Why aren't these farms being worked?"

"Been deserted for years, but Hendricks has bought them all up. Just cuts the hay off 'em now, but the way he's going at it he'll soon have them all producin'. He's spendin' barrels of money."

The road led downward for half an hour, then flattened out through a wide, rich valley, dotted with fields of green, interspersed with clumps of poplar and alder. Modern wire fences enclosed this rich pasturage; fat cattle fed on rich grass that was more fully matured than on the higher levels. A score of men busied themselves about the buildings and in the fields.

"One of the old farms that Hendricks has built up," the driver informed his passenger. "He's got all the best land."

A group of workers near the road waved a greeting to the passing car. Arlen swung quickly in his seat. "Why, they are all Chinamen!" he exclaimed.

"Sure," agreed the driver. "Hendricks don't hire nothin' but Chinks. I bet he ain't got half a dozen white men on his pay roll. Why, his head man is a Chinaman by the name of Lin Hung. You'll probably see him at Cayuse Creek 'cause he bought a piece of the Lee place and is farmin' it. Why he should go away in there nobody knows, but you can bet Hendricks has got somethin' up his sleeve. Probably intends to freeze Lee out like he has everybody else around here."

The driver spat disgustedly over the side of the car. "Chinks everywhere. Pretty soon they'll have us all wearin' our shirts outside our pants and eatin' rice with chop sticks. If I had my way I'd—Hello, what's this?" He swung his car to the side of the road.

A big black horse, riderless, reins dragging, topped a rise ahead and came down the road at a terrific pace. Both men sprang to the ground.

"Hendricks' racehorse, Invader," the driver informed Arlen. "Wonder who got thrown."

The horse slackened its pace as the men ran forward, fell into a trot, stumbled as a hoof caught the trailing lines and fell heavily on his side. The animal struggled to his feet, swung about in a half circle and came jerkily to a standstill. Blood dripped from a stone bruise on the horse's shoulder. Snorting with fear, sides heaving, dainty ears flexed forward, the beautiful animal looked back fearfully over the road he had travelled. Bruce reached out a caressing hand, spoke quietly to the trembling horse, got hold of the reins and stroked the curved, satiny neck.

Arlen's companion examined the wound on the horse's shoulder with a critical eye.

"Don't amount to much but Hendricks will be sore'n a boil when he sees it. I'd hate to be in the guy's boots that let the horse get away from him. Hendricks has got a temper like a meat axe."

He ran his hand over the horse's rump. "Ain't he a peach? Look at them lines! He's built like a thoroughbred. That horse won the Cariboo Derby at Pinchbeck last year. Hendricks' horses got beat the first few times he run, so he sent to Vancouver and got a racehorse in foal—and that's the colt. A lot of the old-timers are sore. Say that bringin' in horses from the outside that way ain't fair."

The speaker spat reflectively. "Speakin' of Hendricks, young feller, if you're plannin' to stay round these parts long I'd advise you to steer clear of him. He's a bad guy. Well, you hop on the horse and follow and I'll go along and see who got spilled."

Five minutes later Arlen came on the car parked by the roadside. The driver stood beside a slender half-breed who sat on a stump his face buried in his hands.

"A bear frightened the horse and this feller hit the dust and sprained his ankle," the driver explained. "And, just as I told you, he's scared stiff to go and face Hendricks." He turned to the crippled youth. "Come on, son, hop in the car and this feller will ride your horse."

The settlement of Cayuse Creek consisted of less than a score of buildings. Here, between a range of low foothills and the swiftly-flowing Cayuse Creek, the settlers had built their homes. Here also were a community hall, a school, a blacksmith's shop, a garage, one store and such other buildings as ranchers need.

It was here that Hendricks made his headquarters. He had purchased the famous Cayuse Ranch which was the finest in the district. On this ranch was one of the genuine historic mansions of the Cariboo—a huge, square log

building that at one time was one of the show places of the country, but now desecrated by being used as a storeroom and dwarfed into insignificance by Hendricks' new buildings.

These modern structures offered a marked contrast to the log buildings of earlier days. The store, a frame building of two stories, with big plate glass windows, resplendent with fresh paint, was more suited to urban centres than to the backwoods. A cement driveway led through a well-kept lawn and hedge to a magnificent bungalow of Italian architecture. Separated from the dwelling by an orchard were corrals, silos, a huge hip-roofed barn whose ridge bore a gilt vane in the shape of a horse going full tilt against the blue.

Hendricks was a mercenary man—money and the power to dominate were his gods. Forceful, energetic, ruthless, and unscrupulous when necessary to gain his ends, he had in a few years become a powerful factor in the country. As each year passed, by foreclosing mortgages, by buying outright, he had assumed more and more the status of a lord or baron. His great holdings began several miles east of Cayuse Creek and he owned sections here and there radiating around the settlement.

But his success was not without cost. It had gained him the enmity of many. They resented his harsh, high-handed methods; a resentment not unmingled with envy. No one knew whence he came or by what method he had amassed his fortune. He was a man shrouded in mystery. This newcomer with his forceful personality struck a restlessness into their souls. He jolted them out of the even tenor of their ways. This dislike was not openly manifested as few possessed the temerity to voice their feelings. His power in political circles, great wealth, enormous physical strength and his flaming temper made him a man to be feared.

Hendricks, dressed in riding breeches, a blue flannel shirt open at the throat, bareheaded, his reddish hair standing up aggressively, sat on the verandah of his store in a chair back-tilted against the wall. Lin Hung, a tall Chinaman, all of six feet, dressed in a blouse-like coat of dungaree, wearing heelless slippers over white socks, sat sprawled on the steps. A half dozen cayuses tethered to a rail stood listlessly with drooping heads. Their owners, both whites and Indians, sat about in indolent attitudes in the warm sunshine.

There was a stirring among the loiterers as the hum of an automobile came from the distance. A moment later the Cayuse Lake stage topped a rise, clattered down the hill and came to a noisy standstill in front of the store.

Hendricks came to his feet as he saw the driver assisting the half-breed to alight and help him to a chair. Whites and Indians gathered in a solicitous knot about the injured boy. Hendricks elbowed his way roughly through the crowd, seized the youth's arm and dragged him to his feet.

"What happened? Where's Invader?" he questioned sharply.

The young breed shook with fear. "I—I got thrown," he quavered.

At the sound of hoof beats Hendricks pushed the boy roughly aside and ran quickly down the steps.

Arlen brought the horse to a standstill and sat looking about him. Hendricks strode to the animal's head, looked the horse over critically, then raised his eyes to the rider. There was no recognition in his glance. He seized the reins.

"Get down," he commanded peremptorily.

Nettled by this display of arrogance, Arlen's eyes hardened.

"What's the hurry, stranger?" he asked coolly.

He returned the big man's stare unflinchingly. The sound of voices ceased; all eyes turned toward the two men. Hendricks emitted an inarticulate grunt of anger, moved forward as though to drag Arlen from the saddle, then stopped suddenly as he saw blood dripping from the horse's shoulder. Arlen was forgotten.

The expression of Hendricks' face was an ugly thing to see. He strode towards the cringing half-breed. His voice boomed out harshly, a dirty epithet at the end of it. The big man could have killed the smaller man with a blow that had his full strength behind it, but this one seemed all the meaner and more cowardly for the careless contempt that was in it, a sweeping swing of Hendricks' huge, open hand that struck the youth full in the face and flung him stumbling helplessly to the ground. He lay there half stunned, his hand nursing his nose from which blood poured, his eyes, small and dark, watching Hendricks with the very look of a sullen, kicked dog.

Arlen felt the blood creeping up behind his ears. The brutality of the act stirred him to a white rage. He flung himself from the saddle, and ran up the steps.

"A man who will do a thing like that is a bully and a coward!"

Hendricks stared at Arlen in astonishment. Slowly his lips drew apart in an evil grin to show white, even teeth. He was a man who could clothe fury and an intent to punish with a smile. He moved slowly toward Arlen.

“Will the gentleman please step away from the window,” he asked ironically. “Plate glass is expensive.”

Lin Hung’s heelless slippers made a faint scuffing sound as he slipped quietly to Hendricks’ side. The Chinaman purred in a sibilant foreign tongue.

Hendricks flicked a whip-like glance at Arlen. Again the Chinaman spoke and the big man studied Arlen from his high boots to the crown of his wide hat. The tense expectation on the part of the watchers relaxed as Hendricks’ demeanour underwent a swift change.

He laughed shortly. “Well, I suppose it does seem rough to a stranger in the country, but as a matter of fact it’s the only way to handle these damned breeds. I’m sorry if I upset you.”

For an interval Arlen held a frowning, tight-lipped silence. From the moment he met Hendricks in the office in Vancouver he had taken an instinctive dislike to this man. He felt morally certain that he could take a fall out of him in spite of his brute strength. He had expected the crash of battle and Hendricks’ sudden change of manner bewildered him.

“Your apology hasn’t changed my opinion in the least,” he said, his voice full of suppressed anger. He walked to the end of the platform where the stage-driver had deposited his baggage and began stowing sundry small articles in his pack-sack. Hendricks and the Chinaman followed.

“Come, come,” Hendricks said placatingly, “let’s forget it. You’re going to stay with us tonight, aren’t you?”

“No. I’m going into Cayuse Lake,” Arlen replied coldly without looking up.

The big white man and the Oriental exchanged startled glances.

“You’ll be needing horses,” Hendricks suggested.

“No. I prefer to walk.”

“Well,” Hendricks persisted, “it will soon be dark. Better stay over night and Lin Hung will take you in his car as far as the trail.”

“Yes. We have plenty nice loom. You stay I take you in car tomollow,” the Chinaman urged.

Arlen was frankly puzzled. It was palpably obvious that this precious pair of rascals were upset by his presence at Cayuse Lake. There was a nigger in the woodpile. The thing aroused Arlen’s curiosity. Why not stay and let them show their hand.

He looked up at the sky. The day was drawing to a close. The sun, through a gap in the hills, had fallen so low that its rays, darting through the spring leaves, came almost horizontally through the trees.

“Yes, it’s getting late,” Arlen agreed. “Suppose I may as well stay.”

“I show you loom,” Lin Hung volunteered as he seized the duffle bags. “What you name?”

“Arlen.”

The Chinaman placed his hand to his breast and bowed his head obsequiously. “Velly please, Mistler Arlen. Me Lin Hung, Mister Hendlicks boss man. Velly happy oblige.”

As Arlen had anticipated, Hendricks’ home was richly furnished. The Chinaman led him through a wide, panelled and beamed living-room up a broad staircase to the first floor.

The bedroom, on the front and corner of the building, with three large windows, was as modern as a first-class city hotel. A white iron bed with box mattress, a large dresser and chiffonier, and to the left a door stood open showing a bathroom in blue and white with tub and curtained shower.

“Dinner leady one quarter hou’,” the Oriental purred as he bowed himself out. “Velly happy oblige.”

“Like hell you are,” Arlen said under his breath. “You old villain, you’d cut a man’s throat for a quarter.”

Arlen washed and went downstairs. Immediately he was gone Lin Hung moved stealthily out of another room and deftly went through Arlen’s belongings. A scowl rippled over his yellow features when he found a locked duffle bag. Quietly he stole out of the room and down the back stairs.

Hendricks and Arlen sat down to dinner. A cat-footed Chinaman waited on them. The host talked with the genial amiability of a Florida real estate broker, his hard face expressionless save for a smile which Arlen knew to be forced.

“Going in for a little fishing, I suppose,” he boomed heartily. “Well, you’ll find that it’s the best fishing in the country.”

Arlen kept his eyes on the table during the greater part of the meal so that the hostility he felt toward his host would not be observed if it should creep into his eyes. It was difficult to accept the hospitality of a man he detested but he was determined to find out what lay back of the peculiar actions of Hendricks and his henchman. While engaged with these

reflections he nodded and made occasional rejoinders to Hendricks' advice as to fishing and hunting at Cayuse Lake.

"You're welcome to stay at Lin Hung's ranch while you're at Cayuse Lake," the host invited heartily.

"I'll either camp out or stay with the Lees," Arlen informed him.

Quick interest flashed in Hendricks' eyes. "Do you know the Lees?"

Arlen shook his head.

Hendricks laughed. "Thought you might be the chap who ran away with Lee's grand-daughter."

"I've already heard all about that," Arlen said coldly.

Hendricks smacked his thick lips. "She's a pretty piece. She can pack her shoes in my trunk any time."

"You'll be a lot more comfortable at Lin Hung's place," Hendricks ran on. "The Lees are not equipped to accommodate anyone."

"I'll decide when I get there," Arlen compromised.

"They belong to the 'Cariboo blue-bloods'," Hendricks explained with bitter sarcasm. "The proud but poor aristocrats of the old days. Just the same, it's a damned shame that the girl has to live alone in there with that old man. I've done a lot to help them out but I don't get any thanks for it." There was a well-simulated note of regretful concern in his voice.

"I know," Arlen said to himself, "that you're a ring-tailed liar." Aloud he said, "Then her father and mother are both dead."

"Wiped out with the 'flu several years ago," Hendricks affirmed.

For the remainder of the meal Hendricks artfully strove to lead Arlen into talking about himself. The young man's reserved manner and noncommittal answers nettled his host. Glancing up quickly Arlen detected a fleeting scowl on Hendricks' face; eyes narrowed, suspicious, questioning.

Immediately after dinner Arlen made apologies that he was tired and went to his room. It was a relief to get away from his host's unwholesome presence. The first thing he noticed was that there was no key in the door.

"No privacy for the welcome guest," he mused. He unlocked the duffle bag, fished about in its depths and drew out a six-shooter.

"Never used one of these and hope I never have to," he said to himself, "but just to prove that I have respect for my dear hosts I'll place it under my pillow."

He removed his wearing apparel, piling it on a chair near the door, sat for a moment to finish his cigarette, turned out the light and stowed himself comfortably in bed.

It occurred to Arlen that a good many things of an unexpected nature had happened to him that day. This trip to the north had already become more of an adventure than he had anticipated—more than the mere taking over of a tract of timber. He had learned to hate a man. Yes, he hated him all right. Hated the look of him, his arrogant voice, his domineering way and his brutal eyes. Hendricks was certainly keen on finding Arlen's mission in the country. He saw interesting possibilities in the future. Undoubtedly there was mystery—possibly tragedy.

His tired body gained ascendancy over his thoughts, and sleep claimed him. However, some part of his subconscious mind was working in the double capacity of watchdog and alarm clock.

He had no idea how long he had been sleeping but suddenly he was awake, every nerve tense.

There was the slightest whisper of footsteps outside the door. Straining his eyes in the dim light of the room he saw a figure loom dimly in the doorway. Arlen continued to breathe heavily. For a moment the form stood motionless then moved slowly into the room and knelt by the chair on which Arlen's clothes were draped. The intruder suddenly stood upright, took a step toward the bed and paused as though listening. Arlen felt a tingle along his spine. He feigned sleep by breathing stertorously while his hand crept under the pillow and fastened on the butt of the automatic. As silently as a ghost the visitor withdrew and closed the door noiselessly behind him.

It was seven o'clock when Arlen took his seat in the roadster beside Lin Hung. The Chinaman toiled the car down the curved driveway and swung into the road.

For some time they rode in a wordless silence, Lin Hung occasionally flicking surreptitious glances at his passenger.

"You come Vancouver?" Lin Hung asked in a tone that was intended to be amiable, but his glance, sidelong and unfriendly, twisted up at Arlen furtive and distrustful like that of a hostile dog.

"Yes."

"Maybe you stay long time Cayuse Lake?"

"I don't know."

"You like stay my place velly much oblige."

“No, thank you,” Arlen replied curtly.

During the interval of silence that followed, Arlen covertly studied the Chinaman’s face. The wrinkled, yellow face, shrunken small eyes, thin cruel lips and furtive manner made Arlen think of a bandit rather than a Chinese farmer.

“Gosh, what a face!” Arlen mused. “I’d hate to meet you after dark, Lin, old boy.” He dropped his hand into the side pocket of his coat. The feel of the gun butt was comforting.

“Velly few man come this place. Sometime timber man, sometime cattle man, sometime plospector.” He swung toward Arlen. “Maybe sometime policeman.” He squinted against the sun as he spoke and the wrinkles of his face bared his yellow teeth so that again Arlen thought of a dog.

It was a relief to Arlen when Lin Hung stopped the car in front of a battered sign nailed to a tree, and pointed to the road to Cayuse Lake.

“Maybe I see you tomollow, nex’ day. I go my lanch.”

Arlen hoisted his pack to his back. “That will be lovely, Captain Kidd.”

The sarcasm was lost on the Chinaman. “Velly much oblige,” he said, and drove away.

The rutted road led gradually downward over low, rolling hills, through an apparently interminable vista of poplars: tree after tree with the silvered undersides of their leaves shimmering and rustling in the soft spring air.

“Truly, this is a land of whispering leaves,” he mused as he strode swiftly along. He could walk too, he thought pleasantly—not with the stiff-kneed, heel-hitting gait of city pavements, but with the shambling, adaptive stride of the outdoor man. There was a pleasure in every thrust of his legs, the lift and swing between, and the air was exhilarating, penetrating to tingling places in his lungs that seemed to have waited ages for the feel of it.

The road led over a series of rolling hills and the going gradually became harder. The pack straps chafed his shoulders, perspiration streamed from his face and the muscles of his legs stiffened.

Small streams gurgled from ambushes of willow and bracken or fell from ledge to ledge in hissing spray. The foliage became heavier as he reached the lower levels and from slight eminences through the thinner growth he glimpsed peaks of splendour beyond the valley that lay ahead.

The tracks of moose, bear and deer crossed and re-crossed the road. Grouse hurtled away through the trees. The lure of the wide-open spaces.

Well, the farther you went the wider and opener they got. Here in the Cariboo was colour and life enough to suit the most exacting.

At times the going was easy; long stretches dry and level as a paved highway—interspersed by rotting culverts and pot-holes into which Arlen's feet sank above the ankles in a slimy ooze.

Why, Arlen pondered, as he stumbled along the wagon-wheel tracks, hadn't Hendricks, with his alleged political pull, put this road in condition for motor traffic. Not an expensive undertaking. There must be a reason.

By and by the lengthening shadows of the tall poplars warned him that the day was nearly gone. He verified this by his watch. He could not make Lightning Creek Ranch that night. He was pleasantly stirred by the thought that he would have to spend a night in the woods.

Three hours later he eased his tired body into his sleeping-bag and lay watching the coming of the alluring night. It was one of those soft spring evenings that are saturated with an almost unbearable sweetness, with far more than the usual number of fleecy clouds in the sky, with a robin singing his evening song from every tree. The breeze in his face seemed thick from the weight of vernal fragrance; it touched him like an immense and velvety caress. And he, born of the soil, felt rising up in him the immemorial response to the call of spring.

His thoughts drifted to Audrey. He looked at his watch. This hour would be the beginning of her activities. She had brought him down to the early morning train and he was grateful that she was for once without her shadow, Anton. Too early for that lounge lizard. He'd be taking his beauty sleep.

Audrey had looked so small and tired and palely beautiful. A little forlorn, too, in the morning light. It seemed that the darkness of her brown eyes cast like shadows of darkness underneath them, and that these shadows made her cheeks whiter. "You get a ranch, Bruce," she had said as she kissed him good-bye, "and I'll milk the cows." There was laughter in her eyes but Arlen saw that her lips trembled. Arlen sighed. She was a darling. The thought of Audrey on a ranch brought a smile to his lips.

The young man's plans were still nebulous. He had acted on the spur of the moment but was firmly decided that he had left city life definitely behind him. Ahead lay various possibilities. He might take a contract to supply ties to the railroad; might buy out the old Lee ranch or arrange to work it on a partnership basis; or even go to work on a ranch—anything as long as he could stay in the country.

He knew that the fruits of the labours of farming were equally as nebulous as his plans. Well, he would see what the place was like. Five hundred acres cleared—it sounded good. With these pleasant thoughts in his mind he lay in a delicious drowsiness.

The moon had set early. Overhead stretched the tight fabric of Cariboo sky, pin-pricked by uncounted stars, from which streamed soft, shadowless light until that which was darkness became a dim visibility peopled with forms shapeless and without line.

He had been lying still for perhaps half an hour when his thoughts were banished by a sharp sensation. Something had stirred behind him. He lifted his head and listened, his eyes straining to pierce the gloom. In the distance somewhere a coyote struck up his mixture of yelps, gulps, barks and howlings that were answered by one of his kind far up the hillside. There was the rushing sound of water where the mountains flung down their melting winter burden to the valleys below—nothing else.

He had about decided that his ears had deceived him when a breeze swept down the hillside. The poplars seemed to make a confused and crowded attempt to warn him. Their leaves, under the rustle of air, seemed to whisper to him sibilantly, sharply. Arlen sat up, his heart thumping. Shadowy figures were stooping over his duffle bag.

“Hey, there!” he shouted as he struggled to free himself from the enveloping folds of his sleeping-bag. But a crushing weight fell upon him from behind, sinewy arms wrapped around him and held him trussed and helpless. He managed to pull one arm free and struck blindly at his assailant. The smack of fist against flesh brought a grunt of pain. In the half-light Arlen saw an upraised arm; saw the blow coming and tried to duck. A crash—and a million stars went off in a rocket-like explosion and an inky darkness fell upon him.

CHAPTER III

THE chill night air aroused Arlen from his stupor. Shivering, he groggily felt his way to the sleeping-bag and buried his aching head in its folds. He did not sleep much for the remainder of the night and woke from his fitful slumber next morning—woke a half hour before daylight. Immediately he thought of last night's occurrence. There was an unreality about the memory, something incredible about the whole affair, so that it would have been easy for him to believe he had imagined it. But when he felt the lump on the top of his head; saw the wide slit in the locked duffle bag and its contents lying in scattered heaps, he knew that it was no figment of his imagination.

While he busied himself with breakfast preparations he groped for a solution of the puzzle that had been further deepened by last night's attack. His bag had been thoroughly searched, but as far as he could see nothing had been taken. What had they expected to find? He touched the top of his head gingerly. Another score to settle with Hendricks and his Chinaman.

Arlen's eyes hardened. Before last night's cowardly attack he had hated Hendricks with a bitterness that was foreign to his make-up, but now he felt a kindling madness in his soul. He itched to pull Hendricks' long, hooked nose. He wanted to bash it in, level with his face, or kick his feet out from under him and see him lying in the dust.

A sound from the trail attracted his attention. Not ten feet away a huge dog came to a standstill and except for the hair that bristled along his backbone stood as still as a brazen statue, head raised, ears pointed, heroic in pose and proportion. He looked like a long, lean greyhound, with his black muzzle, deep chest, slender waist and shaggy grey fur. The great wolf-like form stood motionless for a long moment while man and dog appraised each other.

“Hello, old boy.”

The dog stretched out his nose, just perceptibly, and sniffed. He took a step forward and sniffed again. Then, little by little, the great plume of a tail began to wag. The wag became faster. Arlen laughed with pleasure. He slapped his thigh and commanded, “Come here!” At his voice and gesture the dog came, folded back on his haunches, looking for all the world like a friendly grey wolf, and gravely extended one huge paw.

“You're a friendly beggar,” Arlen commented, stroking the dog's big head. He surveyed the animal's lean flanks, slender waist and long legs.

“And I’ll bet you can show some speed.”

The dog’s presence, the young man decided, meant that he could not be far from Lightning Creek Ranch. He further cemented his friendship by feeding the remnants of his breakfast to his visitor, and as the first rose colour of the rising sun tinted the east he lifted his pack to his chafed shoulders and with the big dog taking the lead set off down the road.

Gradually the trees fell away before him and presently, with an almost startling suddenness, he stood on the brink of an eminence, and the wide expanse of Cayuse Valley and lake lay spread before him. The lake, all blues and violets under the glow of the eastern sky, stretched for miles in a long curve, its further end hidden from sight behind the shoulder of a mountain. Along the shores poplars, birches and spruce ranged themselves like sentinels against the curtain of water.

To the right and beyond the creek lay the Lee place—for undoubtedly from Logan’s description, this was Lightning Creek Ranch. In the clear air the dilapidated log barn, corrals and sprawling out-buildings seemed only a stone’s throw distant. Back on a green hill, just visible through the leaves, bulked a huge log house, its windows showing lemon-coloured in the light of dawn. Behind the ranch the ridges were heavily timbered, and the sweeping meadows below this, right to the edge of the lake, were lush and green. A disconnected irrigation flume, evidently recently built, followed the snake-like course of Lightning Creek to a group of modern farm buildings. Of course this was the Chinaman’s ranch—that was certain.

The road from the lake to the ranch buildings was nothing but two ruts with grass between. Evidently the road was the line between the two holdings. Lin Hung’s land was enclosed by modern wire fences, while Lee’s was circled by rail fences, rotting and crumbling. Arlen walked up this road through an apparently interminable vista of cottonwoods and poplars, through a heaven of smells—cattle smells, and the smell of sweet, clean grass, stable smells and the smells of hoof-turned earth, of sunlight and the sweet pungent odour of cottonwood leaves.

Some of these huge cottonwoods drew his attention. Their gnarled roots spread a few feet and then seemed to plunge straight down, and their giant boles terminated in a wide spread of fragrance against the glorious blue of the Cariboo sky. There was, probably, two-hundred years or more packed inside their bark in circles. In that respect they were time-keepers, but Arlen thought of them more as guardians of the decrepit old mansion, protecting the house from bitter winds of winter and spreading shade and coolness over all during summer.

In a close-cropped pasture on the Lee place cattle grazed and in a corner of this same field was a small cemetery enclosed by a fence of split cedar. Most of the graves were grass-grown and their marble slabs dim and grey with age, but two of them seemed fresh, and showed signs of recent care.

Near the fence there was a horse picking grass. The creature raised its head, inspected the stranger, then resumed with utter indifference. The animal, although small, had the lines of a thoroughbred; golden-coated, a star on its forehead, burly shoulders running down to an angle from bony withers; between the arms of the two forelegs a deep chest—lung power; and tapering, satiny long neck and small feet.

With a deep bark the huge dog leaped the fence and rushed toward the feeding horse. Arlen shouted a quick command which went unheeded, but his alarm was quickly dispelled as horse and dog tore about the enclosure with the dog weaving in and out under the horse's head, barking joyously.

He passed through a tousled orchard, then through a slovenly barnyard where old-fashioned farm implements and wagons were left standing out in the weather. Pigs grunted and squealed, and from a ramshackle barn cows lowed softly. A rooster crowed and instantly other cocks answered his challenge to the day; torpid stars faded in the sky and wild birds sang in full chorus.

There was an air of desolation about the house. It held that unhappy, bewildered aspect which an abandoned farm usually wears. The ledge under the front door was grown up with weeds. It was plain that this part of the building was not in use. The curtainless windows stared at Arlen coldly as though resenting his intrusion. He passed the sagging front door with an instinctive feeling that it had not been opened since the last funeral. A thin pennon of smoke drifted above the trees from the rear of the house.

Rounding the corner of the building he stopped short. A girl with her back to him stood feeding a flock of multi-coloured hens. The first thing he noted was the sun shining on her hair which was curly and of a peculiar light golden colour and it hung below her shoulders. Immediately he knew what had given her hair its peculiar shade—the Cariboo sun had shot her golden hair with streaks of lighter colour.

She turned quickly as the dog rushed toward her.

“Why, Shep, you bad dog, where have you been all—”

Then she gazed in amazement at the man the Gods had wafted to her door at break of day. Her blue eyes, these wide apart, startled, amazed but direct, continued to stare at the stranger. She wore a pair of men's khaki

trousers tucked into the top of worn, heavy boots; a blue denim shirt open at the neck showed the deep bronze of her slender, sun-tanned throat. But her hands drew and held Arlen's attention. The finger joints of the small hands were thickened, the palms calloused and hard. Her face was arresting and certainly pretty but a certain hardness of feature belied her youth. She was a grave little figure, as sombre and forlorn as the bare mountain that towered behind her and caught the first softening tinge of sun from the eastern sky.

“Are you Miss Lee?”

The girl nodded, her eyes still wide in amazement.

Arlen dropped his pack to the doorstep. “May I stay here for a few days?” he asked.

For a moment the girl hesitated. “Well, I'm afraid we're not prepared—I ___”

Arlen hastened to assure her that he was not hard to please.

“You'll have to take us as you find us,” she warned him. “We are pretty much alone here.”

He liked the way she spaced her syllables. Her voice, too, was low-pitched, a round, smooth voice that somehow harmonized with her graceful figure. Certainly not the voice one would expect to hear in the backwoods.

She seemed ill at ease and he spoke of commonplace matters in an attempt to relieve her embarrassment. He told her of his hike over the trail, how he had camped overnight almost in sight of the ranch and of his meeting with her dog—but omitted to mention the night attack.

With a wide sweeping motion of her arm she flung the last handful of grain to the feeding fowls and invited her guest into the house. As he had surmised, only a small part of the big house was in use. The room into which she ushered him answered the purpose of both living-room and kitchen. The room was big and hospitable, with its worn but clean curtains billowing out with the breeze from the open window whence came streaming sunlight to display the worn, old-fashioned furniture.

Some of the aged chairs had been re-upholstered in more modern trappings by amateurish but not unskilful hands.

A huge rock fireplace, the opening sealed with a board frame, its mantel littered with ore specimens, framed photographs of bygone days of ox teams and mining, nearly filled one end of the room. A sagging kitchen stove, its oven door hinged with haywire, stood in one corner near a wooden sink, and on nails driven into the logs hung a motley array of battered cooking utensils. The floor was bare and unpainted, and around the stove and sink

the tread of feet had worn hollows from which the heads of old-fashioned cut nails protruded.

An old man, bent and twisted like the wind-tormented apple trees outside the window, came slowly from a room in the rear, shuffling along in heavy, mud-stained brogans, the uppers cracked and worn. His suit of overalls hung in tatters but there was a fine serenity and a proud poise about the old figure. The face of the man was not deeply lined or fissured, but its entire surface was a complexity of the finest wrinkles radiating in all directions. His hair rifted around his sunken temples like snow, but despite his great age his deep-set blue eyes were still bright and keen and intelligent—there was no sign of a flickering mentality.

Arlen accepted the proffered hand and stood looking down at the venerable figure. Here was an ambassador of another age—the early days of the Cariboo gold rush with its red-shirted, bewhiskered miners, six-shooters, dance halls and ox teams. A whole country had once paid tribute to the physical prowess and business acumen of the man who stood before him. There was a wistfulness in the lean, tanned face with the pebbled webs of wisdom in each corner of his eyes, and a desolate sort of dignity about the gnarled frame in worn clothes.

“Glad to have you with us,” Lee declared in a voice that was astonishingly deep and virile. “Are you a mining man?” he added hopefully, and was visibly disappointed at the reply.

“I want you to see some of the stuff I uncovered yesterday,” he said eagerly. He took a bit of rock from his pocket and passed it to Arlen.

“That’s the best I’ve hit yet,” he went on, his eyes shining. He looked earnestly up at the young man. “If I had the money to go on with—hire men and machinery—I could make a fortune.”

Arlen knew nothing about ore or mining. He turned the bit of rock in his hand. “Looks good,” he agreed.

The aged face brightened. “It’s the best prospect in the Cariboo. All I need is a little money—”

“Grandad,” Anne interrupted, her voice weary, “You better wash up. Breakfast will soon be ready.”

Arlen’s eyes travelled from the ancient, lonely toiler, bowed with a quarter of a century of unrewarded labour, to the sad-faced girl with the work-worn hands. Here was all that remained of a proud family; a family that would soon be dispossessed of their home—a home carved from the

wilderness into which two generations of the Lees had poured their life-blood. Arlen was stirred by a curiously poignant sense of pity.

Logan's figure darkened the doorway. He started slightly as his eyes encountered the visitor but he understood Arlen's cautioning wink and there was no sign of recognition as he entered the room. Anne clumsily introduced them and the men shook hands.

Anne took down a nest of milk pails from a shelf and moved toward the door.

"I'll milk for you," Logan volunteered.

"You needn't bother," the girl replied coldly.

Logan flushed. He reached out and took two pails from her arm. Anne looked at him reproachfully and passed outside.

"I just got back from Pinchbeck yesterday," Logan explained in an aside to Arlen, "and Anne is sore at me because I was drinking."

Logan's manner was not that of the garrulous, boastful, pugnacious Logan who had visited Hickman's office in Vancouver. Quiet, unobtrusive, low-voiced, Arlen was surprised at the change in the man.

The big dog lay sunning himself in the yard.

"Time for the cows, Shep," the girl said.

The animal was off like a shot. He ran in long, graceful leaps along the lane fence, sprang with effortless ease into the pasture among the cows. A few short, sharp barks and the cows moved into the lane to the barn. The dog took up his station behind the last swinging tail. The leader, a big Holstein, stopped at sight of the stranger leaning over the rail, but the dog started her again—that fellow was all right. Two dry cows tried to enter, but Shep nipped their heels and sent them back—he knew his business.

Logan rolled aside the barn door with a noise like distant thunder and the cows filed in. Arlen stood at the door listening to the pleasant sounds of the barn—the cows nosing their grain and munching it luxuriously as they stretched their necks; the soft tinkle of chains; the thump of their feet as they moved about; and, most musical of all, the rhythmic flow of milk into the tin pails.

When the girl was about to begin on her third cow Arlen took the pail from her.

"I want to find out if I've forgotten how to do it," he smiled.

She watched him as he drew up the stool and sat down, pail resting between his shins. There were some few preliminaries on the part of the

volunteer hand and then, zim, zim, zim, streams of milk suddenly pelted the bucket. Its sound changed to a heavier zoom, zoom, zoom; then to a zud, zud, zud, as the foam arose. Proud of his effort he turned his head to see if the girl was looking on. Their eyes met and Arlen grinned joyfully. The faintest trace of a smile illumined her grave face.

“I wonder if she ever laughs,” he mused. “She’d be a lot prettier if she would.”

There was a peal of thanksgiving from the pigs waiting in the yard as the men dumped the rich, unseparated milk in the pig trough. Wasteful, Arlen thought.

“They’ve got an old separator but it’s busted,” Logan informed Arlen. “Don’t make any difference anyway as there’s no market for cream or butter. Just as well to turn it into pork.”

They had just dumped the last pail when Anne called them to breakfast. They filled tin basins at a wheezy old pump and washed up at a bench just outside the kitchen door.

Before entering the kitchen Arlen stood for a moment gazing admiringly over the wide acres stretching from the sun-drenched foothills behind him to the edge of the shimmering blue lake. His feet seemed to fasten into the earth with a sense of ownership. He could see tremendous promise in this rich, old farm if it were handled right; wished it belonged to him.

In spite of the fact that he had eaten that morning he was ravenously hungry. The smells in the big room were friendly and appetising. While he ate a bowl of porridge and cream he watched the girl’s deft motions as she moved about preparing breakfast, admired the grace of her lissom body, her womanly handling of utensils.

She cut slices from the loaf on the scarred breadboard and placed them between the wires of the toaster, slid a frying-pan of sputtering eggs into a huge, cracked platter and garnished them with strips of fragrant, crisp bacon. There was no scarcity of food, but he noticed how carefully she measured out the coffee from the nearly empty can. Two or three of the coffee beans missed the lip of the antique coffee mill and rolled behind a row of tins on the table. The girl searched diligently until each one was retrieved. She felt Arlen’s eyes upon her and her tanned face took on a deeper colour.

Old man Lee, his white hair neatly brushed, his face shiny from soap and water, sat at the head of the table and talked happily of the wealth his mine would one day produce.

“I’ll make a million dollars out of it within two years,” he boasted.

Arlen, willing to provoke the man to further speech, remarked, "Stranger things have happened."

Thus encouraged, the old man went on talking, his tone eager as a fanatic's. He elaborated his theme of how he would find the buried creek-bed and reach the hidden lode, and Arlen listening marvelled at the stubborn persistence and bravery of the man.

Lee hurried through his breakfast.

"Got a couple of holes ready to fire so if you'll please excuse me I'll get back to work."

He shuffled across the room, took a torn and faded coat from the wall and with Anne's assistance eased his stiffened old arms into the sleeves. He made a wry face. "Getting a little bit old, Anne," he grinned. He threw a sack on his back and moved to the door.

Anne placed her arms about her grandfather's bent shoulders. "Please stay at home today," the girl pleaded. "You're working too hard."

"Never mind, Anne," he said, pinching her cheek. "I'll make you a rich woman some day."

Anne stood in the doorway watching the stooped figure plodding up the trail.

"I wish there was some way to make him give it up," she said wearily. "He's old and weak, but he's pouring every ounce of his strength into that hole."

It was Anne who bore the burdens of the farm. Condemned to poverty nearly all her life she was the sacrificial slave to her grandfather's weaknesses. It was she who performed household miracles, who stood as a buffer between the old man and his creditors, who listened to his vainglorious boastings and smiled sadly at his promises of wealth. With nothing more valuable to her name than a pair of overalls and a calico dress she had watched him bartering their patrimony for powder and tools to use in his beloved mine. She loved the gentle old man and was loyalty itself when others ridiculed his mania for the tunnel on the barren mountain. Many times she had sought to turn him from his path, but her efforts were futile. She hated the yawning hole in the mountain, and feared it; saw in it an incubus that drained away the aged man's strength. But when he pleaded with her she yielded to his insistence and saw the mine swallow up, year after year, the little extra money the farm afforded them. And here in the wilderness the yawning tunnel and the man had fought for years their arduous duel—the man calmly passionate and optimistic; the mountain

submitting to his attentions, swallowing his unremitting toil with not the slightest convulsion to show that it felt any effect from his effort.

Arlen saw the sad light in Anne's deep blue eyes as she stood in the doorway gazing after the gnarled figure of her grandfather. He felt a quick admiration for the stoic courage of this girl; ached with pity for her.

CHAPTER IV

THE two men sat awhile over their second cup of coffee and cigarettes while Anne cleared off the table. She refused her guest's offer to help her with the dishes.

It was evident that Arlen's statement that his health demanded a summer in the open was received rather doubtfully by Anne. She cast an appraising eye at the young man, noted his powerfully muscled arms, his wide shoulders, his heavy torso above lean flanks and tapering limbs. A body symbolical of strength and endurance.

His request that he be permitted to board at Lightning Creek Ranch was received with an equal degree of hesitancy.

"I don't want to loaf around," he explained to her. "I was brought up on a farm. I'd like to dig in and work. Looks as if there is plenty to do here."

"It'd be a big help to you, Anne," Logan urged.

Logan's intercession won the day. "I think it will be all right," she yielded.

"Well, we put that over, Tom," Arlen said, once they were outside.

"Yes, but I wouldn't let the old man know that you are paying board. It's his boast that no one can pay to eat or sleep under his roof. That was all right in the old days, but the poor old duffer is lucky to eat three meals a day himself and wouldn't if it wasn't for Anne. He kicks like a steer if he hears of Anne charging for a meal, but Anne gets four-bits once in a while from a Forestry man or a timber cruiser. It helps out a lot.

"Another thing," Logan went on, "it's best not to encourage the old fellow to talk about his mine. It embarrasses Anne. He lives only for his prospect and his dreams of the past. He'd run on for hours if he could find anyone to listen to him."

"He interests me," Arlen admitted. "I like to hear him talk."

"You'll get tired of it," Logan warned him. "He gets tiresome as hell. You'd better come up the hill and I'll show you your timber."

An hour later they sat on a promontory by the lake shore and rolled cigarettes. The forenoon was one of somnolent calm. Below and to the left lay the lake, a turquoise blue under the cloudless sky. The rippling water at the mouth of Lightning Creek was marked by dark patches of waterfowl.

The quiet air was cut by the hissing screech of wings as flocks of incoming ducks flew around the lake in gradually lowering circles, then the deeply fanning whistle of wings flapped to retard progress and the final churning splash as the feathered bodies struck the water. There was the steady drone of waterfowl conversation, the contented, chuckling gabble of feeding ducks.

The high-pitched voices of Lin Hung's Chinamen came faintly to their ears. A pair of horses attached to a plough moved steadily back and forth across a flat bench below the Lee house. Arlen had seen no hired help about the place that morning. He questioned Logan.

"That's Anne. She's putting in some more vegetables. I advised her to. There'll be sale for all she can raise when the tie camps open up. I could raise them on my place but she needs the money more than I do."

"Isn't it late for planting?"

"No. Got lots of time yet. We get lots of sunshine here." He pointed to the east and then to the west. "You see, the sun comes up in that gap and sets in that one over there, so that sometimes we have too much sun—gets pretty dry."

Arlen again looked down at the tiny figure behind the plough. He emitted a low whistle of admiration at her pluck.

The picture of her as she stood that morning in the sunlight would stick with him forever. Was it because the frame was so unusual? No, he had to admit that her face would have stood out in a row of feminine faces. It was pretty, but its prettiness was the antithesis of the accepted type. Verbally he could not have explained what he meant; found himself inarticulate and beggared in words to express himself. A kind of beauty he couldn't find words for. And Logan was in love with her. And she was married. He was surprised that this thought struck him with a feeling of regret. That feeling, he explained to himself, was probably because her marriage had been a failure—possibly a tragedy.

Here was real drama. Old Jack Lee wearing his life away in the never-ending quest for the hidden minerals of the earth, and Anne struggling with the soil—both engaged in labours as old as civilization, as new as the newest dawn.

His eyes again turned to the tiny figure below. He wondered what her thoughts were when she looked across at Lin Hung's modern buildings, his fat, well-tended soil and his plenitude of labourers. Bitter no doubt. And he could not blame her. Certainly the Chinamen had a hold in this country.

Why, he puzzled, had the white man given over so much land to the Oriental? He voiced his question.

“Because the native born sons migrate to the States,” Logan answered dolorously. “The young man of today don’t want to go on the land. It’s the same with prospecting and lumbering.” Logan pointed to the hill above the Lee home. “All the land the Lees have out of their original five thousand acre estate runs from that hill down to the lake—four sections. Hendricks owns all on this side of the creek in the valley. He bought up the mortgages and foreclosed on the Lees’ three years ago. He claims that he sold it to Lin Hung—but that’s just a piece of bluff. I know why—” he broke off suddenly. “This piece the Lees hold now is clear of encumbrances, but the old man will need something some day for his mine and stick a plaster on it. Hendricks is just laying for the chance. You’ll see Chinamen working on the old Lightning Creek Ranch inside of two years. And when that happens,” he finished mournfully, “the Chinamen can have my place. I’ll beat it out of the country.”

Not if I can help it, Arlen thought. If he could buy the ranch he could lead the life he longed for; keep the historic old place from falling into the hands of an alien race, and last, but by no means least, he’d take a keen pleasure in checkmating Hendricks.

“Do you think they would sell to me?” he asked eagerly.

Logan shook his head. “Anne would. But when you talk to Lee about selling outright he goes up in the air. He’ll borrow money on piece after piece, but the poor old chap thinks he’s going to sell his mine for a fortune and pay off all loans. He’ll lose it all before long.”

“Was the old fellow wealthy in the old days or does his imagination run away with him?” Arlen asked.

Logan rolled another cigarette and leaned back against the bole of a tree. Logan had been born in the Cariboo, he informed Arlen. He ran through the tale of the Lee generations as he had heard it from the old-timers of the district.

Anne’s grandfather, Jack Lee, came out from Scotland in the sixties. He was reputed to have wealthy parents. This fact he proceeded to demonstrate by spending money with a lavish hand. A gay young dog, he was welcomed in all the bars from Ashcroft to Barkerville. He grubstaked miners by the score and several times struck it rich.

Logan chuckled. “You’d hardly think it to look at him now, but they say that he was a humdinger. Handsome, and as strong as a bull. He’d hire a

dance-hall and throw it open to everybody—everything free for the night.

“Even when drinking Lee’s voice was low and gentle. He was always a gentleman. Never wanted to quarrel, but when aroused was a veritable berserker. There were scores of stories how he would wreck a bar-room when he was cheated or crossed. One of the standard yarns of Lee’s escapades was of a prize-fighter coming to Barkerville in search of an opponent and easy money. Jack Lee volunteered to fight him and nearly killed the pugilist.

“Unlike most men of his day, Lee did not marry a klootch; kept himself clear from the Indian women. But fell in love with a pretty little blonde dance-hall girl and married her.”

Noting Arlen’s expression, Logan said defensively, “But she was a good girl. There’s lots of people living in British Columbia today whose grandmothers were dance-hall girls in Barkerville and are proud of it. The girls used to take checks for the drinks, but they were straight as a string.

“Lee’s wife was a lively little thing. Her gaiety and caprices made her all the more lovable to her big husband. He showered his attentions upon her. They took a trip around the world and then came back to settle down on Lightning Creek. They spent thousands of dollars on the mine, the ranch buildings and land. Lightning Creek Ranch was the most up-to-date place in all the Cariboo.”

Logan smiled reminiscently. “I can just faintly remember her. I must have been pretty young but I recollect when she came to the races one day. They had a big, open carriage and a prancing pair of black horses. Lee wore a goatee like one of them southern colonels and he was dressed like a real sport. I remember that his wife’s golden hair was a little grey and that she was tiny and had the sweetest smile. I remember that he had his two children with him, both boys, and the old man just worshipped those kids. One thing I will never forget is that old Lee gave all the kids in Pinchbeck two dollars each to spend at the races.

“Lee’s wife and one of the boys took ill. Lee had the best doctors from Vancouver attending them—but they both died. His wife’s going would in itself have been a deadly blow to Lee, but to lose the boy too, it crumpled him up. For a long time he was very bitter; didn’t mix up with other folks and didn’t put his horses in the races at Pinchbeck for many years.

“The remaining boy, Jim, grew up to be exactly like his father—full of mischief, but a lovable youth. His father idolized him. Sent him to the old country to be educated and gave him everything he wanted. Jim was one of the best riders in the Cariboo and won every race he started in.

“It was about this time that Lee’s mine gave out. The boy had the impression that his father had unlimited wealth and he spent the greater part of his time in Vancouver. Old Lee didn’t let on to his son that he was hard up; let him go as fast as he wanted to. He kept selling off one piece of property after another to keep things going, always having faith that he would put the mine on a paying basis again.”

Logan threw away his cigarette stub and rolled another. “There’s another happening in the Lee family that I remember,” he said meditatively. “I must have been ten or twelve years old and my folks were living in Ashcroft at the time when young Lee sent word to his dad that he’d married and would arrive on a certain day.”

The narrator smiled reminiscently. “The old man couldn’t afford it, but I wish you could have seen the turnout there to meet the bridal pair. He had half the population of the Cariboo and all the hacks he could find at the Ashcroft station.

“Although I was just a kid I can remember it just as plain as if it was yesterday. I can see old Lee as he walked up and down the platform, twisting his big moustache and pulling at his goatee, nervous as one of his well-bred horses. The train pulled in and the prettiest girl I ever saw stepped to the platform with young Lee. The old man threw his arms around both of them.”

Logan laughed pleasantly. “Ain’t it funny how little things stand out in a man’s mind. The thing that I remember best is that old Lee turned around to introduce the boy’s wife to the crowd and couldn’t do it because he started to cry like a kid. Of course, when I think of it now he may have been pretty well licked up, but, as a kid, it struck me as mighty sad to see a grown-up man crying.

“Well, nobody knew where young Lee’s wife came from, where the boy met her or anything about her. Some said that she was a show girl. Anyway they got on fine, and they certainly were a handsome couple. You can see their photographs on the wall by the fireplace.

“I guess the boy got a shock when the old man was forced to tell his son that they were up against it—down to the last penny. But I bet it hurt the father more than the son. The young fellow showed he had the guts ’cause he dug right in to work on the farm—borrowed money from friends in Vancouver to do it and might have pulled the place out of the hole if the old man hadn’t gone so far in debt.”

Logan hesitated for a moment as though to make a period. When he spoke again there was a sympathy and tenderness in his voice not easily suspected in one so stolid.

“And then Anne was born. When she was old enough they sent her to a private school in Victoria. In spite of her family’s poverty Anne never wanted for anything. Her grandfather said he’d give her an education such as a Lee girl should have if it took all the farm made.

“I remember seeing her once when she came home on a holiday,” Logan continued, his voice gentle. “She was a dainty little thing. Of course she never noticed me ’cause I was a ranch hand and she was a Lee girl.

“When Anne was fourteen she was called home in the middle of the winter by the death of both her parents. They’d caught the ’flu and in order to save money tried to doctor themselves, but it ended up in pneumonia.

“The girl went back to Victoria, but with his son gone, things on the ranch went from bad to worse. Lee had to bring Anne home and she’s been here ever since.”

And then Arlen asked curiously, “But I understand Anne’s married.”

Logan stirred uneasily. “Yes,” he said bitterly, “she is. She was about seventeen when she met a slick racing man at the Pinchbeck Stampede. I was in Ashcroft at the time and didn’t see him. You can imagine how hard it must have been on her to live away in here, with no company but her grandfather, after going to school in Victoria and having everything she wanted. After the races this young fellow came out to the Lee home and stayed quite a while. He had a good line of talk and was handsome and Anne fell for him. The old man didn’t like him—suspected he was a fourflusher from the first. But Anne thought he was all right and they went to Vancouver to get married. Four days later she came back. Nobody knows what happened and, as far as I know, she’s never said a word about it to anybody. But I suppose she told the old man.”

It was noon when the two men returned to the ranch. As they entered the yard Anne appeared in the doorway and announced that the midday meal was ready. Arlen studied the girl with renewed interest.

He saw that she had changed from overalls to a dress and it had worked a marvellous transformation. The flush and heat of bodily work had somewhat passed away from the girl’s face. She had had time to don her bathing-suit and take a quick plunge in a shallow pool in the creek, and brush out her hair. But the atmosphere of the fields, the ripeness and glow of open air and sunshine, seemed to be still about her. Her lovely head with its wealth of hair and her face with its delicate curve of cheek and lip, its rounded lines and healthy colour, were greatly set off by the simple folds of faded, blue linen; and her small feet and shapely legs in their brown shoes and stockings completed the general effect of lissom youth.

They ate in silence. There was a warmth, a contentment, a homelike atmosphere about the old room. A checkered, red tablecloth, evidently laid in honour of the guest, covered the worn table. Pots on the crackling stove simmered cheerfully, giving out appetizing odours, and on a square of sunlight on the bare floor a cat purred contentedly. An errant breeze billowed the curtains of the open windows, set the cottonwood leaves whispering and brought the fragrance of springtime.

The beauty of it all enveloped Bruce Arlen—a contentment measurably deepened by the lively memories of another farm, another kitchen and other springtimes, which now seemed so near, in which for him there had been a peace of mind which city life had denied him.

Contemplating these recollections now he wondered if city life had made him inferior to that Bruce Arlen who had taken such glorious delight in the warm winds and reviving earth of May. To that Bruce Arlen, spring had been welcomed with open arms in spite of the fact that it was the leanest, meanest season of the year, a time of empty bins and pockets, with debts crying for money just when he must contrive, somehow, to finance new-planted crops. And he had made the old Ontario farm pay.

“Well,” he assured himself, “I can do it again.” He would either lease or buy this ranch. He was made for this—this clean, open, earthy strife. He looked forward to the heat and haste of summer with a challenge in his eye. He entered joyously into the battle.

CHAPTER V

ARLEN found an astonishing number of things about the ranch, within and without, that were broken and in a sad state of repair. In the combination living-room and kitchen there were several broken windows, the squares filled with sheets of paste-board; rickety chairs; the hinges on the oven doors and draughts were broken and ineptly mended with wire; but worst of all the drain-pipe from the sink, instead of draining outside to a cesspool drained into a bucket under the sink, which Anne had to empty a dozen times a day. Outside, the antiquated farming implements were all more or less deteriorated; broken wheels on the wagons; spliced plough handles; broken cultivators, and all the harness worn and patched.

There had been no forehanded getting ready for spring. Logan had cut a small pile of wood, but it was now depleted. Rounding the corner of the barn Arlen heard the sound of an axe. Anne was splitting wood. He took the axe from the girl and rolled up the sleeves of his shirt. He smiled at the incongruity of his white arms. It meant sore hands and aching muscles for a week but he would soon be back in condition. The sound of his axe sounded clear in the windy silence. He laid his blows cleverly and accurately. The blade flashed like quicksilver in the bright sun. His muscles coiled and flowed.

Out of the corner of her eye Anne gave covert scrutiny to the lithe surge of his body from the hips, the muscular freedom of all his limbs, the easy assurance and infallibility of all his strokes. He was no novice with an axe. She somehow divined that whatever this man should attempt he would do very well.

The woodpile finished, Arlen took an axe and saw and went up on the hill across the creek among the standing firs, selected a tree and set to work. When the tall tree shivered and crashed he stripped it of its branches and started sawing it into stove lengths.

Below, the windows of the big log house in the stand of cottonwoods glinted in the sunshine. He saw Anne's gingham dress flashing blue as she came around the barn. In and out, back and forth she hurried, carrying pails, wood, hanging clothes on the line. He had never seen so much energy imprisoned in so slight a figure. Presently, when she had finished the kitchen work, she would no doubt don her overalls and go back to her ploughing.

While the saw rang its rasping refrain, Arlen's mind busied itself with the problems that lay before him. He had set out from Vancouver with no formed intentions as to what he would do. The tie timber, no doubt, would prove a profitable investment. But this farm. Its rich soil. Its romance. The brave old man and the girl. The whole background fascinated him. The surroundings into which he had been projected were intensely stimulating; they excited him as he had never before been excited. A mystery to solve and an old farm to reclaim.

Life in the city had impressed upon him the sense of his own insignificance—he had been hidden, lost, submerged in it. Just a standardized office man. Here on the fringe of nowhere he would be able to rise above the ordinary humdrum of life. He would accomplish things; he would find himself.

Finally he came to a decision. No use to ask them to sell outright, so he'd try to make some arrangement whereby he could work with Anne in an effort to place the farm on a paying basis; ask her to take him in as a partner, he to furnish the capital and they'd go fifty-fifty on the profits. It would require a large sum, probably more than the value of the ranch, to put the farm in order. But what of it? His last week's profits on the stock market would be more than ample. Logan was capable, and undoubtedly he had the Lee's interests at heart—he'd make Logan foreman of the ranch.

It was five o'clock when sore muscles warned Arlen that it was time to quit. He glanced along the row of even blocks. It gave him an enjoyable sense of accomplishment. Now for a swim and a change.

As he neared the float he saw that Anne was there ahead of him. She wore a faded green bathing-suit that fitted snugly to the curves of her slender body. She turned her head away as he approached, tossed her curly hair back from her face and ran to the end of the springboard.

Arlen watched her as she paused for one delectable instant, arms upraised. What a figure! Youth—youth like an arrow straight and flying. Like an arrow the slender form rose, then plunged. The perfect dive, clean and silent.

“Beautiful,” Arlen shouted as Anne's blond head broke the water.

A few minutes later they were racing for the house. But much to Arlen's disgust the girl left him as though he were standing still. He was winded, blowing like a fat man before he had gone half way to the house. “Long way to go before I'm fit,” he thought ruefully.

He gave himself a brisk rubdown. He whistled happily as he dressed, conscious of a feeling of well being that he hadn't experienced for years.

In spite of the girl's seemingly inexhaustible supply of energy, Arlen noticed a slight droop to her slender shoulders, and a weariness in her eyes. Brushing aside her protests he helped her to clear the table and wash the dishes.

Anne, her sleeves rolled into tight little wads on her upper arms, her small figure encased in a blue apron, her arms in a big pan filled with soapsuds, passed the dishes to Arlen who dried them and placed them on the shelves. Presently, when they had finished, Logan joined them and they all repaired to the rickety verandah on the front of the house.

The shadows cast by the tall cottonwoods lengthened and deepened, the light of the westering sun flamed with colours of orange on the far mountain peaks and tinted with gold the placid surface of the lake. A tiny voice piped up from somewhere, the notes thin and reedy. Another voice and another took up the quavering chant until the swelling volume must emanate from a thousand throats—the chorus of frogs, singing the refrain of peace and plenty.

Old man Lee knocked the ashes from his pipe and spoke gently. "Things looked good at the mine today. I set off three holes and drilled two more, but I'm short of powder."

For several minutes Lee rambled on in a long dissertation on mining, satisfied with a nod or monosyllable from his listeners.

Arlen felt that the greatest obstacle to the plans he had formulated that afternoon would be the Lees' pride. Anything that savoured of charity would be repugnant to them. He hesitated, unwilling to risk their displeasure, but at length he summoned courage and told them the idea he had in mind.

During Anne's lonely life her eyes had acquired a habit of horizons and far-away matters—a hint of sadness. Listening to Arlen as he painted in glowing colours the possibilities of the ranch, she caught his enthusiasm; was in the grip of intense excitement. Her cheeks flushed, her eyes shone.

With her it had been a terrific struggle to get the bare necessities of life, working from daylight to dark for food and clothing and firewood. It would be glorious just for once to be free from debt. Free! To call this old home all their own. No more that awful feeling of uncertainty at the sight of some stranger coming up the road from the lake, wondering if it were an emissary coming to foreclose on some part of the place her grandfather had pawned for a few paltry dollars. Free to be able to think of something except the

price of absolute necessities. Free to buy a nice dress or a decent pair of shoes, a pair of real silk stockings.

She, whose forefathers had been the richest in the land, had learned to sacrifice even to the extent of her looks. She had become an overall-clad workman, a labourer, realized the fact and accepted her fate.

There were times when she had gone to Cayuse Creek for supplies when big cars loaded with well-dressed people flashed past her plodding horse and ramshackle wagon and she had looked down at her coarse stockings, cheap dress, heavy shoes, and felt the callous spots on her hands, she found it difficult to heed the Tenth Commandment. She envied these people their ease and pleasure and possessions.

Old man Lee leaned forward in his chair, listening intently, drinking in every word. He liked this young man with the earnest voice; liked him and trusted him. His eyes grew bright with hope—beheld visions of Lightning Creek Ranch restored to its former ascendancy. He would again have the most famous racehorses, the best cattle and the finest buildings. He would regain his former status in the Cariboo. And best of all, he would have the means to develop his prospect.

Watching the faces of his audience Arlen felt that he had won. For a moment after he had ceased speaking there was a silence.

“The season is getting on,” Arlen reminded them. “If you agree to my proposition there’s no time to be lost. We’ll have to start in right away.”

Anne was the first to speak. She raised grateful eyes to Arlen. “I think it’s wonderful!”

“You can count on me,” Logan said simply.

Old man Lee spoke, his voice pitched high under stress of excitement.

“I’ll give you an interest in the mine as security,” he said with a magnanimous air. “There’ll be no danger of you losing money as I’ll make a millionaire out of you inside two years. If I had the right machinery to work with, it would be less than that.”

With an ever-increasing optimism they discussed plans for the development of the farm. Arlen had experience, nevertheless he found Logan a good counsellor and his knowledge of the country was of extreme value in this undertaking.

Before darkness fell, Arlen and Logan walked down to the lake shore. Logan’s cabin, a shed-roofed log structure, was situated on a point of land jutting out into the lake and about a quarter of a mile from the road. A small

chicken-house of cedar shakes and a log barn completed the meagre set of log buildings.

“Not much of a place,” the owner apologized, but his eyes were shining. “Some day I’ll make this a real ranch,” he added proudly.

A narrow path led to the house between rows of growing vegetables. Logan knelt before a row of lettuce. His thick fingers caressed lovingly a plant larger than its mates. He looked up at Arlen, his eyes glowing. “Isn’t that a dandy for this time of year? I started them in a box in the cabin before the snow had gone.” A true son of the soil, Arlen thought.

A huge cat scuttled like a streak past their legs as they entered the shack. Logan chuckled. “Pat isn’t used to strangers.”

Arlen glanced about the room. A typical trapper’s cabin. The furnishings were crude. A rude bunk in the corner, without sheets or pillow cases; a small tin stove set up on blocks of wood; home-made table and chair; shelves containing an assortment of foodstuffs, and from nails driven in the log walls hung necessary cooking utensils and steel traps.

An up-ended box near the head of the bunk which served as a table was littered with a confusion of tobacco tins, cigarette papers, magazines, newspapers and cairn-like heaps of cigarette butts. On the floor lay several empty rum bottles.

Logan placed the one and only chair for his guest and sat down on the edge of the bunk.

“Just got back from Pinchbeck yesterday and haven’t had time to clean up,” he apologized.

He removed a document from the pocket of a suit hanging on the wall and passed it to Arlen. “Bill of sale for the tie timber.”

He began pacing the floor nervously. His kindly face registered acute embarrassment.

“Don’t know what you’ll think of me, Arlen,” he blurted. “I’ll make a hell of a fine foreman. I was pretty well jingled when I hit home. Didn’t have sense enough to stay in my cabin. Went up to see Anne ’cause I’d bought her a little present, and told her that I’d bought the timber and that she was entitled to half of the profits ’cause she owned the land.” He stopped before Arlen, a hopeless look in his eyes. “The only thing for me to do,” he said in angry self-abasement, “is to eat dirt. I’ll tell Anne the truth. Tell her that I’m a cheap fourflusher. I’d rather take a punch on the nose—but it serves me right.”

“Forget it,” Arlen advised. “Let it go as it stands. We’re in together on the farm, so what of it?”

A look of relief swept over Logan’s face. “By gorry! By gorry—you’re some guy.”

Logan sat down on the bunk and placed his head in his hands.

“Gosh, but I’ve felt rotten today. Had to put up a bluff in front of Anne, but it was hard work. No more booze for me! Never again,” he groaned, as thousands of wiser men have groaned before him.

Arlen laughed. “What you need is a good, stiff drink.”

“Yeh,” Logan agreed in sarcastic good humour. He pointed toward the empty bottles on the floor. “And I’ll take a slice of the moon and a couple million dollars. Never again. If those bottles were full I wouldn’t touch it. Wouldn’t even smell of it. I’m through.”

Aden’s eyes twinkled. “I’ve got a bottle of Scotch in my bag,” he announced.

Logan’s head came up with a jerk.

“You better take one good drink,” Arlen urged.

Logan smiled sheepishly. “Well, seein’ it’s you, I hate to refuse. I—I might force one down.”

“All right. Come up to the house.”

At the door Logan stopped abruptly. “Say, Anne’s death on drinking. Would you mind bringing the bottle down here?”

“Sure.”

Dusk had fallen when Arlen stepped outside the cabin. The eastern sky brightened and a golden illumination spread over land and water. He could see it move like a great flood. Then suddenly his shadow shot out ahead of him and he turned to find the moon itself glowing like a monstrous ball behind the low shoulder of a mountain.

Two shadowy figures moved out of the path from Lin Hung’s ranch to the road and paused in the shadow of a poplar tree. Above the rustle of the leaves Arlen heard Hendricks’ voice raised in manifest anger.

“*Socorro!* You’ve made a mess of things. I told you to get into his bag and find out if he’s a bull. But you go and bang him on the head. He may have recognized you and even if he isn’t a cop he’ll stir things up and get us into a mess.”

Lin Hung's answer was soft and purring, but it held a menace and it was not the tone of an underling addressing his boss. He made a loud clicking sound in the back of his mouth. His lips drew back from his teeth in a dog-like snarl.

"You velly smart man, Mistler Hendlicks. You all time talk. This man he jump up and *stlike* me. He velly stlong man. Maybe he have gun—killum me. Not very good for Mistler Hendlicks if he killum me, eh? You crazy. You makee me sick."

"Oh, all right," Hendricks said placatingly, "but you should have been more careful. If he's a bull he must be from the outside. Otherwise I'd have been tipped off. He may be from the secret service, and if he is we better watch our step. Anyway, you keep your eye on that *hombre* and you better lay off for awhile until we find out who he is." With this parting admonition the big man moved up the road toward the Lee house.

For a moment Lin Hung stood silently in the shadow, his cigarette a glowing pin-point of light. Then, muttering angrily to himself, he disappeared up the lane to his house.

The moonlight showed Arlen's face set in grim lines. His suspicions were well founded. It was Lin Hung who had dealt him that brutal blow. Knocked cold by a damned Chink. Could you beat it? A wave of anger shook him. He looked angrily over at the light glowing from the window of Lin Hung's house. He'd a damned good mind to burst through the door and punch Lin Hung's dog-like face. No, that would be foolhardy, he reasoned. There were too many of them. He'd probably get a knife stuck in his ribs.

They thought him to be a police officer. Arlen shook his head in puzzlement. What outlawry could these men be pursuing in a country outwardly so peaceful? They were breaking the law or they would not stand in fear of the law—didn't require much reasoning to arrive at that conclusion.

Hendricks frequently made use of Spanish words. He must have Spanish or Mexican blood in his veins. Yet, although swarthy, his hair was almost red.

The big man had told Lin Hung to keep an eye on the stranger. Well, he, Arlen, would keep an eye on those two birds and he'd settle the score with them before long.

Nearing the house Hendricks' voice, drifting through the open window, grated on his ears.

"How long is he staying, Anne?"

Anne's reply was inaudible.

"You're crazy!" the big man ejaculated, a note of anger in his voice. "You're taking him in and you don't know a thing about him."

This pronouncement was followed by the sound of Hendricks' heavy footsteps as he crossed the room. When he spoke again his voice was indolently good-natured, pitched in a conversational tone.

"You know that I told you, Anne. You're foolish to live like this. A girl as pretty as you ought to be having a good time. Why don't you come to see me? I'll take you to the dances at Pinchbeck any time. You and I can go to —"

Arlen saw that Anne had been reading and the open book lay on the table before her. Hendricks stood bending over the girl in a proprietary manner, a cigarette held in his big fingers.

Hendricks' heavy brows knitted in a savage frown at the interruption but he greeted Arlen with an assumed air of good-fellowship. Arlen answered him with a curt nod, and went to his room.

Foolish, Arlen thought, as he opened his bag, to thus openly show his enmity for the big brute. If he was to probe successfully the mystery of Hendricks' doings it would be a far better policy to hide his real feelings. But he couldn't do it—couldn't even be civil to the man.

Remembering the expression on Hendricks' face as he leaned over Anne he found himself frowning angrily. He detested the man, but this sensation was different. He tried to analyse this feeling. It was some sentiment akin to jealousy—it couldn't be that, although it was quite as strong—that forced him to cry out against a brutal, evil-tempered man like Hendricks having anything to do with a girl like Anne.

"A girl as pretty as you ought to be having a good time," he had heard Hendricks say. Yes, he knew the sort of interest he would have in Anne. However, he should worry. It was none of his business. Anne, he decided, was able to take care of herself.

Arlen had intended to return straight to Logan's cabin but as he passed through the room he caught the significance of a quick look of appeal in Anne's eyes. She doesn't want to be alone with him, he thought. Well, anyway, he'd get a kick out of annoying the visitor by spoiling his tête-à-tête. He sat down, but instead of lounging back in the chair he sat stiffly on the edge, elbows on his knees, and stared at the floor.

The girl's eyes met Arlen's for just the fraction of a second, but that fraction was enough. He knew that she approved his action.

Hendricks caught the meaning of this manœuvre. His heavy lids dropped over his glowing eyes, his face reddened.

At this moment Anne's grandfather entered. The bent figure started visibly when he became aware of Hendricks' presence. Mumbling a greeting he moved hurriedly to the door of his room.

"Lee, I want to speak to you outside for a minute," Hendricks commanded.

A look of childish fear flickered in the old man's eyes.

"I'm—I'm rather tired," he protested weakly. "I—" His uncertain eyes gave way before the big man's unswerving gaze. "Very well," he capitulated.

At the door Hendricks turned. "Good night, Anne." His eyes rested on Alien. There was the trace of a sneer about his lips. "We'll meet again."

"If we never met again I'd be able to suffer in silence," Arlen returned quickly.

Hendricks' eyes burned as with a fever. "The feeling is mutual," he rasped.

"Which I consider a blessing blended with unmitigated joy," Arlen retorted. "*Adios, hombre.*"

The last two words had an astonishing effect on the big man. Every muscle tensed as if he had been subjected to a galvanic shock. His eyes glared fearfully at Arlen. The colour flowed from his swarthy face leaving it the hue of a toad's belly. He lunged forward a step, a crazy babbling cry in his throat.

Arlen sprang to his feet. His muscles jerked stiff. He waited for the crash of battle and wondered what spot he would select to land on Hendricks' jaw.

For a moment the panic-stricken man stood with legs wide apart, staring wild-eyed at Arlen. His long, powerful arms were extended from his sides in the position of a wrestler about to grapple with an opponent. The sweat stood out on his forehead in great beads. His fingers opened and closed convulsively.

Slowly the colour stained his face in irregular patches which grew and spread and joined. As though he were confronting the muzzle of a gun he backed slowly towards the door, then turned swiftly and with one last darting glance over his shoulder at Arlen he disappeared.

Arlen sucked air through his teeth as the door slammed.

“‘I shot an arrow into the air, it fell to earth I know not where’” he quoted. “But unlike the poem, I know where it landed. The barb struck kerplunk in the heart of the skeleton of that swine’s family closet—a bulls-eye in the centre of his black past.”

“What did you say to frighten him?” Anne asked, her eyes wide.

“I said ‘*Adios hombre*’. Heard him use the word a couple of times. Had a hunch he was a Mexican or a Spaniard. The words slipped out unawares, but they certainly shot him to pieces.”

Anne brushed the thick hair back from her face with agitated fingers.

“I detest him. I think he’s vicious. I’m—I’m afraid of him.”

Outside the door Hendricks stood for a few seconds breathing heavily. He seized the old man roughly by the shoulder in a grip that made Lee wince with pain.

“Who’s that fellow? What’s he doing here?” he asked hoarsely.

“He’s buying timber,” Lee began. “He’s—”

Hendricks’ grip tightened. “Don’t you lie to me! Who is he?”

“I’m not lying,” the old man protested indignantly.

Hendricks flung Lee roughly aside. Glancing fearfully over his shoulder at intervals he strode swiftly to the ranchhouse below and summoned Lin Hung for a conference.

CHAPTER VI

WALKING down the dark tunnel between the spreading, moon-stippled cottonwoods to Logan's cabin, Arlen found that his nerves were jumpy. A breeze swayed the tree tops forming shadows that joined and dissolved like moving, silent figures. The stirring of small, furtive night animals was like the approach of stealthy feet. He emitted a gasp of alarm when Shep, approaching noiselessly from behind, touched a cold muzzle to his hand.

When he stepped into Logan's cabin he was further startled and nearly upset by a furry, yellow ball that tore round in a circle, shot against his legs, and disappeared.

"Where'd he go?" Arlen asked bewildered.

Logan laughed. "A patent of mine," he said, pointing to the door.

A loose piece of canvas hung flappingly over an opening in the lower part of the door which permitted Logan's pet to come and go at will.

"Clever idea," Arlen laughed. He placed the bottle on the table.

Logan brought glasses and water. He poured himself a generous drink and held it up. "Look out, stomach. Here she comes." He drained the glass in one huge gulp.

The cat pushed its head timidly through the flap and with saucerlike eyes surveyed the interior. Logan made peculiar coaxing sounds. The cat crept hesitatingly to the bunk and began to purr contentedly under its master's stroking hand.

"When a fellow lives alone like me," Logan said slowly, "a cat like Pat's a lot of company. Lazy devil though. Lays in front of the fire or out in the sun all the time. Doesn't rustle to keep himself in grub."

Logan chuckled as he reached for the bottle.

"There's only one way I can make Pat pay for his keep. I say to him: 'Now, Pat, it's about time you got a little grub for the larder.' Then I put about a teaspoonful of full-strength rum in a saucer. He makes an awful face, but he licks it up, shakes his whiskers and sneezes, tears round the room four, five times, then lets out a yowl and shoots through the hole. In about half an hour he comes back with a grouse. If grouse is scarce he brings back a jack rabbit. I suppose sometime if I should give him two teaspoonsful he'd bring back a cougar."

Mellowed by the influence of the drink Logan lay back contentedly on his bunk, hands clasped behind his head.

“Speaking of animals,” he went on in great good humour, “I wish you could have seen my cow, Pansy, this morning. They say that humans are the only ones that eat and drink too much and that animals go according to nature and don’t over-indulge. Pansy had as big a jag last night and as big a hang-over this morning as I had.

“Last night when I had plenty booze—and being wise as a pack-rat—I cached drinks all over the cabin. I always do that when I’m drinking. Sort of hide them on myself hoping I’ll forget until next day where I put them and so have an eye-opener for the morning.

“Well, of course when I woke up I felt kind of rotten and the first thing I did was to rustle for them drinks. I found a glass half full of over-proof rum back of the alarm clock. I tried to down it but the smell sent a shudder through me and I shook my head and made an awful face and snorted like a bull-moose. I couldn’t stomach it, so I put it back on the shelf.

“When I went out to the barn I saw that I’d left the door of the grain shed open and Pansy had been in and eaten half a sack of oats—and you know what oats in big quantities does to a cow.

“I always coax Pansy into the tie-up with a little oats in a pan. So I take the pan of oats and calls her, but she don’t pay any attention to me, but stands with her head down looking mighty disconsolate. I walked up close to her and held out the oats. She stuck out her head and got one big sucking sniff of those oats—and say! She did exactly what I did when I got a whiff of that rum. She shivered all over, shook her head from one side to the other and let a snort of disgust that you could have heard a mile away.” He grinned humorously up at Arlen. “That proves that I’ve got as much sense as my cow.”

The speaker turned himself another drink. For a long time he talked steadily, boastfully, of what he would do as foreman of Lightning Creek Ranch.

Arlen, pacing the floor, heard little of Logan’s discourse. His mind was again struggling with the mystery that had been further deepened by the fear inspired in Hendricks by two Spanish words. He had never witnessed such desperate, craven fright in a man’s face. What awful memories had those words stirred up?

Gradually Logan became aware of Arlen’s preoccupation.

“What’s eating you, Arlen? Worrying already? Don’t you fret. We’ll make this the best ranch in the Cariboo.”

Arlen swung about to face Logan.

“Listen, Tom,” he began seriously. “There’s dirty work going on here. You’re no fool. You’ve been living in the same district as Hendricks and this Chinaman ever since they came to the country and you can’t make me believe that you’re not aware that something suspicious is going on. I’ve been in the Cariboo two days only and have become wise to enough to warrant notifying the police to put Hendricks and Lin Hung under surveillance.”

Then, omitting no detail, Arlen recounted his experiences from the time he reached Hendricks’ headquarters at Cayuse Creek until the present moment.

The instant Arlen began speaking a quick change came over Logan’s features. He shifted about nervously on the bunk, head lowered, eyes avoiding Arlen.

“Now, what do you know about this, Tom?” Arlen finished.

Logan hesitated as though sparring for time.

“Well,” he suggested weakly, “there’s a few bad Indians down at the Reserve. It was probably them that hit you over the head. They’d steal—”

“Rot,” Arlen interrupted impatiently. “Think up another one, Tom. Didn’t I just finish telling you that they didn’t steal anything?”

Arlen eyed Logan sharply. Was it possible that Logan was mixed up in this thing? If not, why was he so anxious to sidetrack the issue? He put the thought aside. Logan’s face was undoubtedly an honest face. And besides, he remembered Logan’s battle with Hendricks in Vancouver. Logan hated the big man.

“You’re a poor liar, Tom,” Arlen accused. “You know plenty but you won’t tell, for some reason. All right. It’s up to me. They can’t bang me on the head and get away with it. I’ll give the police my yarn and whether they act or not I’m going to do a little Sherlock Holmes stuff on my own.”

At this Logan came to his feet. He was completely sober now and when he spoke his voice was vibrant with feeling.

“Don’t do it, Arlen,” he begged. “Don’t do it, I am lying. I know a lot about it, but—for—for certain reasons I can’t tell you—not just yet. It’ll come out all right if you’ll just lay off for awhile.”

Arlen touched the lump on his head.

“Yes, I’ll lay off,” he replied sarcastically. “Like hell I will. Lay off and let that damned Chink crack me on the head just when he is so inclined? Nothing doing. I don’t feel in the mood to turn the other cheek.”

Logan seized Arlen by the arm.

“Arlen, I want you to trust me,” he entreated. “Leave this thing to me. Leave it as it is. Don’t put the police on it. I’ll tell you this much—if you put the law after them now you’ll be sorry. Promise me that you won’t.”

Logan’s plain face was tense, eager with pleading. Arlen was impressed by the man’s gravity. Surely it must be a serious matter that could thus provoke Logan’s solicitude.

“All right. I promise.” Arlen reluctantly conceded.

Had Arlen known the terrific forces of fear and hate unleashed against him by the words that had inspired mortal funk in Hendricks, he would not have given his promise of silence to Logan so readily.

“They’ll be out to get you now,” Logan warned. “Don’t go out in the woods alone. But if you do, keep your eye peeled. They probably wouldn’t murder you, but you might get bumped off and it would look like an accident. Hendricks is a tough customer. I got the best of him that day in your office, but I know he’s too big for me.”

“I’m not afraid of the brute,” Arlen asserted.

Logan sized up Arlen’s well-knit figure. “Shouldn’t be surprised if you know how to handle your fists.”

“Just to be on the safe side,” Logan volunteered, “I’ll walk up to the house with you.” He pulled out a drawer in the table. “And, in case anyone starts fireworks—this.”

“This” was a six-shooter which Logan stuck in his hip pocket. Outside the cabin door they found Shep waiting for them. With the big dog frisking ahead the two men moved up the road.

Passing the lane that led to Lin Hung’s ranch Arlen had an uncanny sensation, a sort of sixth sense, that somebody was hidden in the trees watching them. This feeling was further strengthened when Shep abruptly lifted his head and cocked his ears, his body rigid. He growled, a mere whisper deep in his big throat.

With a whinny of welcome the golden-coated mare came to the fence as the two men drew near. With her beautiful mane tossing she pawed the ground with dainty hoofs. With one prodigious bound the dog was over the rail. For an instant the two animals touched noses, then with a long, springy

stride the dog sped round the pasture, the horse racing after. Round and round they ran, faster and faster, until Shep appeared a grey streak and the golden mare like a shaft of light from the moon itself which shone resplendent over all. Finishing with a whirl of speed Shep bounded to the road and rejoined the men.

“That’s Anne’s horse, Cariboo Queen,” Logan informed Aden. “She’s a direct descendant from the old man’s favourite horse, Chinaman. Chinaman made racing history in the old days. Don’t get Lee started talking about his old horse because he’ll talk for two hours.”

What a day it had been, Arlen mused, as he stretched out in the high-posted bed. More like the pages of a dime novel than real life. There was old Lee’s romantic history, Anne’s tragic life, and the mystery surrounding Hendricks and Lin Hung. He not only had a farm to put in order but he had this enigma to solve. Well, he couldn’t do anything now that he had given his promise to Logan. Anyway, this was the life! Tangible things to do, obstacles to overcome, and as an added spice a touch of adventure.

His body was a little sore from his day’s work. A pleasant feeling of physical weariness came over him. The moon, riding high through the tree tops cast soft shadows on wall and floor, stippled the patchwork quilt with fantastic patterns, transformed the worn, braided rug by his bedside into an oval of glory, and touched Arlen’s face as with a light caress.

“Feel like a kid again, back on the old farm,” he smiled drowsily, and fell into a dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER VII

AFTER breakfast the next morning Logan beckoned Lee outside and the two men moved down by the barn where they stopped and became engaged in an animated conversation in which Logan did most of the talking. Arlen saw that his foreman was speaking heatedly, his arm flung out occasionally in emphatic gestures. Nervous under Logan's fire of words the old man paced restlessly to and fro and when they returned to the house Arlen noticed added lines of worry about Lee's sunken blue eyes.

Arlen and his foreman spent the day in taking an inventory of the ranch and listing their needs. That night they sat by the kitchen table in the light of a coal-oil lamp and checked over the list. They found that practically all the antiquated farm machinery would have to be junked and replaced with modern equipment.

Logan's brows puckered in a frown as he studied the completed list.

"Great limping fishhooks!" he ejaculated. "It's going to cost a small fortune to bring that layout here."

"Look now, Tom," Arlen said earnestly. "If we're going to get in any more crop this year we've got to hustle. I'll go to Vancouver tomorrow and attend to this list. In the meantime you hire all the men you can get hold of and patch up the road between here and Cayuse Creek so we can truck our stuff with a car and then set the men to work on the ranch. Spare no expense. Hire every Indian on the Reserve if you want to. Do all you can with what you have to work with until the new machinery gets here. Let's go."

It was late June on a sweet and beautiful evening, the kind of June night known only in the Cariboo. Bruce Arlen and Anne stood leaning on a rail, their elbows almost touching, watching Shep and Cariboo Queen race madly round the field. With one last joyous bark Shep leaped at the horse's head and horse and dog came to a standstill in front of the watchers. The soft-eyed, velvet-limbed mare curvetted up to the fence and nudged Anne's shoulder with her soft muzzle.

"My turn now, is it, Queenie?" Anne asked. She climbed to the top of the rail and vaulted lightly to the horse's bare back and they were off like a shot.

Arlen got a thrill every time he watched Anne and the Cariboo Queen on their mad scampers. He admired the ease and grace with which she sat her

plunging horse, her lithe body swaying rhythmically with every movement of the animal.

Anne dismounted only slightly out of breath. She tossed back her wealth of hair from her face and it floated back in the breeze adding its fragrance to the perfume blowing in their faces. Arlen stared. Like all men of a very virile type he was particularly susceptible to that most feminine of allurements and this was the most beautiful hair he had ever seen—a sun-bleached blond shot through and through, in the lowering sun, with streaks of darker threads that were almost auburn.

“Your grandfather tells me that you’re going to enter the Cariboo Queen in the races at Pinchbeck this year,” Arlen stated casually.

The girl said sadly, “Poor Grandad. He loves racing but he hasn’t been to a stampede for an age.” Her face clouded as if from a painful memory. “I haven’t been to Pinchbeck for seven years,” she added.

“Well, we’ll all go this year,” Arlen assured her, “and you’ll ride Cariboo Queen in the Derby.”

The girl shook her head uncertainly.

“It would please your grandfather,” he urged, “and Tom and I would get a great kick out of it.”

“It would make Grandad happy,” she agreed.

The sun was setting with a peculiar cloud formation which for the moment turned the ragged world of the distance into a crumpled mass of purple and grey and gold.

Anne looked out over the fat, undulating meadows of the restored ranch. She had never ceased marvelling at the change. Nearly every acre was now under cultivation. They had made fast progress. It was positively amazing.

Carpenters, plumbers, masons, electricians, augmented by a small army of Indian workers from the Reserve, had worked a miraculous change in the old place. New buildings had sprung up almost over night. Many of the tumble-down out-houses had been entirely destroyed. A few of the more substantial structures had been reinforced and the roofs shingled. The old open flume was replaced with modern piping. There were new fences everywhere and a huge silo towered on the spot where the old barn had stood. A cook-house and quarters for the farm hands and a huge new barn loomed across the road.

The girl swung her eyes toward the house. Every room was now habitable. She felt grateful to Arlen for the kind thought that prompted him to leave the Lee house—so far as possible—in its original state. With

painstaking care he had mended antique chairs, beds and tables; had salvaged the greater part of the furniture that had been collected by the ancient Lee. The fire-places, sealed up and cold for a quarter century, once again sent light, radiance and good cheer throughout the log-walled rooms. Except for modern plumbing, new floors, paint and electric lights the old rooms retained their same ancient air of homeliness.

The old store, whose shelves had been empty for years, had been rebuilt, and stocked with a plentiful supply of general merchandise and groceries. Her grandfather's reputation among the older Indians for honesty soon brought a fair business. This, she thought, would increase Hendricks' enmity as his store trade had suffered a corresponding decrease.

The opening of the tie camps had necessitated the installing of a government telephone and the rebuilding of the old Cayuse Lake road. The thoroughfare was widened and levelled, new bridges and culverts installed and traffic was open for cars for the full length of the ancient highway.

The girl's eyes rested on Arlen's grey roadster parked in the yard by the front door. He had taught her to drive. She loved the thrill of guiding the speedy car along the smooth highway; the surge of strength that responded to her slightest touch.

The previous evening Arlen had given her half the first payment on the tie timber. She had protested but he had overruled her objections. "That was the understanding," he had argued. "We are to share fifty-fifty."

Anne looked upon the transformation of her old home and her almost incredible change in fortune with mixed emotions of happiness, anxiety, wonder and a hurt pride. Arlen was doing too much for her. She was fully aware that he had expended twice as much as the value of the farm. It would be a long time before he could show a profit on the investment.

He must have oodles of money, but she wanted him to regard this undertaking as a business investment. If it was to be a hobby, any money that he would turn over to her in the next two years would not be earned by the farm—it would be almost like accepting charity. He was spending too much on the place. She worried as to the outcome; knew the uncertainty as to profits in farming.

She knew that for several years beef cattle had been sagging at the bottom of the market, which had meant empty pockets for the cattle men. Early that spring Logan had predicted a rise in prices and had prevailed upon her, when she sorely needed money, to hold her stock over until fall. The cattle had come through the winter without the loss of a yearling, and added to this was the fact that every bearing cow had dropped a calf. She

hoped, for Arlen's sake, that Logan was right. A raise of even two cents a pound meant optimism and hope.

Noting the long silence, Arlen stole a glance at the girl at his side. Anne stood with elbows on the rail, head lowered. Her curly blond hair fell about her tanned cheeks, blurring their smooth oval outline. Her eyes were downcast, her full red lips parted, showing her white, even teeth. Studying her profile Arlen felt his pulses quicken.

Anne was different from any girl he had ever known. He had never encountered so lovely a personality. Her large blue eyes looked straight into yours and her sweet low voice dealt only in straight talk. She was more virile, more alluring, than any woman he had ever met, and, best of all, there was nothing coquettish about her.

When in Vancouver the date had been set for his marriage to Audrey; [it] was to take place in the spring. Since he had returned, questions had arisen within him. True that during his long betrothal there had been times when he was uncertain of his feeling toward Audrey, but now a more definite doubt crept in. He wondered why.

Was he kidding himself? Didn't he know? Should he admit that the reason he doubted his loyalty to Audrey was because he had met Anne? Nonsense! It was just a matter of propinquity. Seeing her all the time, eating together, working together, swimming together—being in this girl's alluring presence from morning till night would ripen seeds in a frostier soil than a man's heart. Well, she was married and he was engaged. And besides, Logan was in love with Anne. So that was that.

At the thought of Logan, Arlen's brows knitted. He wouldn't let Tom know that he, Arlen, had given a thought to Anne—not for a million dollars. From the first he had been aware of Logan's dog-like devotion to the girl; had loved her since she was a child. Logan had tried to conceal his feelings but Arlen had read him like an open book.

Yes, he resolved, he'd not betray his feelings for Anne. Yet the next moment his eyes swung to the girl as though magnetically drawn. He felt a fervid longing to seize her in his arms, run his fingers through her hair and kiss her provocative lips. The desire was almost overpowering. He had better get away, he decided. In his present mood it was not safe for him to linger in this girl's magnetic presence. With a muttered excuse he left her and hurried down the path to Logan's cabin.

Anne was unaware of the passion that had shaken Arlen. It was well for Arlen's self-possession that he did not see the gentle light in the girl's eyes as she gazed after his retreating figure.

Logan had told her of Arlen's engagement. Was his love affair progressing happily, she wondered—wondered what his fiancée was like—pretty, rich and accomplished, no doubt. She took a deep breath that was almost a sigh. With her head bowed in deep thought, her hands clasped behind her, she walked slowly down the hill towards the lake.

Since the night Arlen's carelessly spoken words had sent Hendricks away in a panic the big man had not been seen at the lake. It was rumoured that he was away on an extended trip to the coast.

Passing Lin Hung's ranch she was surprised to see Hendricks and the Chinaman sitting on the verandah with a bottle on the table between them. The big man called a hearty greeting which the girl returned with a slight nod.

Anne's beauty appealed only to the bestial part of Hendricks nature. His eyes followed the slight figure until she disappeared.

"I'd give my right arm to own that kid," he said with an oath.

Hendricks back again, she thought, with a feeling of distaste. She had fervently hoped that she was rid of him; had hoped that his nameless fear of Arlen would keep him away. But evidently he had decided that his fear was groundless.

The moon had risen when Anne stepped from the canoe and hurried up the float. She stopped short with a gasp of alarm as Hendricks moved from the shadows of the trees to the road.

"Hello, Anne! Thought I'd come down to walk up with you," he said as he fell in step by her side. He laid his big hand on her arm. "Anne, you're the prettiest thing I ever saw." His arm slipped round her waist.

Anne knew that Hendricks was capable of terrific, passionate outbursts of insane rage. She had many times sensed his amorous eyes upon her and had always felt a repugnance for the man—feared him. But heretofore he had never laid hands upon her.

She pulled away from him. Her eyes widened with fear when she caught the expression of his face and realized that he had been drinking. She could not keep herself from trembling but the only sign of fear was her quickened breathing.

Like a flash she turned to run but the big man's long arm shot out suddenly and drew her close to him. She struggled wildly. The contact with her body seemed to let loose a volcano inside the man. He pushed her head back. She saw his swarthy face, illumined by the moon, within a few inches

of her own—a face now insane with passion. Roughly he tried to push his mouth against her lips. White, terrified, humiliated, Anne struck with her free hand at the face above her.

“You little devil,” he growled. “How do you like this?”

He pinioned her arms to her sides and viciously pressed his mouth against her lips. She screamed and kicked out savagely but the man had her and was brutally crushing her. He laughed throatily. “You’re not so innocent. Married woman, eh? That’s a good joke.”

Anne heard the sound of running feet. Hendricks suddenly loosed his hold.

Arlen’s voice snapped. “Hold a minute, Tom.” He seized Logan, who was about to spring at Anne’s assailant, and pulled him back.

Air whistled as it sucked through Arlen’s nostrils. His lids came down to form glittering slits. His arms, as his lungs filled with air, seemed to drag his fists into a fighting posture. The moon shone on Hendricks’ face while Arlen was in shadow. Arlen picked the exact spot on Hendricks’ reddish chin where the upper-cut was going to land.

But with an oath Hendricks struck first—struck out viciously with his right fist. Arlen’s head moved a half inch and the blow that the big man aimed at it slid by. Arlen’s instant counter started from his knees and curved in a beautiful arc. It caught Hendricks as his huge body was coming in, which added doubly to the power of the punch. There was a sound as of a wet towel smacking a board when the blow connected with the big man’s chin and sent him prone on his back.

“A pippin!” Logan applauded, trembling with excitement.

Hendricks staggered groggily to his feet and lashed out. Arlen easily avoided the dazed man’s wild swings. Arlen stepped in close. There was a nicely timed left jab that landed on Hendricks’ nose and snapped his head back on his shoulders. Arlen’s own shoulders heaved as he sent his right in a perfect cross to the jaw. Hendricks staggered back several steps, then suddenly toppled to the ground. He crawled to his hands and knees and tried to stand but again collapsed in a heap and lay still.

Logan stared from the fallen man to Arlen, then back again. “Goddlemighty!” he said. “Goddlemighty!”

Arlen swung about to Anne.

Blood surged to the girl’s cheeks under his direct gaze. She pressed her hands to her temples. She touched her cheek where Hendricks’ rough face had bruised her skin. She thought of it as a badge of shame. She felt that

Arlen had heard Hendricks' words. She winked bravely to keep back the tears.

Logan came to her side and spoke gently to her.

“Are you hurt, Anne?”

She shook her head.

Anne stood looking at Arlen for a long moment, waiting for him to speak. He had heard and was disgusted with her, she thought. But Arlen was struggling for self-control; struggling to keep from taking this girl in his arms and comforting her.

Anne's hand fluttered to her throat. She looked first at one man, then at the other.

“You heard what he said?” she breathed.

Arlen nodded.

“It isn't true!” she cried piteously. “It isn't true! I'm—I'm married. I—” The tears started, trickled slowly down her face. Her whole body fought against the sobs that could no longer be suppressed—sobs that rose from the hidden springs of an aching heart.

She turned and ran blindly up the road.

Hendricks swayed to his feet, his eyes glazed and vacant, he staggered away.

“He still hears the birdies singing,” Logan chuckled as he watched the weaving figure. He turned to Arlen. “You did a good job,” he said admiringly. “But,” he added seriously, “don't get too cocky over it. Hendricks is drunk. If he hadn't been drinking he wouldn't have been here and he wouldn't have insulted Anne. The first punch did it. But I tell you he's a tough customer. If he'd ever got hold of you it might have been different. He had it in for you before, but now,—you watch your step.”

CHAPTER VIII

ARLEN had insisted that Anne give up all outdoor labours and confine her activities to the store and post-office. She superintended the kitchen but a half-breed Indian girl performed the more menial tasks.

A great change had come over the girl. Relieved from the heavy work, heart-breaking worries, scrimping and saving, some of the sadness had gone from her eyes. Her hands, coarsened and thickened by manual labour, had begun to regain their natural shape. Some of the blistering tan had gone from her face, allowing a bit of rich colour to centre in her cheeks.

A week after Arlen's encounter with Hendricks, on a morning when the air was redolent with the fragrance of late spring flowers, Arlen announced that he had to go to Pinchbeck on business matters and asked Anne to accompany him.

The girl had become a fairly proficient driver—had proved an apt pupil. The luxurious seat that softly cradled her body; the throbbing hum of the powerful motor; the feeling of tremendous power at her fingertips; the speed and rush of air, caused her to float within an elation that verged upon the dreamland of illusion.

Anne hurried through her duties and at the first sound of the motor she appeared dressed in her blue gingham and wearing a pair of frilled buckskin gloves.

“All right, driver,” Arlen smiled as he shifted his seat.

Her eyes alight with pleasure she slipped to the seat Arlen had vacated and took the wheel.

Today she was filled with a monstrous exaltation. For the first time in her life she had money of her own and she was going to plunge into an orgy of spending. All kinds of nice things in the way of clothes—and no matter what else she might have to deny herself she was going to have one pair of real silk stockings.

It was mid-afternoon when Arlen finished his business. When he returned to the car he found Anne busily stowing away bundles of various shapes and sizes.

He stared at her. She had visited the barber and the treatment she had received had amazingly enhanced the beauty of her hair. It fluffed about her

head in curling splendour, the sunshine forming a sort of halo about the outer fringe.

The girl flushed under his appraising eyes.

“Grandad has been my barber for a long time,” she smiled nervously. “It’s been a real luxury to have it properly done. Do you like it?”

“Great!” he approved. “And I’m glad you didn’t have it cut too short.”

To Anne there was a magic madness in the air today. She sat erect behind the wheel, her hair flying, her face flushed. The whistling air, at once mild and intoxicating, swept them joyfully. They came to a long, level stretch of road with no obstructions on either side.

“Open her up,” Arlen advised.

Anne glanced at the meter. Thirty, forty, fifty, sixty, until they were doing a dizzy seventy. Arlen glanced admiringly at his companion. The girl’s slim, gingham-clad body, her hair, her cheeks, her eyes, seemed filled with a pulsating vitality. He had never seen her look so radiant. She had learned to drive quickly. She was an adorable thing.

“How do you like it?” he shouted, grinning.

Anne emitted a happy laugh. “Glorious,” she cried. “Just heavenly.”

As she slowed up for a corner Arlen leaned towards her. “Anne,” he said happily, “that’s the first time I ever heard you laugh.”

The girl’s face became suddenly serious. For an instant she withdrew her gaze from the road and glanced at her companion. He saw the shadows that quickly drowned the joy in her large eyes.

“There’s been little in my life to cause laughter,” she said soberly.

True enough, he thought. Today had probably been quite an event in Anne’s life. Funny old world! Now there was Audrey, who was several years Anne’s junior, and yet she was already satiated, absolutely fed-up with the world’s pleasures—forever searching for new thrills.

In spite of all his good resolutions the image of Audrey still persisted in merging into that of Anne. He shook his head. He’d spend more time in Vancouver with Audrey when the ranch was going good and he’d probably forget about Anne. He had to—that’s all. His engagement was announced, Anne was married—so that settled it, he assured himself for the hundredth time.

Anne flew at the task of preparing the evening meal. She would help get the dinner underway, take a shower and put on one of the three new dresses

she had bought. Which one should she wear? Again a rippling laugh escaped her lips. Imagine! Anne Lee wondering *which* dress she would wear.

In a flurry of excitement she unpacked the purchases of the day. Her room became a litter of papers, boxes and strings. Dresses, sweaters, shoes, handkerchiefs, pyjamas, hosiery, lingerie and a dressing-gown. She spread them all out on the bed and stood back admiringly.

She knew which one she liked best. She picked out a brown dress with a pleated skirt. This was the most expensive piece of wearing apparel she had owned in years. She ran her fingers lovingly over a pair of brown silk stockings, her eyes glowing.

Ten minutes later she had finished dressing. Gazing in the mirror the girl drew in her breath with a gasp of delight. She had not thought it possible that a dress could make such a change. She swung her lithe body slowly about. Her graceful slim hips were now beautifully rounded by the clinging folds of the dress. Her firm breasts were moulded to frank perfection. The skirt falling to the knees exposed her shapely, shimmering silk-clad legs.

Anne tried to appear at ease as the men entered in response to the dinner gong—stood with her back to the door, pretending to arrange the dishes on the table. She felt that they had stopped and were staring at her, and was annoyed to feel the colour flooding her face. She turned to face them, with a smile of embarrassment.

Arlen was the first to speak.

“Anne,” he laughed. “You should have warned us. It isn’t fair, is it, Tom?”

But Logan was stricken dumb. He had started to remove his wide hat but his arm remained aloft as if in a frozen, stiff salute. He stared, and he continued to stare throughout the meal.

Unmindful of the others, Lee took his grand-daughter in his arms.

“Just as a Lee girl should be,” he said in a tone of husky remorse. He held her off at arms’ length. “My, you look lovely, Anne.”

That evening Arlen and Anne stood in the lane leading from the log house to the big new barn that loomed among the whispering cottonwoods beside the singing stream. They stood with folded arms resting on top of the bar gate, watching Lee as he carried the velvety coat of Cariboo Queen.

The day for the famous race was nearing. For the past week the old man had forsaken his mine in order to attend to the horse. The veteran trainer was using all his skill to get Cariboo Queen in top-notch condition. The old man

stood back a few paces and ran a critical eye over the beautiful animal, his face glowing.

“Just look at her,” he cried exultingly. “You haven’t a chance to lose, Anne. A Lee horse always comes in ahead. She’ll win in a walk! Take her out for a couple more runs and she’ll be ready for the flag.”

There was a distressed look in Anne’s eyes as she watched the gnarled old figure leading the horse to the stable.

“I wish I hadn’t promised him that I’d ride,” she confessed. “I’ve never ridden in a race and Queenie never saw a track. It will break Grandad’s heart if we lose.”

“Cheer up,” Arlen comforted. “You’re going to win.”

The girl shook her head doubtfully.

The previous winter had been one of intense cold, but little snow, presaging danger when summer came, for there is a blessing in deep snow as it means plenty of water when the sun beams hot for the brief span of summer—and water means good crops. The cattle rancher in the Dry-belt learns to gauge his future by the growth of oats and hay. They mean the difference between success and failure when the cattle go to the sales pens or are carried through the long winter months.

The gloomy predictions of a dry summer had worried the workers at Lightning Creek Ranch, but at present there was no sign of drought. Below, the westering sun shone on wide fields of oats, barley, wheat, alfalfa, clover and timothy. On the other side of the creek the flat was a rich, deep green with evenly spaced rows of vegetables and beyond, near the lake and on the benches to the right, cattle grazed on verdant carpets of green.

Looking on all this Arlen felt an immeasurable content.

“Prosperity is with us, Anne, or at least it’s on the way.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “Everything looks wonderful.”

Logan shouted from the door. “’Phone, Arlen.”

Five minutes later Anne saw Arlen come to the door and stand for a long moment without moving. Slowly he came down the hill toward her, steps lagging, a puzzled, hunted expression in his eyes. She knew at once that something dreadful had happened. She looked up at him, startled.

He twisted his face into a wry smile.

“Anne, you’re looking on a man that was once an embryo millionaire but now has gone off the deep end. As a bloated stock-holder I’m sunk.”

“What—what do you mean?”

“Sold out! Worst Stock market crash in years. My bank roll will look as though an elephant had sat on it with a hippopotamus in his arms.”

“You’ve lost all your money?”

“That’s it, and how!” He laughed harshly. “All I have left is a few safe bonds and—” He swept his arm to encompass the scene about them. “What you and I have here.” He threw out his arms resignedly. “Oh, well, what of it” he said with a forced grin and a fine air of bravado. But Anne saw his lips twitch. He averted his face and hurried away.

The girl felt a paradox of emotions. She felt miserable—was deeply sorry for Arlen’s misfortune. But, although she experienced a twinge of shame at the thought, there was a crumb of comfort to the knowledge that now the social barriers between them had been somewhat lowered. They were now on an equal footing. They would have to fight it out together.

Logan was sitting moodily on the edge of his bunk when Anne passed the cabin. He stole to the window and watched her from behind a torn shade. He saw her step into the canoe and his gaze followed her until she was hidden by a fringe of trees.

He heaved a deep sigh. The change wrought in Anne by her new clothes had left him stunned, bewildered. Why, she seemed like another person. He was puzzled that clothes could work such a transformation. The gulf between himself and Anne had widened. She was gradually slipping away from him.

She had scarcely glanced at him during the entire meal. It seemed that her eyes and talk had been all for Arlen. Well, why not? He, Logan, couldn’t talk on matters they had discussed, whereas Arlen carried on a conversation easily and well.

Scores of times during the past few years he had been on the verge of asking Anne to marry him and always at the last moment his courage had deserted him. He’d better put his chances to the test before it was too late. He sprang nervously to his feet. He’d do it.

Lying on the bunk drowsed the sharer of his shack and pampered object of his affections. Lathering his face before the cracked mirror, Logan addressed the cat.

“Did you see her, Pat? Hardly know her, would you? I wish she’d stayed the way she was. Can you imagine her having anything to do with a guy like me, Pat? Glad I bought a new suit when I was in Vancouver. I’m going to put it on and go over the top—if I don’t get cold feet.” He glanced over at

his pet who was sleeping soundly through it all. “Pat,” he said in humorous sarcasm, “you’ve been working too hard.” He turned again to his toilet.

Meticulously he folded and tied a neat, blue, polka-dot cravat, and donned his natty blue suit. The coat pinched in fashionably at the waist and the trousers were of the latest balloon type. From under the bunk he withdrew a newspaper-wrapped bundle from which he extracted a new wide-rimmed cowboy hat. He dusted the rim with his elbow and adjusted it to his head in quite the correctly rakish angle. A jaunty bright red silk handkerchief in the breast pocket of his coat completed his array.

He stood before the tiny mirror and surveyed the effect with care. A touch here, a pat there, and he turned to his pet.

“Take a look, Pat. Am I all right? Some class, eh? Do you think I got a chance?”

Without opening her eyes the cat stretched luxuriously, yawned cavernously and relaxed into sound sleep.

Logan chuckled. “You’re a hell of a lot of help, you are.”

It was late when Anne returned. Moonlight flooded the valley. Logan stood on the float waiting for her, his heart thumping, a choking sensation in his throat. She had spied a figure on the shore when still some distance away and took it to be Logan. He’s worried about me being out so late, she thought, and she experienced a sudden glow of gratitude. The canoe rubbed along the planking of the float and came to a stop. The girl looked up at him, her face flooded with moonlight.

“Hello, Tom,” she greeted, and then added, “Why, Tom, you look so nice.” Her mood gave her voice an added softness. She stretched out her hand and as he lifted her to the float beside him her slender body swayed against his and he caught her in his arms for a moment.

“My legs are so cramped I can hardly stand up,” she smiled, her face close to his.

“Anne, will you marry me?” he blurted.

Outwardly there was no ardour in this advance; inwardly he was seething. His face pale, his eyes burning, and now that he had broken the ice, words came tumbling from his lips. There was no passion in the words he used—his words were only matter of fact.

“You can’t get along all the time like this,” he pointed out. “You’ve got to have somebody to look after you, and our farms are right together. You’ve got to get married sometime and I’ll take good care of you, Anne.”

The girl saw he was trembling from the very strength of his emotion. She was surprised and faintly humbled to know that he loved her so much; that he was so deeply moved. She saw that the occasion was painful and embarrassing for him. She wanted to touch his hand by way of comfort but she was afraid it might let loose the sleeping fires which he was striving manfully to control.

“You know, Anne,” he went on huskily, “that I’m not much good at talking, but I don’t think you’ll find anybody that will love—do better by you than me.” He was breathing heavily. The colour ebbed from his sun-bitten face. Sweat shone on his forehead.

“Tom,” she said gently. “You know that I’m—I’m married.” She looked up at Logan out of wide blue eyes misting with memories that had not lost their power to torture.

He nodded solemnly. “Yes, Anne, I—” He floundered with embarrassment, striving for words to express himself; shifted nervously on his feet. “I—I thought maybe you could get a divorce,” he said desperately.

She had to hurt him but hated the thought.

“You’re a dear, Tom. You’re the best friend I have. But, Tom, I can’t marry you. I’m—I’m sorry.”

Logan winced. “It’s all—all right, Anne,” he said stammeringly.

She laid her hand on his arm and looked up at him through a mist.

“Tell me, Tom. Do people talk about me? Do they say that I am not married?”

Logan stirred uneasily. “I wouldn’t pay any attention to them, Anne,” he ground out savagely.

The girl’s head drooped. “I thought so,” she said wearily. She held out her hand. “Good night, Tom.”

“Good night, Anne.”

With lagging steps Logan entered his cabin, lighted the coal-oil lamp and placed it on the table. He walked back and forth endlessly, smoking cigarette after cigarette, his eyes tense and brooding.

He wondered if things would have been different with him if he’d had a better chance in this world; had an education; talked as intelligently as Arlen instead of being afraid to open his mouth when in the company of educated people for fear he’d make a break. There had been nothing but hard work with his hands for him ever since he could remember. Cow-punching,

trapping and pick and shovel. Hard work since he was a kid and there probably would continue to be hard work for him as long as he lived.

He rested his hands on the table and studied himself in the broken mirror, looked down at his rough hands, his cheap, ready-made suit. Yes, he thought dumbly, he could understand. And so regarding himself he felt that his chances of winning Anne were very, very slim.

He glanced at the empty bottle. Wished he had a big drink. Oh, well! He'd be going to the races before long. He'd have one hell of a time. What was the difference? He didn't give a piebald damn. Who cared what happened to him, anyway?

His eyes lowered to his slumbering pet. His face softened. "I've always got one friend in this world, eh, Pat?" He poked the sleeping cat with a thick finger.

Thus rudely disturbed from his dreams Pat lashed out with a paw, then sprang to the floor.

For a moment the animal seemed to feel a blank consternation at the thing he had done. But there was no mistaking the kick aimed by his master and he shot through the hole in the door.

Logan looked stupidly down at his lacerated hand.

"Goddlemighty! And you too, Pat."

CHAPTER IX

SPRING merged into summer. The days slipped by so rapidly that Arlen scarcely noticed their passing. He had worked hard enough before but now that the ranch was no longer a hobby but the means of his livelihood he put a sort of ferocity into everything he did. The work went on at a tremendous pace. The workmen were all driven and spurred by this savage ferocity of Arlen's, but he seemed to find a keen pleasure in driving himself close to the limit of his strength. His face changed; tanned a golden bronze, thinned from the fierce labour, so that grim lines had come into it.

A languid monster of heat rolled over the country. In the woods, twigs as brittle as though they had come from a kiln crackled under the feet with every movement. A haze of smoke from distant forest fires hovered over Lightning Creek Ranch; the sun, showing dully through it, displayed only a round, coppery ball which exuded little more brilliance than a moon.

The first week in July slipped by, each day as it went irrevocably, hotter than the last. What a week it had been. Hot—so hot that the leaves of the stately cottonwoods had turned the lighter sheen of their leaves to the sun and stilled their whispering.

The smoke grew thicker until one morning Arlen could detect a pitchy odour in the air. A dozen times a day he would wet his finger and hold it to the wind, waiting carefully for the feeling of evaporation which tells its direction, and gave thanks when each time the verdict showed a different point from the heavy pall in the distance—the approach of an irresistible monster.

The water in the creek became a mere trickle. Irrigation ditches slowly dried up until not a drop reached the thirsty meadows and benches.

Arlen summoned Logan and Anne for a conference. With faces steeped in gloom they looked out over the parched land. The rich fields that had given promise of a bountiful harvest already had taken on a tinge of brown, and the channel of Lightning Creek, left bare by the vanished water, showed a great ugly gash in the earth, with dry sandy bed shining hotly in the sun. There was a sense of desert desolation in the prospect; a threat of famine.

“I don't know of anything we can do,” Arlen groaned. He pointed to the lake. “Water—tons of it. But what good does it do us? I set the gas pump throwing water on the vegetable gardens, but it's like a drop in a desert. If this had only held off another two weeks we should have been all right.”

The heat was terrific. The stirless air above the baked earth blurred under the pitiless sun. Even the birds were hushed, and on the field below cattle stood dejectedly in the shade of protecting poplars, heads drooping listlessly.

Logan removed his hat and mopped his sweating face.

“Great jumping bobcats but it’s hot. Never saw anything like it in my life. Just as though you’d opened the oven door to take out a pan of biscuits.”

Anne drew in a long breath. She thought of the long rigorous winter to come and of all the hungry mouths of cattle, horses, sheep, hogs and chickens to feed. Arlen had added heavily to the depleted herds of livestock. This drought, if it continued a few days longer, meant that they would have to dispose of everything in the fall, undoubtedly at a tremendous loss. A great fear clutched her heart. This water famine spelled disaster—absolute ruin.

The girl glanced at the disconsolate figure at her side. Arlen’s face was set in lines of weariness. He had passed many sleepless nights since the drought began. Everything he owned in the world was now at stake, she thought. She felt a deep sense of compassion for him.

It seemed incredulous that their fortunes could suffer such a complete reverse in such a short space of time. The day they had driven to Pinchbeck they had been so joyous and optimistic. She had never known a day so happy and free from care. Then had come the news of his loss in stocks—and now this.

She had spent too much money that day. She experienced a sharp twinge of regret, bitterly reproached herself for her extravagance. Every dollar would count now. Doubtless they would have to borrow money in the spring to buy new stock. They would have to scrape to get enough to live through the winter. She wondered if she could return the purchases she had made. Well, poverty and self-denial she had known all her life; it would be nothing new for her. She would just have to step back into the old rut again.

The girl moved meditatively up to the house and entered her room. From the closet, one by one, she took down her recent purchases and spread them on the bed. She selected a cheap cotton dress, two pairs of stockings and one pair of shoes and placed them in her dresser drawer. The remaining articles she proceeded to return to their original coverings. The brown dress and silken hose came last. She shook the dress out gently, laid it against her body and surveyed herself in the mirror. Anne stared at her reflection long and steadily—stared and sighed. Her fingers ran lovingly over the silken, pleated folds. It had been worn only twice; they would take it back. For a long

interval she hesitated, her lips set in a firm line, light eyebrows puckered determinedly. She placed the dress and stockings in their boxes, her hands shaking slightly as she tied them securely in their wrappings.

She suddenly felt very weary. This awful heat—would it ever cease? Her room was stifling. Her throat ached and there was a feeling like hot sand along the edges of her eyelids. She sat before the mirror with her chin in her hands, her elbows on the dressing table, and regarded herself with unendurable bitterness. Defeat. Defeat all along the line. Was there ever going to be any good luck for her? Was she one of those unfortunate women whose lives were doomed to be a series of tragedies? She removed a tear from each eye with the rolled corner of her handkerchief, stretched her arms before her, bowed her head and wept softly.

Now that Lee had pronounced Cariboo Queen in prime condition for the race he had resumed operations on the tunnel. Huge blasts boomed at intervals from the distant mountain. Each night the old man brought joyful tidings of his progress. His hopes ran high. He would soon reach the elusive vein of ore.

Anne was sorely puzzled. During the past few months her grandfather seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of powder. He had also come into possession of a number of new tools. The storekeeper at Pinchbeck assured her that he was not running a charge account. She had questioned Arlen and Logan but neither of them had supplied the old man with money. She dared not put a direct question to her grandfather for fear of offending him.

For weeks Lee had importuned Arlen to visit his mine. The previous night at dinner the old man had pressed the point with more than his accustomed vigour and Arlen yielded to his request.

Swinging a pair of field-glasses over his shoulder he started up the hill. He had no difficulty in keeping to the trail—a narrow path up the hillside, beaten smooth by the plodding feet of the hardy old man.

A Chinaman perched high on the hill to the rear of Lightning Creek Ranch took instant note of Arlen as he left the house and swung to the trail. Parting the brush before him his beady eyes followed the young man until he was out of sight. Bending double, he wormed his way to the path and with stealthy, furtive tread, followed after.

Halfway up the mountain Arlen paused. Logan had repeatedly warned him not to go far from the ranch alone. He had been so busy that he had given Hendricks and his Chinaman little thought. Hendricks had not been to the lake since the night of their encounter. The big man might have well-

formed plans for Arlen's downfall but so far he had committed no overt act. He continued on his way.

Outside the tunnel Arlen glanced about him. A narrow-gauge track of iron rails ran from the edge of the cliff to the yawning mouth of the mine. The orifice itself was about six feet in height and four feet in width. As far as he could see into the interior the roof and walls were supported by uprights and cross-beams of spruce logs.

A rumbling sound from within gradually increased in volume. Lee appeared, pushing a hand-car heavily laden with rock-rubble. Shoving, straining, he forced the heavy weight to the brink of the cliff, released a bolt and sent the grout thundering down the slope. Breathing heavily he wiped the sweat from his face with his sleeve. Then he spied Arlen and shouted a cheerful greeting.

At once the lone miner launched into a lengthened disquisition on the geology of the country. He pointed to an ancient rockslide and to the scar above from whence it came and explained how this had blocked the original channel of the stream and swung it to the west.

"There's gold under there," he went on enthusiastically. "There's been thousands of dollars taken out of that creek in the early days and there's thousands more under there yet. They made the richest finds right where the creek makes a bend, so the slide must have covered up the best part of it. I expect to find colour any time."

He led Arlen into the dark, cool depths of the tunnel. The dim radiance of a coal-oil lantern held in the wrinkled hands of the guide set their shadows dancing grotesquely against the dank walls. Lee talked steadily, a zealous light in his old eyes, exultation in his voice.

Lost in amazement Arlen stared about at the work wrought by this man's hands. It seemed unbelievable. Here, for years, this kindly old man had served this yawning hole as a priest serves his temple, the mountain of rock and gravel passively receiving the buffets he gave it. It was a greedy pit into which the last years of his life were poured; like a huge anaconda somnolently swallowing its prey. One could not but admire such sturdy optimism. Certainly he was foolish, but certainly he was brave.

They emerged into the heat of the day and stood outside the tunnel while Lee identified for Arlen some of the towering mountains about them. The dome-shaped one dead ahead of them across the valley—that was Squaw Mountain. And that one next, Lee proudly announced, was Lee Mountain.

Arlen noticed that the conifers on Lee Mountain ran in a peculiar skimpy alignment over the crest and down a hogback to the valley below like plumes in the head-dress of an Indian warrior. Following this peculiar growth through the glasses Arlen's eyes became fixed on an odd cup or depression at the foot of the mountain. It was as if some agonized convulsion of nature had scooped out a perfect amphitheatre, or else the deposits from the cascade of some cataclysmic rockslide had massed in a huge circle on top of the earth. The rim of this tremendous basin was a sheer wall of earth and rock and, as far as he could see, without a break in the entire barrier. A fringe of trees topped the wall of this strange valley and on the far side, at the highest point, a huge dead pine spread its gibbet-like limbs against the sky.

There was a hint of perturbation in the old man's voice when he answered Arlen's question.

"That's Blind Gulch. You can't get into it," he answered and abruptly shifted to another subject.

Arlen again trained his glasses on the odd formation. Blind Gulch, he repeated to himself. In some way the name awakened vague memories. Where had he heard it before? Still, it might be a name used for similar formations in many parts of the continent. His glasses steadied and held. No, he was not mistaken. There was a long rambling building showing through a stand of trees in the centre of this valley. And Lee had told him that it was impossible to get into the place. Again he questioned the old man.

"That's my old mine that played out. A slide came down a few years ago and filled the entrance to the gulch." He moved toward the tunnel. "You'll excuse me—I've got to get back to work," he hastily apologized. It was plain he had no taste for the subject under discussion.

Arlen had gone perhaps a mile along the trail on his return to the ranch when he came to a standstill. Blind Gulch. Of course, he remembered clearly now. Those were the words Logan had shot at Hendricks in Vancouver, words that were spoken with a bitter emphasis, throwing Hendricks into a towering rage and precipitating the fight between the two men.

His mind harked back to all the strange doings of the past weeks; Logan's demand for secrecy; the old man's uneasiness; Hendricks' fear of the law—and now Blind Gulch. Arlen's mystification deepened. He matched this circumstance with that. Within his brain mingled surmises, conjectures, doubts, suspicions. But what was the use of puzzling over it? He had given Logan his word that he would not investigate further.

A turn of the trail again brought Blind Gulch within view. He walked to the edge of a jutting ledge and peered below. He drew in his breath and moved back a step. Whew! What a drop. The promontory on which he stood fell sheerly away without a break for fully a thousand feet. From this lofty eerie, even through his powerful glasses, Lee's old mine buildings in the crater-like valley took on the semblance of toy houses.

He uttered an exclamation. His glasses steadied. Outside the barrier of Blind Gulch he made out a number of dark specks crossing an open expanse that was largely clear of growth. There were eight in number. To his astonishment the moving specks disappeared in the apparently impenetrable wall of Blind Gulch. Tense with interest Arlen watched to see if the vanishing specks would emerge within the valley's walls.

There was a movement in the rock-strewn trail behind Arlen. A yellow face surmounted by a wide-rimmed straw hat raised slowly inch by inch from behind a boulder. For a moment the Chinaman's slant eyes studied the situation. Then with an ugly-looking blackjack gripped in his claw-like fingers he crept with the stealth of a cat stalking a mouse toward the unsuspecting man.

A rock-rabbit emitted a shrill cry at Arlen's feet. Startled, Arlen looked down at this strange denizen of the rocks. With a frightened squeak the animal scuttled across the trail. Arlen turned to watch its going.

Arlen's body grew rigid.

The Chinaman, crouched for a spring as the white man turned, straightened like a flash and swung the club from sight behind his body. "'Lo," he said with a nervous grin that was intended to be friendly, but his darting eyes turned sick with fear as the blackjack dropped from his shaking fingers.

For an instant Arlen did not fully grasp the situation. His eyes flickered from the yellow face to the weapon on the ground. He ground out a hoarse oath, placed the field-glasses on the ground and with the same motion lunged for the terror-stricken Chinaman. With a squawk like a frightened hen the Oriental turned and fled with Arlen pounding heavily at his heels.

Stark fear lent the Chinaman wings. His straw hat sailed in the air. His coarse black hair stood straight out as though in a gale of wind. He tore round the first curve in the narrow trail at such a speed that he narrowly averted going off at a tangent and plunging into space. When Arlen reached the second corner the fleeing man was just disappearing around a bend a hundred feet ahead.

Breathing hard, Arlen walked slowly back and retrieved his glasses. He picked up the weighted leather club and turned it slowly in his hands. He looked down the dizzy space to the rock-rubble a thousand feet below. A sickening realization of his narrow escape swept over him. His body would never have been discovered. He might now be lying a sprawled, misshapen, shrivelled thing on the grout beneath. Arlen felt himself breaking out in a cold sweat; turned away with a feeling of acute nausea.

No doubt Logan had good reasons for withholding his knowledge of this matter, Arlen reflected, but how long could this go on? Twice he had been attacked. Hendricks must have put a price on his head to tempt this Chinaman to commit murder. Logan had emphasized the fact that Hendricks would commit no overt act; would not resort to bullet or knife to accomplish his, Arlen's, extermination. But, as Logan put it, "You might get bumped off and it would look like an accident." Firm lines formed about Arlen's mouth and his jaw hardened. If that Chinaman had been successful in his attempt today there would not have been the slightest clue as to the perpetrator of the deed.

CHAPTER X

PRESENTLY all other thoughts were banished as a turn in the trail brought him in sight of the sun-scorched ranch and a quick realization of his predicament. Already the huge vegetable gardens showed brown patches. He had depended on this crop for ready cash but unless the longed-for rain came soon it would be shrivelled beyond restoration.

He emitted a sigh that was almost a groan and studied the heavens for trace of clouds. The heat was stifling. It was like a devouring element, blazing from the rocks in radiating waves that set his temples throbbing and turned him sick and giddy.

To the right and below him he descried a gully, its floor partly shaded by the westering sun. He'd take a short-cut to the ranch—anything to get away from the furnace-like wall of rock.

Five minutes later he leaned back on a mossy ledge and mopped his face in the shade of a protecting wall of rock. It was surprisingly cool as compared with the sun-scorched trail. A cloud of mosquitos buzzed about his head. Strange that the pests should be here at this late date he thought idly. The drought and heat had long since driven them from the valley below. The foliage here was green and shiny compared with that of the lower levels. He looked about him with quickened interest. Suddenly he became aware that his elbow where it rested against the rock felt pleasantly cool. His shirt sleeve was soaked with water. He seized a handful of moss and squeezed it. Water oozed between his fingers. He stood for a moment listening intently. Had his ears deceived him? Curious, he moved along the base of the cliff. No, here was a tiny stream trickling down a mossy crevice and farther on another and another. Altogether he found a dozen rivulets purling down the ledges to be lost in the dry sand and rock-rubble below.

With feverish haste, his eyes alight with interest, he scrambled up the wet and slippery slope to the top of the hill and stood surveying the scene about him. He found himself on a small plateau, its floor carpeted with a rich growth of poplar, willow, alder and bracken. Sinking above his boot-tops in the water-soaked ground he pushed his way through the heavy foliage. Abruptly he came to the shores of a small lake. Flocks of ducks set the calm water rippling as they rose with a startled quacking; muskrats plopped, and a deer showed his white flag as he bounded to cover.

Renewed hope shone in Arlen's face. Eagerly he cut a pole and probed the depth of the lake. Even at the edge he could not reach bottom. He slapped his thigh and in his excitement he spoke aloud, an exultant note in his voice.

"It can be done! It isn't much more than a mile to the ranch and we've got plenty of pipe. This pond isn't more than six acres in extent. It may not be deep, but the ground around it for two-hundred feet is soaked in water—just like a sponge—and the evaporation under this heat must be enormous. Must be fed by underground springs and may fill up as fast as we use it." Wading through the quagmire he slid down the slope and hurried to the ranch.

Anne sat by the kitchen table, a dejected figure, her eyes staring into nothingness. Her eyes in repose were incurably a little sad but now they held an added touch of melancholy.

Startled, she sprang to her feet as Arlen, mud-covered, flushed and dishevelled, burst excitedly into the room.

"Anne," he cried happily, "we've got this thing licked. I've found water." Rapidly words tumbled from his lips.

Her eyes like gentians, her lips parted, her hands twisting a fold of her gingham dress, the girl listened, amazed. Was it possible that he was serious? Why, she had known about that slough since childhood. It was nothing but a pond whose only use was that it was a feeding ground for wild ducks. It was a vain hope. For a moment she hesitated, unwilling to disappoint him.

She said finally, "I'm afraid that it won't help much. It's only a bog hole."

"How do you know it's only a bog hole?" He countered. "Why isn't it dried up then? I tell you that it's full and running over in a dozen places. The ground all around it is full of water—just soaked. And besides, this heat must take out quite a bit in evaporation, Anne. I'm sure there's lots of water there. At any rate it's worth trying—it will help some."

Anne's eyes began to shine. Maybe he was right. In spite of her doubts she was beginning to catch the spirit of his contagious enthusiasm.

"Come up and see it, Anne," he urged. "Slip on those new boots. It's wet and muddy up there. You'll need them. In the meantime I'll go fetch Tom. Snap on it now," he finished gaily. Then added quickly, "What's the matter?"

Anne flushed. "I'm—I'm sending the new boots back," she faltered.

“Don’t they fit?”

Then he saw the heap of bundles on the table. He walked to the girl’s side and stood gazing down at her, a fathoming look in his eyes. A wordless sound of sympathy and understanding escaped his lips. Slowly and methodically he cut the strings of all the bundles, dumped the contents in a motley heap on the table, threw the wrappings in the fireplace, then handed the boots to Anne.

“Put them on, Anne,” he said gently. “We’re not sunk that bad.”

He gathered up the remaining articles in his arms, carried them through the open door of Anne’s bedroom and dumped them on her bed.

Logan proved to be even more sceptical than Anne. Nevertheless, with the instinct of the drowning man clutching at a straw he set eagerly to work with the others on this forlorn hope. Disjointing the flume was begun at once and with Anne holding a lantern they worked far into the night.

The next day was the hottest of all. They were all up and at work with the first rosy hint of dawn. The sun arose a molten ball of fire glowing dimly through the reek of smoke but sending out a blaze of heat that made the earth a simmering crucible.

With a promise of double pay Arlen put every available man on the job and drove them to the limit of their strength. All day long through the torrid heat men toiled up and down the hill. It was a mad race. Arlen was everywhere, lifting, tugging, praising, threatening and by six o’clock the pipes were in place.

With the gas pump they filled the long stretch of pipes. Anne and Arlen stood near the open flume by the dry irrigation ditches. On a raft on the lake above Logan lowered the pipe deep into the pond and adjusted the elbow.

Arlen saw Logan come to the edge of the cliff and wave his arms as a signal that all was ready. He turned the valve and the priceless fluid struck the flume in a spouting deluge that drenched them with its spray and spread through the ditches. Seizing hoes Arlen and the girl shouted happily as they ran here and there, checking wastage at one point, breaking down dams of earth at another. Gradually the torrent spread over the parched land, the arid soil drinking it up greedily.

All through the blistering afternoon and far into the night they laboured. Meal time passed unnoticed. Arlen and his two co-workers were keyed-up to such a pitch of enthusiasm that all except the work on hand was forgotten. They carefully conserved the precious water, at intervals stemming its flow until the hungry soil absorbed the last drop.

It was nearly midnight when Logan sent word that the lake was lowered nearly down to the intake. Arlen and the girl threw down their tools and shut off the water. Mud-covered and muscle-weary but filled with a quiet content they climbed slowly up to the house for a well-earned rest.

Standing under the welcome sting of the shower, looking back at the day's work, Arlen enjoyed a deep sense of accomplishment. They had staved off disaster—temporarily at least. Now, if the rain would come within a few days they would be saved from ruin. Surely this terrific heat could not last much longer. He wondered if the lake would fill overnight. Fervently hoped that it would.

His thoughts drifted to Anne. In spite of his attempts to dissuade her she had stuck by his side all day. The strength and endurance of her lithe body were amazing. What a girl! He gave himself over to an overpowering drowsiness and tumbled into bed.

Daylight was just beginning to struggle with the heat, haze and smoke when Arlen awoke. The moment his eyes opened, his thoughts flew to the work on hand. Would the lake be full? He dressed hurriedly. To avoid disturbing Anne he tip-toed softly down the back stairs. In his eagerness Arlen ran up the hill. Topping the last rise he was astonished to see Anne and Logan standing by the edge of the pond. Anne ran to meet him, her arms waving. Her eyes were still full of sleep but she was glowing with an animation born of high spirits.

“It’s full!” she cried. “It’s full to the top!”

She stumbled on a root and fell into his outflung arms. For the fraction of a second her golden head was pillowed on his shoulder. “You sweet thing,” he breathed into her hair—and immediately regretted the words. She averted her eyes as she flew past him. “I’ll get breakfast ready,” she called, without turning. He watched her retreating figure until she was lost to view over the brow of the hill and turned to find Logan staring at him.

Arlen had been so absorbed in work that he’d had no opportunity to tell Logan of his narrow escape at the hands of Hendricks’ hireling. As they walked down the hill he related the events of the previous day. Listening breathlessly Logan’s mahogany-coloured face lost some of its colour.

“Good God!” he ejaculated.

Arlen stopped and turned to his companion.

“Tom,” he said vehemently, “there’s got to be a show-down. I’ve given you my promise, but this thing is going to end in my being murdered if something isn’t done. It’s up to you.”

Logan's brows drew down. For an interval he stood silent, hesitant, as though he were searching for words to answer this direct challenge. Finally he said,

"Arlen, I'm not going to give the whole show away—I can't. I feel just as you do about it—like to clean up on the whole damned bunch—but we can't do it—not yet. But I'll tell you this—I'm working on it. And by gorry, when the time comes we'll send them all to hell in a hand basket! You lay off it," he begged, "and I promise you that it'll be all right."

"All right?" Arlen exploded. "Like hell it's all right! I'll have to keep on walking around expecting to get sapped on the head or pushed off a cliff!" He looked down into Logan's anxious, pleading eyes. "But," he added, "I think you know what you're doing." He threw out his arms resignedly. "My promise stands."

During the next three days the lake discharged its contents five times. On the third night while Anne was preparing dinner, Arlen came wearily into the room, slumped down in a chair, ran his fingers through his hair and emitted a deep sigh. He was agonizingly tired, drugged with fatigue. His broad shoulders drooped, his face held the lead-grey pallor of exhaustion, his eyes were bloodshot.

"Well, Anne, we've shot our bolt. The lake's dried up."

The water from the tiny lake had worked a marvellous transformation in the fields and gardens. The wheat, barley, oats and hay now stood straight and green. The enriched soil, coupled with the intense heat, had made a hotbed of the root gardens and the vegetables were growing lustily.

The drought continued unabated. Arlen moaned again as the soil became parched and dry with thirst. Across the road Lin Hung's fields and gardens had withered beyond redemption, but, strangely, the Chinaman seemed little perturbed by his loss.

One morning Arlen awoke at the usual hour but instead of arising he gave himself over to a period of gloomy retrospection. What was the use of getting up? Just another day to stand helpless while his crops wilted under the pitiless sun. One thought drifted aimlessly to another. He wondered what Audrey was doing? He knew from the tone of her letters, from their increasing rareness, that she was slipping away from him. Well, what could he expect? It was absurd to think of her tying herself up to a poor rancher—for poor he undoubtedly was. Audrey's father was a wise old bird; too wise to dabble in margins. He'd probably leave Audrey a couple of million dollars. This brought his thoughts back with a jolt to his own affairs as

regarded finance. By selling a few bonds he owned and the small amount of cash to his credit in the bank, would he have enough to tide him over this crop failure and leave a balance to make another try at it in the spring? He doubted it. He'd have to borrow money. He'd be as bad as old man Lee—have to put a mortgage on the ranch.

And there was Anne. He smiled gently at thought of her. He pondered over Anne's marriage. Somehow he couldn't think of her as married. Wondered what sort of man could desert a girl like Anne. Or had Anne left her husband? More likely the latter, he decided. A rotten shame! As much as Logan worshipped the girl he couldn't imagine Tom as Anne's husband. A cracking good fellow but—well, it was just as impossible to picture Audrey married to a horny-handed rancher and living in the backwoods of Cariboo.

These musings, random, disconnected, sleepy and of no great importance, were interrupted by a sound that struck him wide awake as by a blow. He sat up in bed, head cocked sidewise, listening intently. Did his ears deceive him or did he hear rain on the roof? There was the sound of running feet under his window. Then the door burst open below and he heard Logan's glad cry.

“Anne! Arlen! It's raining!”

He heard Anne's jubilant reply. Springing from bed he dressed in eager haste and leaped down the stairs.

They stood outside in the deluge as happy as children around a Christmas tree, their heads thrown back, enjoying the coolness and the rain. The huge drops stung their faces and spatted like bullets in the thick dust in the yard. Gradually the downpour increased until it hissed through the whispering leaves of the cottonwoods, set up a drumming on the roofs and chattered from the eaves.

On the fourth day the sun arose to shine through crystal-clear air on a rejuvenated land—the earth breathed again. The valleys and hillsides were a verdant green. Robins bobbed and fluttered daintily as they bathed themselves in the many pools and from the trees birds sang their songs of thanksgiving. Dried-up creeks filled to overflowing; tiny iridescent rivulets sprang from everywhere, poured themselves into larger streams that leaped and tumbled with rippling mirth or swept proudly to the lake.

It was the second day after the rain ceased. Anne and Arlen sat under the trees. He was smoking his second after-dinner cigarette. Anne had brought her sewing-bag from the house and was mending a jagged tear where the wire fence had torn the sleeve of Arlen's shirt.

It was still light and the lambent afterglow was rosy in the clean, rain-washed air about them. Holding his arm out to the girl, watching her as she deftly plied the needle, he felt a pleasant little tingling inside him. He stretched out his long legs in an ecstasy of contentment.

Tomorrow they were all going to the races at Pinchbeck. He wondered if Anne felt nervous now that she had entered to ride Cariboo Queen. He looked down at the girl's bowed head. Except for the subdued song of birds and the soft whisper of leaves above them the air was very still. He had a feeling that he and this girl were alone in this quiet world. That, of course, was a fancy born of the spiritual harmonies of the moment, but of one thing he was sure—this girl had brought tangible and comforting essences into his life. She brushed the hair back from her face with a characteristic gesture. He studied her profile. She made a picture of beauty, what with her healthy, slim body and the admirable set of her head and her sun-browned throat bare above the open collar. Her proximity thrilled him.

A gentle breeze rustled through the trees over their heads and set the leaves softly whispering. A detached leaf fluttered against the girl's cheek, clung there a second, dropped. She touched the place with the back of her hand as if feeling in a daydream the touch of an invisible caress. A heavier breeze swept through the valley. All the leaves about were trembling and shining. Arlen felt all this agitation of the leaves in his own body. He tried to tame the strange ferment in his blood; fought with himself, drew a deep breath.

Anne gave his arm a pat to signify that the job was finished.

"Anne," he said huskily.

What Anne saw in Arlen's burning eyes brought the blood surging to her face. Both came to their feet. A moment they stood looking at each other, waiting, knowing the thing that would happen—fearing it—wanting it. He seized her in his arms and held her, held her close in his embrace without moving, held her as though it were an eternity. Then suddenly he bent his face to hers and pressed his lips against her mouth. Her lips were parted. He kissed her—kissed her again and again until she fought herself free of him. He drew her back and she yielded to him. At last she broke away from him and stood looking about her, dazed and aghast at the thing that had happened, then fled swiftly to the house.

Filled with consternation with what he had done, Arlen stood staring blankly after the girl until she entered the house. Within him was whirlpool, tempest, conflagration! While Anne was in his arms he had felt within an

aura so highly vitalized as to seem almost electrical and it had left him upset and shaken.

A sound disturbed him. He turned to see Logan rounding a corner of the barn. A sickening wave of self-abasement swept over Arlen. What if Tom had arrived a moment earlier? Arlen felt the hot blood rush to his face at the thought.

“Hell!” he muttered irritably. “I’m a weak-kneed jackass.”

It was no use. He simply could not be near Anne and keep his reason on the track. He would never allow himself to be alone with her again, he swore.

CHAPTER XI

FOR two days from all over the surrounding country, on foot, on horseback, by wagon, railroad and automobile, over winding trails, dirt roads, highways and byways came a constant stream of ranchers, prospectors, traders, cowboys, Indians, half-breeds, Chinamen, and a sprinkling of visitors from distant urban centres. All roads led to the Pinchbeck Stampede until the town became surcharged with a pulsating, vivid life.

Dust everywhere. Dust rolling down the arid, sagebrush hills; dust rising in clouds from the town's streets, stirred by the hoofs of galloping horses, plunging steers, motor cars and wagon wheels; dust billowing over the racetrack, filling the eyes of both humans and beasts. The sun, a glowing ball of molten gold in the clear blue of a Cariboo sky, sent down stifling rays that scorched the earth.

It was noon on the last day of the Stampede and interest in the lesser events had somewhat waned. Cowboys had shown their skill at broncho-busting, steer-riding, and roping; Indians, fierce in war bonnets and paint had danced the war dance, run the bare-back race and rehearsed the historical attack on the old stage coach. Many races had been run, but the greatest event of the Stampede, the Cariboo Derby, was to be run that afternoon.

The crowd flowed down from the track and spread throughout the town, all in eager discussion over the forthcoming race. Although there were sixteen entries the wise ones averred that the race lay between Hendricks' huge, black Invader, and a chestnut, Rob Roy, owned in the Chilcotin. The news that Jack Lee was to enter a horse in the Cariboo Derby for the first time in thirty years and that the entry was a direct descendent of the famous Chinaman of bygone days, spread quickly through the town, but, except among the old-timers, caused little excitement. What chance, they asked, would this three-year-old have against such an experienced field.

Tom Logan, who had arrived the night before, came riding at a terrific speed down the main street leaving a trail of dust behind him. His arms flopped carelessly, his voice roared out in fragments of improvised song. He reined in his horse in front of the liquor store, acknowledged the greetings of several cowboys, and elbowed his way to the wicket.

“Gimme a couple quarts of full-strength rum.” He tucked his bundle under his arm and strode importantly to the Post Office next door.

“Any mail for Tom Logan?”

There was not and never had been, but in his present frame of mind it was a worldly gesture and filled him with satisfaction.

From behind the swinging doors of a Chinese restaurant came the buzz of conversation and the sound of laughter. Inside, men sat at the counter or hunched over tables at which pretty half-breed Indian girls served. The glamour of this room after months of cabin life was intoxicating. The gleam of white cloths, the clink of china, the medley of cheerful voices, the pretty waitresses with their flashing smiles and dark eyes.

One of the girls gave him a friendly nod and smile and hurried to his table with obsequious swiftness. She remembered him. He was “a live one”—here was a generous tip. Pleased and flattered by these attentions Logan grinned up at her.

“Hello, kid,” was his friendly greeting. “Bring me a corkscrew, a T-bone steak smothered in onions and mushrooms, a crab salad, a hunk of apple pie with whipped cream, and a cuppa coffee.” He stretched his feet under the table, took a generous drink from his bottle and sighed with contentment.

Later he’d get some more booze, have a few drinks with the gang and then take a crack at the faro wheel or maybe play a game of poker. He might as well make a lot of dough or go broke. What of it? Nobody cared what happened to him. He took another drink.

His waitress brought a bottle of ketchup, polished it carefully with a cloth and with an engaging smile placed it on the table. Logan grinned his thanks. What’d you know about that? She remembered that he liked ketchup on his steak. He’d given her a dollar tip last night but he’d double it this time. He turned some rum into a glass, diluted it with water and drank it slowly. He might as well give the kid a five-spot for a tip. She couldn’t buy much with two dollars. No sense in him being a cheap sport.

He studied the girl with an appraising eye. She was chewing gum and her white teeth seemed whiter against her dusky face. By golly, she was pretty. Darned little Indian in her, too.

“Ain’t you the man that rode Scrap-iron last year?” she asked, her eyes wide.

“I’m the guy,” he grinned.

“My,” she said admiringly. “Ain’t you goin’ to ride this year?”

“Nope. Been crooking my elbow too often,” he chuckled.

“My, but you’re witty,” she laughed.

Logan’s ego swelled; his chest expanded. He amounted to something with this girl. Guess he’d made a hit with her. She was a peach. He took another drink. He might as well give the kid a ten-spot for a tip. She probably didn’t get much wages and with ten dollars she could buy a dress or something.

Anyway, what was the difference. If he had any money left he’d bet every cent of it on Cariboo Queen. At the thought of Anne something suspiciously like tears blinded his eyes. “Buck up, you damn fool,” he admonished himself aloud. “Next thing you know you’ll be sobbing with a crying jag,” then turned to his meal.

His lunch finished, he walked to the cigar counter, chose a handful of cigars and flipped a bill from his roll and threw it carelessly on the counter. He lighted a cigar and with smoke pouring over his shoulder moved waveringly to the street, mounted his horse and headed for the racecourse.

The crowd surged into the racetrack until the grandstand became filled and overflowing. Cars of ancient vintage drove up with people from miles around, lining the fence of the track. A number of better cars of more prosperous or more extravagant ranchers wheeled in quietly.

Women hustled children about, greeting distant neighbours shrilly. Half-breed women married to white men smoothed the straight black hair of dark-eyed children. Pretty girls with just a touch of Indian blood but with skins almost transparent, dressed as stylishly as their city cousins, walked arm in arm with their big-hatted beaux through the jostling crowd.

A big crowd milled around Cariboo Queen. White men old and whiskered; white men tanned, slender and smooth-faced; half-breeds tall and slim, grinning; half-breeds short and fat; Indians as black as their forefathers—all big-hatted and most of them bow-legged.

Logan’s eyes became focussed on a crowd near the grandstand. Pushing his way through the curious throng to find the cause of this excitement he heard Lee’s voice raised in grandiose tones. Lee was dressed in a suit the vintage of the eighties, a wide hat topped his snowy head, a brilliant handkerchief draped his bent shoulders. His gnarled hand stroked the graceful withers of the beautiful mare.

“Yes, boys,” he declared proudly, “this mare’s born and bred in the Cariboo and comes of the best stock back as far as good horses have been raised in this country. Her sire came right down from Chinaman and her dam

was Cariboo Gold that belonged to my son Jim and won every race she ever entered. Anne is going to ride her. She broke the mare herself when the colt was only a year and a half old. There's real stuff in this little girl. She's a Lee girl and this is a Lee horse, so you boys know how to place your money today."

Shouts of approval and derision came from the crowd that was rapidly being augmented. One bewhiskered old patriarch ran his hand critically over Cariboo Queen's legs and then stood back admiringly.

"If she ain't a thoroughbred I never seen one," he announced. He rubbed his finger over the mare's shiny coat. "And she's right in the bloom too—leave that to Jack Lee. He knows more about horses than any man in the Cariboo." He slapped Lee on the back. "We're with you, Jack my boy. We know what you used to do in the old days."

A young half-breed resplendent in cowboy regalia snorted contemptuously.

"Huh! What do you expect of a young colt that ain't never bin on the track and bin trained by a girl?"

The old patriarch peered shrewdly at the speaker. "What horse are you pickin', son?" he asked softly.

"Rob Roy'll beat 'em all."

The old man nodded. "What odds will you give me agin' this little mare?"

"Huh! I'll give you three to one and it'll be easy pickin's."

"All right, son. You're on."

Thus the odds against Cariboo Queen were set.

Hendricks, apparently oblivious to the many hostile glances directed toward him, strode masterfully through the street. The big man paused for an instant on the edge of the group about Cariboo Queen. Noting the cause of their interest and seeing Arlen's tall figure he turned quickly away. Logan came unsteadily toward Hendricks, a hard light in his eyes, and placed himself directly in the big man's path.

"Hey, boys!" Logan shouted mockingly. "Here's the King of the Cariboo."

Instantly all eyes became centred on the two men. "Atta boy, Tom," someone shouted. The crowd laughed and pressed closer.

Hendricks' face reddened. "Get out of my way," he commanded harshly.

“Don’t get excited, big fellow,” Logan returned coolly. “I just want to know if you want to bet on your imported horse against Anne’s mare. The odds been set at three to one.” He drew out a roll of bills and pushed them towards Hendricks. “Want some of it or all of it?”

Hendricks glanced contemptuously at the money. “Chicken feed,” he said scathingly. “Make the bet worth while and I’ll talk to you.”

Logan’s violent temper sizzled like a cup of cold water thrown in a dry kettle.

“You’d like to make a fool out of me before this crowd,” he blazed. “I’ll tell you what I’ll do. My ranch is worth at least two thousand dollars. The odds are three to one but I’ll—I’ll put up my ranch against your cheque for six thousand that Anne’s horse will come in ahead of yours. Now put up or shut up.”

Gasps of astonishment and cheers came from the onlookers. Anne forced her way through the crowd and came quickly to Logan’s side. “Please don’t, Tom,” she begged.

Arlen seized Logan by the shoulder and tried to pull him away. “Snap out of it, Tom. You’re crazy to make a bet like that.”

Logan shook himself free from Arlen’s grip. “Let me alone. I know what I’m doing.” He swung to Hendricks. “Well, what about it? Are you going to be a quitter?”

Hendricks’ lips curled away from his teeth in a nasty smile.

“It’s a good way to get you out of the country. You asked for it. The bet’s on.”

A messenger was sent for the manager of the Stampede. He returned with a huge crowd following him. Papers changed hands. The crowd cheered. Logan was the popular hero of the moment. He stood proudly by the horse upon which he had staked all his worldly goods, while the crowd looked admiringly on.

Anne was on the verge of tears over Logan’s rash act, but her grandfather was jubilant. “You haven’t got a chance to lose, my boy. Not a chance in the world. A Lee horse and a Lee riding her—they always win.”

Presently Anne and her grandfather were called away by the officials, and Arlen, Logan and the ever-faithful Shep were left in charge of Cariboo Queen.

There was a rumour afloat that Hendricks had imported a jockey from Vancouver to ride the Invader. This increased the big man’s unpopularity

with the natives and there were few pulling for him to win, but a win on the part of the Invader was generally conceded.

Arlen heard one of the crowd say: "Hendricks' jockey, Slim Cameron, used to be one of the best riders in the States. They used to say about him: 'When in doubt bet on the horse Cameron rides.' Here he comes now."

Arlen raised his head and studied the approaching man. Jockey Cameron dressed in riding breeches and jockey cap stopped and ran a professional eye over the Cariboo Queen. He was a slender fellow and carried himself with a certain easy grace. He had marvellous hands for his calling, oversized for his slight figure but well made and as strong as the hands of a wrestler. Arlen was struck by the pallor of the man's face. His skin and the whites of his eyes were of a most peculiar bluish-yellow. That, with the contracted pupils of his eyes gave him a sinister appearance. He was palpably nervous as evidenced by his shifting eyes and jerking hands. Again Arlen's eyes were attracted to the jockey's hands. The fingers of the left hand were yellow with cigarette stain, the fingernails long and dirty. His shirt collar and cuffs were soiled. There was a steaming sweat on his face; uncleanness exhaled from him and enveloped him like a fog. Certainly he was an unwholesome object.

Lin Hung came shuffling slowly through the crowd. His slant eyes darted about questingly until they rested on Cameron. He muttered a few words to the rider and the two of them walked to the rear of the grandstand.

Arlen and Anne were saddling Cariboo Queen when Cameron and Lin Hung returned. The rider's face was now placid. The strong hands were quiet, all trace of nervousness gone. There was a dreamy look in his eyes and he seemed as cool as if he were standing under an electric fan.

Anne, struggling with a cinch strap, was not aware of the jockey's presence until he spoke.

"Hello, Anne."

The girl's head came up with a jerk. A quick cry burst from her lips. The colour fled from her face leaving it a clear, strained white. She staggered back. Trembling fingers fluttered to her throat. "Oh," she gasped. "Oh——"

Old man Lee threw out his arm to keep the girl from falling. "What's wrong, Anne?" Then his eyes rested on the jockey.

The old man grew rigid. A deadly pallor spread over his face right to the roots of his snowy hair. Suddenly the blood rushed back to the wrinkled old face. With a choking, inarticulate cry in his throat, and with a speed incredible in one of his age, he flung himself desperately at the smiling

jockey. His cracked voice raised in a shrill scream of rage as his withered hands lashed out futilely.

“You—you scum—you dirty swine! You’d disgrace the Lee family! I’ll kill you—you—”

The jockey seized the frenzied man’s wrists in his strong fingers. “Same old fire-eater, eh?”

Arlen and Logan sprang forward. “Let go of him,” Arlen said angrily.

“I don’t want to hurt him. He started it,” Cameron protested.

“You get out,” Logan growled savagely, his fists doubled.

A surge of men gathered. Again the Cariboo Queen was the centre of a seething throng. What had happened? There were low, angry mutterings. Had Hendricks’ jockey attacked old man Lee? If so, they’d fix him.

“Who is he, Anne?” Arlen asked gently.

Anne sat on a box, her head bowed. Her curly hair fell with all its magnificence about her face, hiding it. Her voice came from beneath it, choked, liquid with weeping, desperate with intolerable anguish.

“He’s—he’s my husband.”

Arlen winced. He stood looking down at the weeping girl. Her emotion pierced him. His whole being cried out against the thought of Anne being married to a thing like that. He was sick from what he had witnessed.

Logan’s kind face was full of compassion. He reached down and gave the bowed head a timid pat of reassurance as though she were a frightened child. “There, there, Anne. It’ll be all right,” he said huskily.

Anne sprang up and walked to her horse’s head. She struggled for mastery over herself. But an overwhelming passion of grief had robbed her of all self-control. She buried her face in the satiny sheen of her horse’s neck and wept softly.

The crowd about the weeping girl fell silent. Word passed from lip to lip that Hendricks’ jockey was the man who had jilted the Lee girl. Men gathered in knots, speaking in low voices of sympathy and anger. Malevolent eyes glared hostilely at Hendricks and his jockey.

Old Lee put his arm about the girl’s waist. “Anne, dear, they’re calling the horses,” he quavered.

Anne straightened her slim shoulders determinedly. She shook her hair back from her face and dabbed her eyes with a tiny handkerchief. Her agitated fingers reached up and pulled the cowboy hat more firmly down on her small head.

Cariboo Queen was trembling in every delicate vein and muscle and excitement flamed in her soft eyes. Arlen stood at the restive animal's head while the old man hoisted his grand-daughter into the saddle.

Lee placed a trembling hand on the girl's knee and said shakily:

“Remember, Anne, it's a Cariboo horse—a Lee horse and a Lee riding her. They always win.”

CHAPTER XII

HENDRICKS' rider sat his big horse with the confident air that the race was already won. He was not unaware of the lack of enthusiasm on the part of the spectators as he trotted the big black past the grandstand. Cameron, a veteran of the turf, had lost his capacity for getting excited over a horserace. He was inured to hostile crowds. He had been everywhere in the racetrack world and knew all the tricks of his profession. It might be that the lack of capacity for thrills was what had made him a star of the racetracks.

Hendricks beckoned his rider to the rail. There followed a few moments' earnest conversation. Cameron nodded his head and swung his horse to the starting point.

Down past the grandstand Cariboo Queen proudly trotted, her beautiful head held high on glossy, arched neck. She danced and curvetted on her toes in the sunlight with exquisite grace. Anne sat erect, her face pale and wrought, eyes straight ahead. There were murmurs of admiration, and then, as with one voice, the crowd gave her an ovation. The roar of their voices beat on the hot, dusty air like the sound of distant thunder. Again they cheered. A Cariboo horse born and bred for generations back on Cariboo soil; a Cariboo girl in the saddle. Land of memory and sentiment. They did not think she had much chance but they were backing her with their money and rooting for her just the same.

In the excitement Arlen had forgotten to tie up Shep. Out there on the course, unmindful of the snarl of hoofs, the dog trotted gravely by Cariboo Queen's side. It was with difficulty that Arlen and Logan dragged the reluctant animal from the track and tied him inside the rail.

Down at the grandstand the crowd was in a blaze of excitement. Logan's sporty bet, Hendricks' unpopularity, and the treatment accorded the Lee girl by Jockey Cameron had fanned sentiment in favour of the Cariboo Queen to a fever heat.

Hendricks' roll of bills that had resembled a small pillow an hour before had shrunk like a pin-pricked balloon, until at last he refused to cover more bets. There was no Invader money in sight.

Groups of cowboys sat on the ground near the grandstand or draped their loose bodies over the rail in the sunshine and aired their opinions while they waited for the race to start.

“There’ll be whoopee tonight in Pinchbeck if Cariboo Queen cops the race,” one of them averred.

“Yeh,” agreed another. “We’ll be cuttin’ out paper dolls in the bughouse before mornin’ if she does.”

“We’ll make out to get the whoopee anyhow,” a third drawled with laconic good humour. “If Cariboo Queen wins we get tight. And if she loses we get tight to drown our sorrows. So what the hell.”

It was a bad acting field. The starter was having difficulty in getting them off. Horses wheeled and hurtled about; squealed and let fly their hoofs; milling around frantically, their feet raising clouds of stifling dust. The Invader backed across the track into Cariboo Queen nearly unseating Anne. A roar of protest came from the crowd. Anne was having difficulty with her green colt. Confused by the din, and milling horses, the mare whirled and pivoted, her golden coat foam-flecked.

But suddenly a roar smothered individual voices. Arose a clamour from tense throats. There was a scuffling of feet as the crowd surged to the rail—the flag in the starter’s hand had dropped.

The Invader and Rob Roy were in a happy position when the starter fluttered his flag and they shot to the front, the others following close behind. Cariboo Queen was last and apparently out of control. Hendricks’ horse took the lead and at the first turn swung to the pole. Witnessing the plight of their favourite the roar of the crowd died to a low murmur. The deep-throated baying of the frantic Shep came above all other sound.

Logan, white and shaking, turned away from the rail. He slapped his big hat on hard. He twisted his shoulders angrily as though he would cast from his spirits the dread that was cold and of a weight like a shirt of mail. He ran trembling fingers through his tousled hair. “Goddlemighty,” he muttered. “Goddlemighty.”

Cariboo Queen settled into her stride and slowly drew up to the rear of the horses bunched behind the leaders. Under the scourge of heat, the sting of dust and sand that filled her eyes and nostrils, the girl sat bewildered, suffocated, lucky to hold her seat, let alone help the struggling horse. Blindly she clung to the reins, head turned to one side, her body doubled behind the protection of her horse’s head.

It was here that Anne showed her inexperience. She was trying to lay off the pace and rate herself behind the other horses. A more seasoned rider would have realized the necessity of avoiding the choking dust by swinging the horse to the outside.

Old Lee knew what was happening.

“Oh, Anne,” he groaned, “pull Queenie out. She’ll walk away from them. For God’s sake, Anne, pull her out.”

Hendricks’ horse was gradually increasing his lead. The big chestnut had dropped back with the rear field. Cariboo Queen was hidden in a cloud of dust.

A shout arose from the grandstand. The crowd stood up, necks craning. Rob Roy’s rider in making the turn had fallen from his mount. The cry of the crowd hushed when they saw that one foot was caught in the stirrup. He was being dragged through the dust of the track—hands up to protect his head from the churning hoofs. The horse swung to the outside of the galloping horses and the rider kicked himself free just as two cowboys reached him. The rider held his arm aloft as a signal that he was not injured.

Now that the field was coming to the near turn there was the usual shifting of positions, but as they thundered like a troop of cavalry down toward the grandstand, Cariboo Queen had not changed her place.

With half the race run there was no cheering from the spectators. Hendricks’ horse galloped past seventy-five yards in the lead. Jockey Cameron threw a glance over his shoulder at the horses bunched in the rear and smiled derisively at the crowd.

Down by the rail, Shep, choking and gasping under restraint of the unaccustomed tether, strained at the rope. Time and again the huge beast lunged desperately forward only to be thrown back on his haunches. With a wild-beast snarl rumbling in his deep chest he seized the rope in his teeth and chewed savagely. The rope parted. With a deep bay and the leaping stride of a greyhound the great dog shot on to the track and flung himself joyously in front of the Cariboo Queen.

Up came the mare’s golden head with its white blaze. Her sensitive ears flexed alertly forward. Again Shep gave voice. Anne felt a surge of strength under her, the lengthening of the horse’s stride as the animal pulled on her bit in her eagerness to be free. The girl slackened the reins.

Unguided, the Cariboo Queen came out of the dust to the outside of the bunched horses. With neck outstretched, limbs driving with the precision of a well-oiled machine, Cariboo Queen tore onward with a wild burst of speed. Ahead of the flying horse moved a grey streak.

Old Lee was the first to see that Anne was out of the ruck.

“Look at Shep run!” he shrieked. “Queenie’s settling down! She’s going to win! Come on, Anne! Come on Queenie you darling!”

The crowd took up the cry hysterically. The horses were now strung out. The small horse was rapidly overhauling the field! She cut farther to the outside on to firmer ground, flashed around the far turn, picked up horse after horse. The reins were hanging free from the hands of an almost unconscious girl. Without help from her rider Cariboo Queen was showing a burst of speed that set the spectators in a wild roar of excitement.

A sixteenth out it looked impossible, but with the long-limbed dog leading her Cariboo Queen came on like a cyclone, gaining at every stride. Fifth, Fourth, Third, Second. Along the rail pandemonium broke and down at the grandstand the watchers ripped the lid of bedlam.

Around the near turn the horses thundered. Shep had no time or breath for baying. He was hard put to keep in front of the horse's flying hoofs. His ears laid back, long neck stretched out, his flying legs spurned the earth in great leaping strides.

Jockey Cameron harried his mount too wide. He was battling too hard to make the turn. And through this opening left at the rail came the Cariboo Queen. Her head was alongside the Invader's saddle girth before Cameron knew he was in for a race. Cameron's whip rose and fell, rose and fell as he urged the Invader onward. Inch by inch the Cariboo Queen crept up until within one hundred yards of the wire they were riding knee to knee. But that isn't enough to win. The difference in the sizes of the two horses gave Invader a good head over the smaller horse.

"Come on, boys, she needs help!" yelled Logan. "Root her home!"

The crowd cheered valiantly. But the real cheering was done by the man who raised this horse. Off came his neckerchief. Off into the air sailed his wide-brimmed hat. His cracked voice rose in a hoarse cry. "Come on, Anne! Come on, Queenie! Come on, Shep!"

A thousand throats echoed the cry, and on she came, the crowd screaming. Ears flat to her delicate head, eyes rolled back, and blood-red nostrils bobbing up and down, on came the daughter of the Cariboo.

Fifty yards to go. Suddenly Anne gathered the reins in her small hands and leaning flat on the horse's back emitted a cry that was heard above the din of wild shouts and rush of flying horses. Cariboo Queen, dust-covered tyro of the turf, drove herself desperately ahead of the Invader and swept under the wire. And the roar of a triumphant Cariboo assailed the sky. A flood of humanity poured over the track.

Logan's breath exhaled in a long-drawn hiss. He sat down weakly, completely sobered. A minute before it had looked as though he would be a

pauper—not even a shack to go back to. Now he had six thousand dollars. Six thousand dollars! He rolled the figures over his tongue again and again. What couldn't he do on his ranch with that sum. He could build a house that would be fit for Anne to live in. “Goddlemighty!” he breathed.

“Goddlemighty!” and Anne and her colt had won it for him.

Anne edged her spent horse through the howling mob. Hands stretched up to her; men screamed her name deliriously and shouted praises. She forced her horse to the judges' stand and raised her whip. The crowd roared insanely. They roared again as they opened an aisle for Anne's grandfather.

It had been a tragically hard day for the elderly man. Hatless, dishevelled, covered with dust, he strode proudly to the horse's head. The great dog, sides heaving, tongue lolling, lay at Lee's feet. Cameras clicked. It was Jack Lee's great moment.

“Speech,” someone shouted, and the cry was taken up.

Lee turned to the crowd.

“Friends,” he began bravely, “the tradition of the Lee horses has been upheld. A Lee horse always wins. We—we—” His voice broke. He passed a wrinkled hand across his eyes and completed the balance of the sentence in a whisper. Arlen leaped forward. A burden sagged into his arms.

CHAPTER XIII

HARVEST time, with the shrill, harsh note of mowers; slurring hum of threshers; rattle of hay-racks and shouts of men coming steadily through the hot, hay-scented air. It was good hay weather. The hay cut each morning was baked and ready for the mows and stacks by the next afternoon.

The thought of the approaching frost and all of the stock to feed during the long winter, drove and hunted the workers of Lightning Creek Ranch as they have driven the children of earth since tilling and stock-raising began.

Arlen worked long and hard; following the mowers with a hand-scythe; trimming out the corners the machine could not reach; lending a hand to fill the racks above the sheep pens; pitching hay on the stacks, and by his own example kept the men at top speed.

Each night Arlen was in that state of physical fatigue when rest is a positive delight. The sun, the hot air, the busy harvest scene and all the long hours of the hard but pleasant toil set his heart at peace with the world, thrilled through his blood. Each night he gave himself over to the sting of the shower-bath and tumbled into bed at an early hour. He loved it all.

Arlen was deeply worried about Anne. Since meeting Jockey Cameron the girl seemed to have withdrawn within herself. The colour had faded from her cheeks and the old, sad, far-away look had returned to her eyes. During harvest she laboured steadily with machine-like precision—but without heart. Her nerves were on edge. The sound of unexpected footsteps outside the door would set her hands trembling and bring an apprehensive look to her eyes. During meal times she spoke in monosyllables and no longer joined in the after-dinner amenities on the verandah.

An inner urge prompted him to comfort Anne. But since the evening when he had so utterly lost control of himself he had sedulously avoided being alone with her. Arlen sensed the reason for that watchful, waiting fear in her eyes. She was in constant dread that her profligate husband would appear at the ranch.

And one day he came.

It was on a Sunday afternoon. Arlen had returned from fishing and was cleaning his catch by the lake shore. A horseman debouched from the main road, reined in his horse and glanced about him. Spying Arlen, the

newcomer rode down to the float and dismounted. At once Arlen recognized Cameron.

“Nice catch you have there,” Cameron observed by way of opening conversation.

Arlen carefully scrutinized the man. In the bright sun the jockey’s face seemed a more sickly yellow, his eyes more restless and feverish than on the day of the race. It was evident that protracted dissipation of some sort had marred indelibly a face that, probably, had once been handsome.

Cameron paced the float, wheeled and returned, and continued this nervous walking for a few minutes. He made varied quick gestures that betrayed jerky nerves. His hands fluttered to his face, then to the buttons of his coat, then to his pockets. For some time he paced about and asked, finally, “Which is Lin Hung’s ranch?” Arlen pointed. Cameron mounted his horse and galloped up the road.

Watching his going, Arlen shook his head in gloomy disgust. This was what Anne had been dreading for days. It meant added misery for her saddened spirit. Arlen was swept by a wave of sympathy. Anne married to that derelict. It seemed unbelievable. Yet Logan had told him that Cameron was once a very handsome and attractive man; that he had once possessed a charming personality.

As Arlen passed Lin Hung’s ranch Cameron hurried out to join him. The jockey’s nervousness had gone. The jerks had ceased. His hands were steady, his eyes were bright.

“Is the old boy at home?” he questioned.

“I presume you mean Mr. Lee,” Arlen answered coldly.

“That’s the guy. Is he home or burrowing in his hole?”

“He’s working in his mine,” Arlen returned shortly.

“All right. I’ll be safe to call on my wife. The old sport takes the bit in his teeth when he spots me. He’s anything but keen on me as a son-in-law.”

Arlen could not conceal his repugnance for this man, much less could he be civil. And to hear him speak of Anne as “my wife” stung him to a quick, unreasonable anger. “And I can’t say that I blame him,” he said bitterly.

The jockey shot a curious glance at Arlen.

“Oh,” he said, raising his brows. “Where do you come in on this? Who asked your opinion? What the hell business is it of yours, brother?”

Arlen bit his lip to check an angry retort. True enough. It was none of his affair. This man was Anne’s husband. He held a frowning silence. He would

gain nothing for Anne or himself by quarrelling with Cameron. It would not be difficult for Anne to get a divorce from this wastrel. But how could he, Arlen, go about it if he wanted to help her? He couldn't broach such a delicate subject to her.

As they neared the house Arlen swung to the path leading to the store. He did not wish to witness Anne's discomfiture.

Fifteen minutes later, as Arlen approached the house, he saw Anne and Cameron standing on the verandah. Anne was pale and agitated; there was a frightened, hunted look in her eyes.

"Aw, Anne, I don't want a divorce," Arlen heard Cameron say. "Why, you're prettier than ever. I'm goin' to settle down and be decent. Gettin' too old to ride any more. I'm workin' for Lin Hung on a little job—" Seeing Arlen, Anne interrupted the jockey's flow of talk and stepping nervously off the porch she moved to the road, Cameron following.

Arlen was on the verandah when Anne returned. She came slowly up the hill, her slim shoulders drooping wearily as though a great load lay upon them. Arlen saw, as she hurriedly passed him, that her eyes were blurred with tears. She stumbled over the door-sill, ran to her room and threw herself across the bed.

"Bruce has hardly spoken to me since the races," she whispered. "He's—he's ashamed of me." Her shoulders heaved in an agony of grief. She bit her lips, buried her face in the pillow, striving vainly to smother the sound of her sobbing.

Arlen, listening to Anne's hysterical weeping, felt a strange pain burning high in his throat; a pain that wet his eyes. He winked hard to keep the tears back. Cursing softly under his breath, he stole away from the house.

He sat down on a bench under the trees, head bowed, and stared moodily at the ground. The wind whispered softly through the leaves. Life was a topsyturvy thing, he mused. Sometimes life resembled nothing so much as a thread thrown down at random on an intricate maze of roads. People meet or don't meet, depending on which road their thread of life falls. Anne, for example. Her thread of life thrown at random had fallen on the town of Pinchbeck when she was at the impressionable age of seventeen. There she had met Cameron, married him, and been unhappy ever since. Just one little curl in the thread of life and she might have taken a different road and experienced happiness instead of misery. She was in no way to blame. It was merely that fate had been unkind to her, he decided.

His thought's drifted to Audrey. He had received a letter from her that morning. She was motoring in the south. He wondered if she had taken Anton Czersky with her. He frowned at the thought. Not that he was jealous, he assured himself, but it did jolt a fellow's pride to have one's fiancée travelling around the country with a worthless chap like Anton. She wrote that she was leaving for Vancouver in a few days with two girl friends and that they intended motoring through the Cariboo and would visit him.

He took the letter from his pocket and glanced at the date. His face clouded. They were likely to arrive any day. He hoped they wouldn't come. During the doubtful days of the drought Anne had dispensed with the services of the kitchen-maid and against Arlen's wishes had continued to do the work alone. Anne was in no mood to entertain guests, and besides he didn't like the idea of Anne waiting on Audrey and her friends. Still, he couldn't ask them to have their meals with the ranch hands. He'd wire her that he would meet her at Pinchbeck.

Early on a morning when a reddish rising sun gave promise of a torrid day, Anne, Arlen and Logan rode to the distant close-cropped ranges to round up the scattered bands of sheep, and drive them to the cut-over fields in the meadows near the ranch.

For all Arlen's love of farm life he, like most men who have had anything to do with them, detested sheep. Poets rave about them, but it must be that they have never sheared a fleece with the stench of wool half choking them, or tried to drive a flock of silly, blating beasts through a gate. The odour remains in one's clothes for days—a pig is cleaner and wiser a hundred times.

Anne, on Cariboo Queen, was everywhere, urging strays along with gentle, throaty noises, her pockets full of rocks to throw at those who stopped or tried to squeeze through places that were hardly big enough for their empty heads.

But for Shep's assistance it would have taken twice as long. The big dog flew like a grey streak in and out among the milling animals, keeping them on the move, rounding up the laggards and shooting occasionally to the front to check an incipient stampede. Sweating, breathing dust, Arlen almost regretted that even though they would make a good profit he had added to the stock.

It was nearing sundown when the last sheep was driven through the gate. The milling and blating immediately ceased as the animals began to feed on the rich grass. Tired, dust-encrusted, the three riders walked their horses up the hill towards the ranch.

“A rotten job finished,” Arlen said gratefully as he wiped his grimy face.

They stopped their horses as the sound of a powerful motor came from the distance. A huge car slithered around the corner from the highway, came lurching up the rutted road and came to a stop in front of the house.

Arlen started with dismay as he recognized Audrey’s trim figure among the four passengers who stepped from the car. Three girls and one man. The man, of course, would be Audrey’s hanger-on, Anton. “Hell!” Arlen muttered.

Anne, noting Arlen’s perturbation, looked at him inquiringly.

“Anne,” he said hesitatingly, “that’s my fiancée, Miss Hickman, and her friends. I wired her that we could not accommodate them here and that I would meet them in Pinchbeck, but evidently she didn’t get my message. I’m—I’m sorry, but we’ll just have to make the best of it.”

Panic-stricken, Anne looked down at her dust-covered overalls.

“Good heavens!” she gasped. “Just look at me, and I haven’t a thing ready for dinner. Hold them until I get changed.”

She swung her horse about, galloped to the rear of the house, flung herself from the saddle and in a flurry of agitation flew to her room.

Arlen looked down at his own clothes, smiled grimly. He wondered how Audrey would like him in his present state.

“Tom,” he said humorously, “do you think I look all right to receive ladies?”

Logan grinned. “Sure, but I’ll bet you smell like a tanning factory.”

Arlen rode up to the visiting party, dismounted and removed his wide hat. At first Audrey did not recognize him. Then, with an inarticulate cry of wonder she ran forward to greet him. Dressed in a tailored sports costume, her face thickly rouged, her lashes heavily beaded, her shiny black hair just showing beneath her small grey hat, she was the same immaculate Audrey.

“Hullo, big boy,” she flung her arms around him and held up her face to be kissed.

“Careful,” Arlen cautioned her. “I’m pretty dirty.”

She stood and surveyed him with surprised eyes. “I’ll say you are,” she agreed, sniffing. “Heavens!” Suddenly she burst into peals of laughter. “Come here, girls,” she cried. “Come and see my big he-man farmer. The scent of new-mown hay and bursting buds and what-not.” She turned to Arlen again. “Bruce, you look like a coal-heaver on a rainy day.”

Anton spoke to Arlen, a smile on his lips but a veiled dislike in his eyes. Arlen greeted him curtly.

Anne hurried from her bath and began dressing in feverish haste. She was annoyed to find that she was all a-quiver; strove to calm her agitation. She heard the party come into the living-room and Arlen's steps as he ran upstairs. She studied herself meticulously in the mirror, fluffed out her hair, dabbed here and there with a powder-puff and scrutinized herself again and again.

"Bruce's sweetheart," she whispered to her reflection, "and you've got to meet her. Buck up, now, don't lose your nerve."

She paced the floor nervously until she heard Arlen's voice downstairs, then stood for a moment irresolute, her hand on the door knob, her spirit almost failing.

Audrey, studying the old photographs on the mantel of the fireplace was unaware of Anne's entrance. Arlen, sensing Anne's embarrassment, smiled reassuringly.

Audrey pointed at the photograph of a bewhiskered old-timer. She laughed humorously. "You'll look like that, Bruce, in another ten years if you keep on—" She broke off suddenly as her eyes rested on Anne. Arlen awkwardly introduced them.

Audrey stared at Anne with a curious mixture of admiration, astonishment, curiosity and antagonism. Anne smiled and held out her hand which Audrey accepted, still staring. At the sound of Anne's voice the city girl immediately regained her poise. Her eyes flew from Anne to Arlen and back again. Audrey's long lashes swept up. The red mouth curved. "How do you do?" she said sweetly.

Arlen's fiancée swung about to him, small languid hands on her slender hips, and spoke in a semi-drawl. "You foxy old thing, I don't blame you for being fond of farm life." The tone of her voice was chidingly humorous, but there was an unmistakable glint of resentment in her dark eyes.

Anne met the other members of the party and during the exchange of commonplaces that followed Anne realized that Audrey was studying her intently and she felt that the city-bred girl was appraising her for just what she was—a ranch girl dressed in country store clothes.

Anne hurried to the kitchen to prepare dinner. Arlen followed immediately, took a pan of potatoes from the girl and began peeling them. Anne caught the significance of this act and smiled her thanks.

Audrey stopped in the kitchen doorway, a cigarette between her lips, at the moment that Anne raised her eyes to Arlen.

“A lovely domestic scene,” she observed, a hint of sarcasm in her voice. “May I help?” Upon receiving a smiling negative from Anne, Audrey turned away leisurely. “Oh, well, I may be a flop as a cook but I can shake a wicked cocktail. Anton,” she commanded, “go out to the car and get some gin. My throat is parched.”

Logan poked his head through the back doorway. “Are they staying, Arlen?” he whispered.

“Sure. Hustle and get washed and help me to entertain.”

“Yeh, like hell I will!” he muttered as he withdrew his head. “I’ll go and eat with Pat.”

In the living-room the party waxed gay. Cocktails passed freely. Anton turned on the phonograph and danced with Audrey. The man could dance gracefully and they danced well together, Arlen thought begrudgingly. Watching through the open door, Arlen saw Audrey take her third cocktail. He frowned. She always drank too much when in a bad humour.

During a lull the door opened and Anne’s grandfather came wearily into the room. For three days he had been working and sleeping at the mine. There was an added stoop to his shoulders. His unshaven face was smudged, his clothes battered and stained. Since his collapse on the day of the race he had visibly aged. But instead of heeding his grand-daughter’s advice to stop work he had redoubled his efforts on his prospect. He stood for a time surveying the strangers, blinking bewilderedly in the half-light.

Anton Czersky, leaning against the mantel of the fireplace, his fingers caressing his pointed moustache, was the first to break silence. He spoke to Audrey in a tone that may have been intended only for her ears but in the silence the hissing tone of his voice made it audible throughout the room.

“Eet ees—what you call eet? Reep Van Weenkle.”

One of the young girls tittered.

Arlen’s eyes flashed to Anne’s face. He saw the slightest flush heighten the colour of her tanned cheeks. He felt like bashing Anton on the jaw. Anne hurried to her grandfather, put her arms about him and kissed him tenderly. She turned to her guests.

“My grandfather,” she said proudly. “Grandad, these are Mr. Arlen’s friends. They are having dinner with us.” Lee made a courtly bow. “Pleased to meet you,” he quavered.

Anne led him to his room. "Take a hot bath, dear, and change your clothes." She ran her fingers through his unkempt white locks. "And when you're ready I'll come in and trim your hair."

Lee reached for the girl's hand; looked up at her with a tender light in his old eyes.

"Anne, darling, the mine's looking better every day. I'm going to make you a rich woman before I die."

"But, Grandad," the girl protested, "you must take a rest. You're working too hard."

"Anne," he said gently, "I don't want to die without making a lot of money for you, and I know I haven't much time."

Anne kissed him. "Nonsense, dear, you'll live a long time yet. Hurry and get dressed."

The dinner was a nightmare to Anne. She'd had little time to prepare the meal, but with the exception of Audrey they seemed to enjoy the food.

Arlen saw that Audrey was in one of her spiteful moods. She ate little and drank too much. Her eyes burned; a hectic flush stained her cheeks. Listening to the rapid-fire dialogue between Anton and Audrey, Arlen's face grew hot. Audrey remarked that she was evidently becoming *passée*, would have to take up domestic science and consult a hair specialist in regard to changing the colour of her hair in order to become popular. Anne controlled her features admirably but Arlen saw the hurt expression in her eyes and knew that she had heard and comprehended the innuendo. He felt like reaching across the table, seizing Audrey by her smooth, rounded shoulders and giving her a good shaking. Audrey sensed his mood and twisted her face in a mischievous, mocking smile.

The dinner had been a severe trial for Anne. The evening that followed proved to be doubly so. Another bottle was produced at Audrey's request and they sat down to a game of bridge. The air became filled with cigarette smoke; cigarette stubs mounted in the ash receivers.

Old Lee rose grandly to the occasion. Dressed in his ancient but well-pressed suit, his weariness dispelled under the influence of the drinks, he moved about the room talking boastfully, laughing in great good humour. Again he was entertaining people of importance.

Bored to extinction Arlen sat in the game of bridge. But then, he thought wearily, a few months ago he would not have minded all this artificial pleasure. He wondered how he could ever have been so insane. He had to be up at five-thirty tomorrow. Had a lot of work to do. Wished he was in bed.

“Dammit!” Audrey said suddenly. “I’m out of luck. I’ve lost ten dollars. Let’s quit.” She reached for her bag and threw a bill to Anton.

The man smiled as he pocketed the money. “I thought you was a goot looser, Audrey.”

“In almost everything,” Audrey laughed lazily as she smiled across the dishevelled table at Anne. Arlen could not misinterpret the obvious meaning but he noted with satisfaction that Anne had missed it.

Audrey walked across the room and sat down. For some time she was silent, thoughtful. Arlen, studying her, thought she looked tired and small and a trifle pathetic as she sat in a big chair by the fireplace. There were deep shadows under her eyes. At last she commanded, “Bruce, come here.”

Arlen pulled his chair beside her.

“Bruce,” she said in a low voice, “I want to know if you really like this sort of thing as a steady diet? Do you intend to be a nursemaid for a bunch of cows, working like a labourer all your life?” She reached for his hand. His calloused palm drew her attention. “Just look at that,” she said disgustedly. “Just like a ditch-digger’s hands.”

Audrey glanced over her shoulder at Anne, leaned closer to Arlen. Her arm stole round his shoulders. She looked imploringly into his eyes.

“Please, Bruce,” she begged, “come back to Vancouver. Give this thing up.”

Certainly she was adorable when she was in this mood, Arlen thought. The great, dark eyes, circled with weariness, looked up at him from a haggard, small face, its pallor noticeable under the rouge.

“Audrey,” he said gently, “listen to me for a minute and I’ll try to explain to you just how I feel about it—but I doubt if you’ll understand.

“There is a certain glamour attached to life on the farm but not every man is responsive to it. To most of the people who have always lived in cities, life in the country, except for an occasional holiday, is rough and uninteresting. But there is another type of man who finds a great and absorbing happiness in living close to nature; another temperament to which life in the busy centres of population possesses a flat and tasteless flavour. To them the big cities are tiresome and oppressive; they do not like offices, factories and the keen competition in the marts of trade. But put them out in the backwoods on a farm, transplant them to the soil and they find themselves. The sap runs, they flower rankly. I’m in that class, Audrey. I was never cut out for life in the city. I was born, and raised on a farm and I know from experience that here on the land is where I belong—I love it.”

Audrey shook her small head sadly.

“You’ve got a good line of talk, Bruce, but how about me? I wouldn’t mind if you had this as a hobby, but you’ve been up here all summer and have been to Vancouver only once. And then,” her voice broke slightly, “You were so crazy to get back here that you could spare only half an hour with me. Can you imagine me living up here all the time?”

No, Arlen thought, not even by the wildest stretch of his imagination could he picture Audrey as a rancher’s wife. But aloud he said lamely. “You’d—you’d get used to it and like it.”

She laughed, but her mirth was forced. “Horse-feathers—and you know it. Don’t try to kid me, Bruce. You can go ahead and slave around cattle and pigs and things until you smell to high Heaven and get hardening of the arteries from hard labour before you are forty. But not for me. And I’ll bet you’ll get sick of it too.”

“And besides,” he reminded her, “I’m broke. All I own is a half interest in this ranch.”

Audrey leaned over until her face was close to Arlen’s.

“You know very well, Bruce, that I have plenty of money.”

Arlen shook his head vigorously. “Nothing doing, Audrey. What do you think I am?”

“Well, then. Dad will take you back into the office any time. He promised me he would.” She placed her hand on his shoulder.

“Please, Bruce, come back.”

There came a sudden interruption. All eyes turned as the door swung noisily open. Arlen suppressed a groan of sympathy for Anne as he saw Jockey Cameron framed in the doorway. The jockey was hatless, his unkempt hair hung dankly over his pallid brow, his eyes, strained and dilated, stared out from a face that was ghastly in its pallor. One hand clutched his turned-up coat collar at the throat, the other fluttered nervously about his face. He shuffled into the room.

“Anne,” he said croakily, “I want to see you. I’ve got to have—” Then he saw Lee.

The aged man came slowly to his feet. Mindful of his guests he struggled desperately for self-control.

“You here!” He pointed a shaking hand towards the open door. “Get out at once,” he commanded, “or I’ll not be responsible for my actions. Go!” His voice was vibrant with a terrible rage.

Cameron cringed under the old man's wrath. He looked beseechingly at Anne.

"Anne," he whined, "are you going to let your husband be treated like this?"

A tense, hushed silence fell upon the room; a silence that lengthened intolerably. Anne felt the eyes of the whole company upon her. Her face flamed in an agony of shame. Her throat felt dry; her heart seemed to cease its beating; her very soul seemed to crumple under its weight of misery.

Lee, his eyes blazing, snatched a rifle from the wall. Arlen leaped forward, wrested the gun from the enraged man's hands and spoke soothingly.

Weak and giddy, Anne came to her feet, and in some way, somehow, her numbed limbs carried her to her grandfather's side. She placed her hand on his arm. She heard her own voice, as if from a distance, heard words issuing from her lips as if drawn from some inner part of her that she did not know. "Grandad, please." She turned to her husband, "Come with me." Cameron following, she walked unsteadily to the kitchen and closed the door. Lee excused himself and moved feebly to his room.

For a long interval the party sat in silence. Audrey emitted a sigh. She made a little grimace, wrinkling her nose and dilating her nostrils.

"Tragedy stark and naked," she said in a hushed voice. "The rattling of the family skeleton. Married to that! Ye gods! A damned pity!" She looked curiously at Arlen who stood haggard and distressed. "Seems that even life in the quiet countryside has its sinister aspects, eh, Bruce?" Arlen did not answer. Audrey shook her head. "Come on, Anton, mix us a drink. I need a good stiff one after all that." She looked toward the kitchen door. "I'm damned sorry for her," she said gently.

When Anne bravely returned to the room she had somewhat conquered her emotion. She sat down at the table, her face averted.

Audrey sprang to her feet.

"Come on, let's all go to Pinchbeck and make whoopee. You'll come, Bruce, and you, Miss Lee."

Arlen demurred. "Got to be up at five-thirty."

"Oh, come on, Bruce. Be a sport once again. Staying out one night won't hurt you."

"I think not," he told her.

Audrey's face again showed a heightened colour. She came a trifle unsteadily to Arlen, leaned against him, drooping with weariness.

"Please, Bruce. I haven't seen you in so long." She threw her head back. "Kiss me," she commanded. He touched her lips lightly with his own. She drew back quickly, a flash of anger in her eyes. "My, but these farmer boys are rough," she said sarcastically.

"Don't go out again tonight," Arlen insisted. "You're all in. Stay here until morning."

"Yes, please do," Anne added.

Audrey looked up at Arlen.

"Be yourself, big boy," she said lightly, a hard look in her eyes. "Didn't you wire me that you couldn't accommodate us?" She turned to Anne. "It's sweet of you to ask us to stay, but we'd hate to intrude on your privacy."

The colour mounted slowly to Anne's cheeks.

Suddenly Audrey's face softened. A flood of feminine tenderness welled to the surface, changing the girl's whole appearance. She crossed the room and flung her arms impulsively around Anne. "That was a particularly rotten thing for me to say," she said contritely. "I'm damned sorry! I think you are a darling, sweet thing." She kissed Anne on both cheeks.

Arlen walked to the car with Audrey. The girl stepped on the running-board and turned. In the glare of the flashlight he saw that there were tears in her eyes. Her tenderness to Anne, her present emotion, touched a responsive chord in his heart. He took her in his arms and gently kissed her. For a moment she clung to him passionately.

"I'm going to say good-bye to you, Bruce, old dear. G-Good—Good-bye." She dabbed a handkerchief to her eyes. "Oh, damn! Step on it, Anton!" The door slammed. The big car rolled down the hill.

Arlen, without moving, stood a full minute after the tail-light of the car disappeared and the throb of the engine became a mere murmur and then died in the distance. He returned to the house, said a quiet good night to Anne and went upstairs.

Anne tidied up the room, made arrangements for breakfast, then stood for a moment gazing into the glowing embers of the fireplace. "Poor kid," she murmured, "she's going to have a lot of tragedy in her life, too." Her slim, straight shoulders drooping wearily she walked to her room.

CHAPTER XIV

FALL came and the first frosts that stole into the valley touched the wooded flanks of the mountains with a crisp stroke that transformed the poplars into yellow plumes, the vine maple and sumach into a red flame of embers dying there. Only the black growth of conifers, fir, hemlock, pine and spruce, kept their stalwart green. The hills and valleys became a fine mosaic, an ancient tapestry woven with parti-coloured strands.

The ground in the forest and about the Lee house had become a gaudy carpet of leaves that rustled dryly underfoot. Mornings of brisk winds and sunshine were still heralded by the song of birds, though far less ardently than in the mating season.

Robins were gathered in flocks that flew from lake to hillside with shrill calls. The trees, lush with wild berries, would hold them in the north for some time, yet the gathering of robins into companies is the first sign of their departure for the southland.

Each season has its own peculiar charm, its own colours and its annually recurring incidents in the lives of its woodfolk. The ducks and geese formed in dark patches on the lake and their quacking and honking were louder and more prolonged than their subdued notes of the mating season. Rabbits scurrying through the woods showed a trace of white on their brown bodies. The sun sank lower in the heavens and the tranquil evenings held a sting of frost.

To make a farm ready for the long rigour and ordeal of winter is very much like getting a ship ready for a long voyage. Everything must be in order, within and without; must be prepared to oppose the storm and cold, and provisioned to stand the siege of snow. Arlen found a keen pleasure in these preparations; attacked the job with eager joy.

Beef prices, as Logan had wisely predicted, were the highest in years. Arlen, with Logan and Anne, rode out to round up the cattle and found them rolling in fat from the luxuriant growth of late summer. Cattle that were more numerous than they had anticipated; liabilities last year, but now assets.

The round-up finished, the three riders sat their horses, looking on the pleasant scene around them. The mid-afternoon sun flooded the ranch. Smoke from the house rose lazily through the still, clear air. Crows cawed in the grain fields and a flock of magpies were engaged in some ribald

convention in the tops of the cottonwoods. From the corrals came the racket of steers bellowing and milling about, the yelling of the cowhands as they worked the stock into more compact formation for the buyers' inspection, the bawling of cows hunting for their calves temporarily lost in the movement of the herd.

Arlen felt a deep sense of content. A carload of hogs, logy with fat had brought top price and so also would the cattle. The tie camps had made heavy inroads on their vegetables, but all the roothouses were filled and overflowing. He was going to hold all the vegetables for higher prices in the spring. The granary in the big barn was bulging with its golden wealth.

That night Anne and Arlen balanced their books and the resultant figures to their credit made them jubilant. For the first time in weeks Anne smiled happily. All bills paid, bins and root cellars filled and the store well stocked, there remained a handsome balance in the bank.

They sat close together, poring over the figures, Anne's golden head almost touching Arlen's. So close that a tendril of her hair brushed his face. Awareness of her swept over him. He stole a covert glance at her ravishing profile. She was infinitely desirable. Again an almost irresistible impulse stirred in Arlen to take her forcibly in his arms. Abruptly he moved back his chair.

Lee sat by the fireplace mumbling to himself. The aged man was gradually failing, both mentally and physically. More and more his mind dwelt on stirring incidents of the dim past. He was subject to fits of mental aberration in which he would talk to his wife's photograph.

The elderly man knocked the ashes from his pipe to the hearth. He looked up at the photograph on the mantel. His cracked voice rambled on: "I'd make a lot of money out of my mine if I had a few hundred dollars to work with. I'm going to make your grand-daughter a rich woman, Mary. She's going to have everything she wants."

Anne looked over at the shrunken old figure. A depth of tenderness came into her eyes. "The old darling. He's always thinking of me," she whispered.

Arlen spoke in a low tone. The girl's eyes grew bright.

"That would be wonderful," she breathed softly. "It will make him so happy. But we'll have to be tactful."

Arlen took a roll of bills from a drawer, counted several into Anne's hand and quietly left the room.

The girl sat down on the arm of her grandfather's chair and put her arm around his shoulders. "Grandad, we've been going over our accounts and we find that we've made quite a lot of money." She opened his knotted, calloused fingers and placed the money in his palm. "That's your share."

Lee's faded eyes brightened. For an interval he fingered the bills, speechless with gratification.

"Why, Anne," he finally quavered, "I can hire some help with all this and have enough left for powder too." He reached up, pulled her head down and pressed his cheek to hers. "Anne, darling," he said huskily, "you won't have to worry much longer. I'm going to be in pay-dirt in a short time and you can take your proper place in the world again."

"Yes, I know, dear," the girl gently agreed. For a time they sat silent, staring into the fire. At length Lee stirred uneasily.

"Anne."

"Yes, Grandad."

"You've got to get rid of that man. You must get a divorce. I've always planned that with the first money I got out of the mine I would hunt him up and free you of him. But I—I never had the money." He thrust the roll of bills into his grand-daughter's hand. "Anne, dear, you take this money and free yourself. I can get along all right at the mine. I don't need it."

"No, no, Grandad," the girl protested, her eyes moist. "I have plenty. I have already attended to that—that matter. The lawyer writes that there will not be the slightest trouble."

"That's good. That's good," Lee murmured thankfully.

He muttered incoherently, then relapsed into a long silence. Anne, watching the old face, saw his eyes close. But when she stirred he reached for her hand.

"Anne," he said, a wealth of sadness in his voice, "I wish I had more to leave you when I go. I'm sorry that I haven't been able to do right by you, little girl. I'm—I'm afraid I've been a dead failure. Spent too much money when I was young, but I loved your grandmother so much—wanted her to be happy. And I thought I'd always be able to strike it rich again. You're just like her, Anne. I'm sorry. I—I—" His voice broke.

Anne felt a tightening in her throat. She stroked his thin hair lovingly.

"It's all right. Grandad. You've been sweet and kind to me. We're doing all right now. We'll soon be prosperous again. Come, dear, you better go to bed."

On the following morning, Arlen, working on his car in the garage, cursed under his breath as Lin Hung's car stopped in front of his ranch and she saw the unmistakable figure of Jockey Cameron alight and come swiftly up the hill.

For two weeks Cameron had not made an appearance at the Lee house. Arlen had fervently hoped that the man's wanderlust had taken him to other parts and that Anne was rid of his obnoxious presence. Anne had somewhat recovered her spirits; seemed more herself of late. The jockey's return meant a revival of the old heartache and Anne's proud spirit would again suffer humiliation.

Watching the jockey's approach, Arlen began to boil with anger. He would be quite within his rights if he forbade Cameron admission to the Lee house, he told himself stubbornly. He'd order him off the place.

"Hey, you!" he shouted roughly as Cameron was about to pass. "Where you going?"

"Hello, big fellow," the jockey returned cheerfully. "Just the guy I want to see." He entered the garage, sat down on a box, lighted a cigarette and drew his lungs full of smoke. "What's eatin' you?" he asked, noting Arlen's angry expression.

"What's the reason for this visit?" Arlen demanded.

"Well, brother, I've had a pretty tough job for a couple weeks; been sitting the leather pretty close. So now that I've been turned out to pasture for awhile what's more natural than to visit my wife?"

Arlen's face reddened. "Your wife in name only!" he flared.

Cameron jerked his head up sidewise at Arlen. "Eh? What? How'd you know that? Did Anne tell you?"

"Tell me what," Arlen returned crossly.

"What you just said. That she left me at the wire."

Arlen shook his head irritably. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Say," Cameron said abruptly, "I want to talk to you. You can't string me. I know that you're stuck on Anne and I want to give you a tip—"

Arlen came swiftly around the car, his eyes blazing. He bore threateningly down on the speaker.

"Damn you and your tips! You get out of here or I'll—"

Unruffled, without rising, Cameron held up his hand.

“Take back your horses,” he said calmly. “Take back your horses. There’s no sense of you makin’ me grab leather. You’re big enough to put me in the also-rans with one punch, but what good’ll it do you?” He ran thick fingers through his black hair. “Now you listen to me and don’t kick over the traces ’cause its for your own good and I’ll give you an earful. I came to see you and I’m not goin’ to bother Anne. She’s applied for a divorce and I don’t blame her. She’s a thoroughbred, clean and good as they make ’em while I’m a scrub and a bum. I’m not in her class—now.” He looked gravely up at Arlen, and Arlen felt his anger melting away. “I’m not goin’ to be high-hat but I’ll tell you this—I didn’t lie to Anne. My folks are real people. I ran away from home when I was a kid and got in with the wrong gang around the racetracks and went to hell long ago. I’m only twenty-six now, so you can imagine how much sense I had when I met Anne. I was just a punk kid. Anne went with me to Vancouver and we were married. Two hours after, she quit me and beat it back up here, and,” he finished seriously, “that’s the God’s truth, and don’t you care a damn what these hicks around here say to the contrary.”

For a time there was silence. Finally, Arlen asked curiously. “Why did she leave you so suddenly?”

The jockey shot a quick, angry look at the speaker.

“What are you tryin’ to do—kid me?” he asked, his voice hard.

“Certainly not. Isn’t that a sensible question?”

Cameron stared at Arlen, an incredulous light in his eyes. He lighted another cigarette, moved to the door, then turned. “Try and find out from me. You big dumb-bell,” was his parting shot. Then he hurried down the hill.

CHAPTER XV

IT was on a Sunday afternoon that Dougherty came to Lightning Creek Ranch. The manner of his coming held an air of mystery that was in keeping with the dark and sinister drama unfolded during the following week in which the workers of Lightning Creek Ranch took prominent parts.

Anne called Arlen's attention to the approaching figure—a figure that skulked from tree to tree on a hilltop at the back of the ranch. From behind the bole of a pine the man studied the valley through a pair of binoculars, then came down toward the ranch. Nearing the house the stranger moved warily, his eyes darting about.

Arlen carefully sized up the man. He was a big man, thick-set, square-shouldered, with a magnificent head. His forehead protruded over keen grey eyes, and although dressed in the outfit of a sportsman, khaki suit and high boots, every movement and gesture suggested military training.

Arlen was particularly struck by the eyes of the man. Deep-set, keen, they flashed about as though he were making a mental note of everything his brilliant orbs encountered. Arlen liked him at first sight.

"I think I have the advantage of you," the stranger smiled, "inasmuch as I already know your names." He doffed his hat to Anne. "You are Miss Lee, and," he turned to Arlen, "I take it that you are Mr. Arlen. My informant at Pinchbeck has an eye for detail. Not," he said gallantly, "that detail is required in your case, Miss Lee. My name's Dougherty." He bowed to Anne and shook hands with Arlen. "I'm on a fishing trip," he went on, "and I beg the favour of allowing me to stop with you for a few days."

"Certainly," Arlen said heartily. Dougherty voiced his thanks. Arlen took the guest's small rucksack and fishing rods and led the way upstairs.

Upon entering the room Dougherty's keen eyes roved about him, taking in every detail. It seemed, Arlen thought, that this man was ever on the alert, ever watchful.

"Anne, what do you make of our guest," Arlen asked when he returned.

"Probably a game warden sent in to see that the Indians don't shoot too many caribou."

"Do the game wardens always come in this surreptitious manner?" he asked.

“No,” the girl answered. “They always come by the road.” She looked questioningly at Arlen. “What do you think is his business?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “He’s far above the ordinary type. There’s class to that chap. It’s possible that he’s a game warden, but he certainly isn’t what he claims to be. A fisherman wouldn’t arrive on foot and dodge from tree to tree to our back door as Dougherty did.”

“Well, what can he be?” Anne asked.

Arlen caught the frightened look in her eyes and regretted the words that had alarmed her.

Further discussion of the matter was precluded by the arrival of Dougherty. The big man lowered his thick, muscular body to a chair which creaked under his weight, and stretched out his legs with a weary sigh.

“Had the driver drop me a few miles back,” he explained. “Needed the exercise and there is no way to see the country as well as on foot, but it proved to be harder going than I had anticipated. I’m all in.”

Dougherty asked questions in a casual tone. An ordinary observer might have supposed his interest slight, but Arlen sensed that the queries were adroitly put so that in a few minutes the newcomer had a general knowledge of the country and its residents.

“You have a foreman by the name of Logan,” he said abruptly. “Where does he live?” Noting the surprise in Arlen’s eyes the man added hastily, “I was told that he would give me advice as to the best spots to fish.”

Arlen gave him the desired information. Dougherty came to his feet with an agility that was surprising in one of his weight.

“Think I’ll walk down and see him,” he announced. “I want to go fishing early in the morning.” He turned politely to Anne. “If possible, I would have you put up two lunches. I shall leave in the morning before breakfast and won’t be home until dinner time.” He bowed his thanks to the girl and strode quickly away.

“You’re not so clever after all,” Arlen mused. “A few minutes ago you were all in, and now you step out full of pep.”

Arlen’s curiosity was now fully aroused. He brought his binoculars and from behind a post of the verandah he trained the glasses on the retreating man. Instead of going straight down the hill and taking the path across the road from Lin Hung’s ranch as Arlen had directed, Dougherty held to the ridge behind a screen of poplar until he reached a heavy stand of conifers. Here he stopped and carefully studied the valley below. Arlen started

slightly as he saw Dougherty reach into his hip pocket, pull out a gun, inspect it carefully, then slip it into the side pocket of his coat.

Probably half an hour elapsed when Arlen saw Dougherty with Logan returning over the same route. The two men were talking animatedly but the flow of conversation ceased as they neared the house.

Instead of joining Arlen the two men swung to the left on the mountain trail.

“I’m going up the mountain with Mr. Dougherty,” Logan explained. “He’s going to do some hunting and wants to see the lie of the land. See you later,” he finished hastily, as Arlen made a move as though to join them.

“Another poor liar,” Arlen said to himself. “Dougherty hasn’t either rifle or shot gun. You can’t fool me, Tom. Dougherty’s a police officer and you’ve brought him in here to tackle the job you wouldn’t let me attend to. Well, I wish you both luck.”

That night at dinner Dougherty was silent, thoughtful, with an air of detachment about him. He nodded his thanks to Anne when she brought his wrapped lunches for the morrow and with the excuse that he had to be up at an early hour he went straight to his room and did not appear again during the evening.

During the night Arlen was disturbed by a stirring in the room occupied by their guest. The door creaked open and Dougherty tip-toed down the stairs, the old boards groaning under his great weight. The front door opened and closed, footsteps gradually receded. Arlen glanced at the glowing hands of his watch. “Two-fifteen,” he muttered drowsily. “He’s an early bird all right.”

Dougherty’s non-appearance at dinner caused little alarm, but when twilight merged into night and the canopy under the spreading cottonwoods became an inky darkness, Arlen became uneasy.

Long after Anne had gone to bed Arlen sat up waiting hopefully for the return of Dougherty. There was a sound of footsteps outside. Arlen opened the door in anticipation of welcoming Dougherty but it proved to be Logan. Logan glanced around the room, a worried look in his eyes.

“Not back yet?”

Arlen shook his head. Logan took a few turns round the room.

“Say, can I have your car and get a man to drive me to Pinchbeck tomorrow?”

“Yes, of course. But why do you want to go to Pinchbeck?”

Logan moved to the door. “Can’t tell you, but you’ll find out soon enough,” was his cryptic response.

“Look here, Tom, why don’t you take me into your confidence? I know that Dougherty is a police officer. Let me help you.”

“Nothing doing! It’s a dangerous business to mix up in. You keep out of it,” he warned, then left the room.

A shower-bath failed to rout the conflicting thoughts that possessed Arlen. He tried to sleep, but incandescent thoughts flicked one upon the heels of the other—like a racing engine out of control. His blankets enveloped him, but not in sleep or even rest. He would get up early and search for Dougherty on his own, he decided.

The sound of the car’s motor aroused Arlen. From the window he saw the roadster slide down the hill through a morning mist. Logan was getting an early start, he thought, as he dressed hurriedly. He walked carefully to the floor below, took his rifle from a rack on the wall and filled his pocket with shells.

Arlen left the ranch and headed south along the lake shore. He walked swiftly, his mind busy with conjectures. Dougherty had taken the boat from the float. Arlen would keep within sight of the shore in an endeavour to locate the skiff and then possibly the man’s footprints would show the direction he had taken.

For three hours he held to his lengthy stride, his eyes studying the shore. At times the shoreline was rough and irregular, sheltered coves and rocky promontories. Painstakingly he searched every point and bay but could find no trace of the missing man.

Near midday he came to a shoulder of a mountain that jutted out into the lake, its rocky point splashed with a white spray by a brisk wind. He climbed the steep pitch to the crest. From his vantage point he could see through the screen of boughs right to the end of the lake. A curved sand beach fringed by poplar trees that flew the bright banners of an autumnal forest swept from below his feet to a point a mile distant.

As Arlen reached the brink of the cliff he uttered an exclamation of satisfaction. There, below, was the row-boat, its bow drawn up on the beach. For a time he stood quietly, his eyes roving searchingly about. Three or four crows came cawing loudly to a clump of spruces directly above the point where the boat was beached, but they suddenly swerved upwards and fled on silent wings.

“Ah,” Arlen whispered to himself. “Thanks, Mr. Crow. There’s someone there.”

He crouched low and waited. A minute passed and his caution was rewarded. A Chinaman pushed stealthily through the bush, peered carefully about him, then hurried to the boat. The proceedings that followed caused Arlen to knit his brows with perplexity.

Pushing the boat before him the Chinaman waded waist deep into the lake, tipped the skiff until it was full of water and then with a shove sent it sluggishly out from the shore.

Arlen drew in his breath. Now he had it. The sunken boat, when found, would give the searchers the impression that Dougherty had met his death by drowning.

Hot rage surged through Arlen. They had killed Dougherty. The Chinaman was wringing water from his clothes. Arlen trained the rifle on the figure below. He could press the trigger and snuff out this man’s life. But, he reasoned, lowering the gun, he had no proof that this man was guilty of Dougherty’s murder. What if he should kill this man and Dougherty should turn up safe and sound.

Suddenly a plan formulated in his mind. If he could get the Chinaman between himself and the cliff he’d have him cornered. Arlen’s face set in grim lines. If he could once get his hands on this Chink he’d soon make him talk.

The Chinaman was unaware of the white man’s presence until Arlen stepped from the spruces and with levelled rifle called upon him to throw up his hands. Instead of complying with the demand the startled Oriental emitted a shrill cry of fear, and his feet tore up the sand as he sped towards the cliff. The report of the rifle and the spurt of sand in front of him seemed only to accelerate his speed.

“The same damned Chink who tried to push me off the cliff,” Arlen panted as he ran after the terrified man.

The pursued man swung towards the sheltering woods, but a glance over his shoulder showed him that the white man had anticipated this move and was racing to cut him off. Chattering with fright the Chinaman took the only course left to him. He reached the foot of the cliff and with the water lapping his feet he began to worm his way, like a brown beetle, around the base of the cliff.

Suddenly it dawned on Arlen that he could cross the point of land and intercept his quarry. Suiting his action to his thoughts, he ran up the beach

and crashed through the woods.

Fifteen minutes later, Arlen, hidden behind a boulder, saw the Chinaman approaching. The pursued man stopped, half-crouching, looking back fearfully. Arlen went scrambling toward him as silently as possible over the grout and shale. The roar of the surf on the rocks deadened the sound of his approach.

When Arlen was within thirty feet of the crouching figure the man turned. The Chinaman crouched a moment, staring, then as Arlen raced toward him he started to run. He whirled with a choking cry of terror, dove at first over the route he had just traversed, then, as if fearful that he had been cornered and that two men were on his trail, he swung toward a gap in the cliff. He bounded like a monkey over the rocks and gained on his pursuer steadily.

The Chinaman reached the bluff a full half-minute ahead of the white man and scrambled in terrified haste up the steep wall. Arlen leaned his rifle against a rock and climbed swiftly upward. In wild-eyed terror the cornered man reached frantically about him for a stone to heave at his relentless pursuer. Failing to find a loose rock he picked up a root. Looking up, Arlen saw his danger and pushed his head forward against the rock. The missile thudded against his head. For a moment the pain turned him giddy, but for all that he continued his ascent, shaking his head to scatter the shooting flames before his eyes.

The Chinaman hoisted himself to a narrow shelf and stood erect. He jabbered in Chinese as he looked up at a sheer wall without an inch of foothold. Looking over his shoulder he saw that the big white man was close upon him—his destruction imminent. In a murderous frenzy his eyes roved over the bare ledge for another missile to heave at his pursuer. He turned like a rat, scuttling at the sheer face of the rock, tried desperately to climb it but slid back at each attempt.

Arlen's fingers loosed their hold on the edge of the ledge as the Chinaman stamped his heel viciously on them. Squealing incoherently the crazed man kicked at Arlen's head. The blow struck glancingly on Arlen's forehead and nearly upset him. His long, powerful arm shot out as the Chinaman aimed a second kick, caught him by the ankle and plucked him from his perch. But the Chinaman, in his descent, threw his arms about the white man's body, Arlen's feet gave way under the weight and they fell together, rolling painfully down the cliff. The two bodies struck with a thud among the rocks, the Chinaman on top. Arlen landed on his side, across his right arm. His head snapped down and crashed against a rock. The fall

shook him up, nauseated him with pain. The Chinaman struggled to his feet and ran. Arlen came slowly to his knees, swayed unsteadily to his feet and lunged after.

This time the Chinaman did not attempt to climb the cliff but made straight towards the water that separated the point from a small strip of beach and the sheltering conifers.

Running was difficult over the boulders and driftwood that were covered with frost, slippery and treacherous. The Chinaman, in his haste, fell several times. Arlen, much heavier, fell too, and a sharp rock gashed his wrist. Fifty feet in advance of the white man the Chinaman took the water with a splash. He floundered ahead with awkward breast strokes. A shower of spray arose as Arlen plunged after him with a powerful overhand crawl.

The Chinaman was racing up the beach when Arlen's knees struck bottom. He came to his feet and, like a bull-moose disturbed at its evening meal of lily pads, he plunged through the water and raced up the sand. He was in time to see the Chinaman disappear in the protecting forest.

Shivering from his plunge in the icy water, Arlen sat down weakly. It was useless to follow his quarry; the Chinaman was lost in the dense woods that swept from the lake up the mountainside.

Arlen moved from the cold wind that penetrated his wet clothing to the shelter of a clump of spruce, removed his boots, emptied them of water and spread his coat and shirt on a ledge in the sunshine. He reached for cigarettes, found the package a pulpy mess and threw it from him disgustedly.

He looked at his watch. It was still going. The hands pointed to one-fifteen. He wondered how they had done away with Dougherty. Possibly he was still alive and they were holding him prisoner. Again he was filled with a consuming rage. He'd go back to the spot where he had found the boat and endeavour to follow his footprints.

He had no difficulty in finding Dougherty's tracks. A heavy man, wearing boots with hob nails and a metal crescent on the heels had left deep indentations in the sand. But, although clearly defined on the beach, on the firmer ground under the trees they became indistinct and finally he lost them.

Looking upward through a gap in the towering conifers Arlen's lips pursed in a low whistle. About two miles distant a perpendicular wall of rock arose and on its summit was a gnarled old tree with a gibbet-like limb etched against the brilliant sky. Blind Gulch.

Arlen hesitated. Should he, single-handed, go on? He had given Logan his word that he would not interfere, but, he salved his conscience, Logan would understand. He gripped his rifle more firmly in his hand and started grimly up the hill.

CHAPTER XVI

ARLEN held westward along the ridge, keeping away from the open space that stretched like a scar along the waterless crest below the wall of Blind Gulch; kept within the protecting fold of conifers. The going was hard. A thick scrub of bracken and dwarfed spruce sheltered hidden rocks that bruised his legs and slowed his progress.

Surely, he mused, there must be some point other than the place where he had seen the strange specks disappear, where he could effect an opening. He made the entire circuit of the south, east and west wall of the canyon without finding a break. The walls rose sheerly from the sandy level to a height of from two-hundred to five-hundred feet with no chance of a foothold.

He sat down for a period of self-counsel. No doubt the one entrance to the north would be guarded. On that path lay a great danger. But if he was to get beyond the protecting walls it was his only recourse. Should he give up his quest, wait for reinforcements, or go on single-handed? He thought of Dougherty with his polished manner and ready smile. Anger seethed within him. He sprang to his feet and with every sense keyed-up to a high pitch he swung to the north.

An hour later he pushed his way cautiously through a low tangle of spruce and scrub and came to the sandy floor of an ancient creek-bed. He straightened up slowly and studied the towering wall of rock. The barricade rose about two-hundred and fifty feet but he descried a break of fifty feet at the top that gradually narrowed until hidden by the scrub pine and fir that clung tenaciously to the crevices of the huge wall at its base.

This must be the entrance, he decided, and moved alertly forward. A rocky ledge barred farther progress, its mossy surface moist from the trickle of water that issued from a crevice and poured in tiny rivulets down the face. The moist, sandy loam at its base showed considerable signs of travel. This rock, Arlen thought, was part of a giant slide that had filled the original entrance to the valley.

Through the wilderness of jungle-like vegetation he caught glimpses of tumble-down shacks, habitations built by the gold-diggers of days long past. Carefully he followed the trail along the base of the rock until it became almost indistinguishable in the dry sand.

Stooping low better to follow the trail he crept forward slowly. The soil became damp again and the undergrowth almost impenetrable. Arlen stopped with a jerk. There, before him, was the opening he had been searching for. It was well hidden. Not more than five feet wide, the thickets of brush on either side almost meeting.

With a startled exclamation Arlen dropped to one knee. There before him was the imprint of a hob-nailed boot and in the centre of the heel a well-defined horseshoe. Dougherty's footprint! In this soft soil there were innumerable tracks both coming and going, but Arlen noted with a sinking heart there was no imprint to show that Dougherty had taken the back trail.

Arlen straightened up, his senses keenly alert, and stood for a moment listening intently. There was no doubt in his mind now that there was something sinister in Dougherty's disappearance. He felt his heart thumping and his muscles tensed.

He glanced at his watch. It would soon be dark. Already the woods and valleys were twisting streaks of shadows. A faint moon collapsed in a tuft of clouds at the farther end of the world and forest and mountain became a dark straggle of mystery.

Again Arlen hesitated. It would be a dark night with only the diffused light of the stars to guide his way. He doubted the good sense of going on alone. Would it be better to go back to the lake and await tomorrow? No, he might as well see it through. His hand gripped about the rifle. It gave him a comforting feeling. He edged along the concealed trail, with the care of a man stalking a deer, hardly breathing.

Ten minutes later he raised his head above the concealing low growth and surveyed the walled gulch. Below and to the left stood an old log building, its walls of huge timbers and roof of cedar shakes still intact in spite of great age. The roof sagged drunkenly from the snows of half a century of winters. To the right the valley floor was dense with deciduous trees, with an occasional pine and spruce, but immediately surrounding the sprawling old building the land devoid of vegetation owing to the mass of tailings brought from the bowels of the earth and scattered on the surface in irregular heaps. To the south was a row of bushes on either bank of what had once been a small creek that had run close to the corner of the ancient structure.

Crouching low, he crept cautiously through the concealing fronds until he reached the creek, then followed its dry bed until within a hundred feet of the staring windows. He noted with quick interest that four of the lower windows were boarded.

Foot by foot he crawled a little farther forward, staring and listening for some sight or sound to indicate that there was a human presence within the building. By and by he reached the cover of a patch of bracken and huddled beneath the fringe of it, watching and listening. The bulk of the building now loomed above him in the half-light, the gaping windows leered evilly down at him. There was something about this building, he did not know what, that thrust back at him with a force that was almost physical; a menace in its silence and shadows. He had an eerie feeling that there was some hidden, crouching thing ready to leap upon him from the darkness.

Arlen measured with his eye the open space between himself and the window. He glanced up at the sky. It would soon be dark. He felt in his pocket for matches and his fingers encountered his cigarette-lighter. It would help, he thought. It would be safer to wait for cover of darkness to search the building.

The waiting got on his nerves. Once or twice he stirred restlessly as though to go forward; but each time the very thought of the danger of crossing that open space chilled him into rigidity. Yet nothing happened. The night lay still, the moon broke faintly through the clouds and sank from sight for the night. There was blue here and there across the sky, and a few stars appeared.

For perhaps twenty-five minutes, which seemed like an age to the waiting man, he lay with eyes studying the gloomy structure, listening to the rustling noises of the night. Coyotes set up a dismal howling; night birds answered each other sleepily down at the creek-bed and a blue-jay, hopping near to the hiding man, gave vent to its sudden fright in a startled shriek, then flew to the roof of the building and set up a noisy scolding. Arlen cursed under his breath. If there were humans in the building their suspicions would be aroused now that the meddlesome bird had heralded his presence.

Shadows deepened until darkness shrouded Blind Gulch. Arlen removed his heavy boots and carrying his rifle in readiness, stooping low, he moved stealthily from his hiding place. His feet made the faintest whisper of sound. Like a shadow he crept across the open space and melted into the gloom below the overhang of the sagging building. He felt along the logs until his fingers encountered the window ledge, then paused, holding his breath, for a sound somewhere, however slight, that would indicate a human presence.

A ghostly silence now pervaded the spot. The murmuring sounds of twilight were stilled. Arlen noiselessly gained a seat on the window-sill and

sat with eyes glued to the dank darkness within as if with the very intensity of his regard he sought to pierce the secret he felt sure the old building held.

The silence was broken by a quick breeze that swept through Blind Gulch and stirred the dead leaves of the poplars so that they rattled their brittle bones as if in a sibilant whisper of warning to the intruder. An owl, from the top of the building, loosed a maniacal screech that split the night with a medley of echoes. Arlen's taut nerves jangled as if from the impact of a blow. His heart thumped chokingly, and he felt a cold sweat on his forehead. He was disgusted to find his hands trembling.

After he had somewhat recovered from his fright he lowered himself; stretched out his legs, feeling for the floor. The ancient boards creaked beneath his weight. Arlen thought it would be in keeping if he heard the soft sliding of hidden panels and the shuffling of stealthy feet. Holding the gun in his right hand, and his lighter aloft in his left, hardly breathing, he pressed the lever.

A choking gasp of horror escaped Arlen. Stark fright held him motionless, paralyzed. It seemed that all the ice in the world was trickling down his spine and he felt the hair lift upon his scalp. The room filled with an inky darkness as the lighter fell from his trembling fingers.

He stood staring into the cavern of velvet blackness and his flesh was rippling with terror at that formless thing he had seen slumped in the corner. Shaking in every limb he dropped to his knees and combed the floor with his fingers in an unsuccessful search for the lighter. His almost nerveless hands found a match. Its scratch in the deathlike stillness was like the report of a gun. It burst into yellow light that set the shadows dancing.

At Arlen's feet, the body of a man lay in a heap, like a sack of meal thrown against the wall. It lay on its side in a pool of blood, one leg drawn up to its chin, the head twisted grotesquely, the eyes half open and staring, the face cut to ribbons and utterly unrecognizable. A small horseshoe glistened on the heel of one boot. Dougherty! Knifed to death!

Arlen shuddered, shrank back from the gruesome sight and almost stepped on two more flung corpses. Two overall-clad bodies, yellow faces, coarse black hair and claw-like clutching hands. Arlen glared wildly about, terror struck. For a moment utter panic held him.

The match went out and he struck another. A pack-rat, squeaking, scuttled from sight. The room showed no sign of human habitation. An odour, other than that of the dank, cob-webbed walls, assailed his nostrils—acrid and pungent. He caught the glitter of the lighter and retrieved it. In the

steadier glow he saw that the building was divided by a sawn lumber partition in which there was a door.

For a moment he was nonplussed. Facing this emergency he did not know what to do. Should he go through that door? Discretion whispered no, that he should return at once to the ranch with the news of Dougherty's murder. He turned to look at the huddled thing in the corner, then at the two dead Chinamen. Probably against great odds Dougherty had given a good account of himself. Arlen's throat tightened. He cursed bitterly. He'd go through that door and he'd shoot to kill.

Stealthily he approached the door. The tenseness of the moment caused him momentarily to forget the ghastly sight behind him. His limbs ceased trembling, his hands were steady. Extinguishing the light, he swung the door slowly open. In spite of his caution it creaked loudly. He fell to one knee, his rifle in readiness, every nerve tuned to a hair-trigger keenness. For a long time he remained quiet, a breathless shadow; then with eyes darting about warily he snapped on the lighter.

In the flickering glow he saw that the room was uninhabited. The windows were boarded and, as an added precaution, the boards were covered with sacks. There were no beds, but in a corner several worn and dirty blankets were piled on the floor. An oil stove stood by a rickety table and above, a shelf held several half-filled paper bags, tea, coffee, several loaves of bread, tin cups and a blackened kettle. The acrid odour he had noticed in the other room was stronger here.

He moved slowly into the room and stood for a moment looking about him. His attention was attracted to several bulging gunny sacks on the floor. Plunging his arm into one of them he drew forth a tin can. He lifted the lid but clapped it back quickly, sickened by the sweetish odour.

For a puzzled moment he stood frowning. Then it came to him with a rush. Dope! Hendricks and Lin Hung were dope-runners! He had read of the border smugglers, but to find them here——! What an ass he had been not to recognize the face of Lin Hung as that of a drug-fiend. The saffron, parchment-like skin; the fevered bulging eyes with their narrowed pupils. Then there was Cameron, who was always with the Chinaman, with his fits of despondency and cheerfulness. Yes, he had been slow-witted all right. But, he excused himself, it was the first time he had ever come in contact with drug-addicts.

The silence was broken by the sound of voices without. Arlen had barely time to stumble gropingly through the darkness to the next room. It was hopeless to attempt to reach the window in the stygian darkness. He had just

flattened himself against the wall of the partition when a key grated in the lock. He heard Hendricks' voice raised in manifest anger.

“Why in hell did you bump off that bull? I told you a month ago that these shipments were to be our last. And now, the last thing, you go and mess things up so that we haven't got a chance. We're done for!”

A bland Oriental voice answered in the darkness. “Mistle Boss Man, you all same one damn coward.”

A match was struck. Through a crack in the wall, just level with his eyes, Arlen saw the claw-like fingers of the Chinaman cupped over a coal-oil lamp. The room burst into sudden brilliancy.

Lin Hung opened the door and at his word of command a file of Chinaman entered and stood with dark eyes blinking in the lamp's glare. If they had left China with any mark of the Orient in their attire they were well disguised now in nondescript workmen's overalls and jumpers. They would attract no attention anywhere on road or ranch.

Lin Hung pointed to the blankets. The travellers threw themselves on the floor and stretched out with weary sighs of satisfaction. A cackle of voices arose which was silenced by Lin Hung. He brought them bread and cheese which they wolfed hungrily.

Hendricks paced the floor with nervous, jerky strides. He could see that he had lost his grip over Lin Hung. The Chinaman had let the dope get the best of him. It was now futile to go on. He had enough money, anyway, and had been scheming to make this his last big grab and quit. The undertaking had been becoming more arduous each day but the murder of this officer had ruined all his plans; probably meant his freedom and might mean his life. He was a man toppled from the heights of security, suddenly and completely, into the clutch of complete disaster.

The big man stopped in front of his confederate. Lin Hung was sitting on a box by the table. He produced a long pipe, stuffed something into the bowl, and held it to the flame of the lamp, his hands trembling; then, with smoke issuing through mouth and nose, leaned back blissfully against the wall.

“I asked you why you bumped that cop?” Hendricks said harshly.

Lin Hung twisted his dog-like face up at the big man, a flickering anger in his narrowed eyes.

“What's a malla you? You makee me sick. You allee same bloken egg. White all lun out. Just yellow left. You got no gut.” He threw out his long arms. “What you likee me do? Poleceman he ketchum us here. Dope and

twelve China boy. He shoot two boy and break jaw and smashum head four more. Velly stlong man. Boys killum with knife.” He shrugged his shoulders resignedly. “Much better killum too quick than too late. Lotta men like you got no gut no killum go to jail or hang by neck.” He tapped his head. “Lin Hung no clazy. Lotsa blains. Heap savvy.”

“You’re so full of hop,” Hendricks growled savagely, “that you think you can kill an army and get away with it. You’re too damned quick on the killing. You’re not in Mexico. You’d have spoiled everything a long time ago by murdering old Lee if I hadn’t happened to be here.”

“Much better killum. Old man costs us lotsa money.”

“A lousy fifty dollars a month, you damned hop-head! What does that amount to? I’d give a hundred grand to be out of this mess.”

Hendricks resumed his pacing.

Like most criminals he was a craven at heart. His mind was groping frantically for some firm ground upon which to stand to view his dangerous position. If this cursed Chinaman had left the pipe alone and kept his head clear this would never have happened. He would not have employed the services of the dope-befuddled jockey. This consignment of opium, the bunch of Chinks who had murdered the bull, and the crowd lying on the floor tonight would have been safely dispersed two weeks ago if plans had gone according to schedule.

Lin Hung’s reference to hanging by the neck had done Hendricks’ nerves no good. He wished fervently that the Chinaman would take an overdose of the pipe and never wake up. The big man’s eyes darted furtively to the relaxed figure with the pipe. With this Chinaman out of the way, he, Hendricks, would have a chance to get clear. Lin Hung was the only one who held knowledge that was absolutely fatal. He ran his tongue along his dry lips.

Through yellowed eyes that were mere slits the Oriental watched the big man’s face. Slowly his talon-like fingers slid from the pipe to the drawer of the table. The nickelled barrel of a revolver glistened in his listless fingers. He made a sharp clucking sound. The huddle of blankets stirred into sudden life.

“Did you speak to me, Mistleee Boss Man?” he purred wickedly. He stood up, all trace of nervousness gone, his eyes burning with a hectic light. “Too bad you no likee killum man.” His voice was soft but menacing. “You likee quit? All light. I no quit, I makee lotsa money. You all time heap scared. You no have gut. Just three men can make talk. Jockey, old man Lee

and Logan. I fix um. Long time I no give jockey dope. Two tlee day he go clazy. Logan he come home dlunk. I nail door his cabin. Put lotsa gasolene makee good fire. Some day old man Lee he go work in mine. He liftum pick to stlike lock. Maybe somebody put lotsa dynamite in lock. Bong! Too bad old man have accident.” He rubbed his hands and leered up at Hendricks. “Evellytling velly nice, you see?”

“Yes, you’re a hell of a killer,” Hendricks blazed, “but the one man I offered you a couple of grand to get is still walking around.”

“You clazy. He not poleeceman.”

“What the hell difference does it make? I told you to get the——.”

The Chinaman’s thin, cruel lips broke into a grin of mirth.

“You no likee him,” he chuckled. “He heap savvy fight. He give you nice punch on the jaw.”

Hendricks’ face grew purple with rage. He swung about to face his tormentor.

“*Caracoles!* I told you to get him. It doesn’t make any——”

The latch clicked. Hendricks leaped for the door, but too late. Jockey Cameron, dirty and unkempt, burst wildly into the room. The sweat glittered across his forehead, wet his matted hair and streamed down his cheeks. The fingers of one hand clutched at his throat. His eyes rolled like a hound’s quarry and a fearful gurgling came from his pale lips. He seized Lin Hung’s arm with strong fingers that bit into the flesh.

“For God’s sake let me have a little,” he gasped.

The Chinaman struggled futilely to loose the grasp. As Lin Hung reached for his gun Hendricks sprang forward. “Here, none of that!” he shouted. He grabbed Cameron by the shoulder and propelled him toward the open door.

To the jockey’s confused mind it was Hendricks who was preventing him from getting the drug his system craved. With a sobbing cry he flung up his free hand and raked his fingers down the big man’s face. With a grunt of rage Hendricks struck the smaller man a brutal blow and flung him outside.

The smuggled Chinamen were all on their feet, each with a knife in his hand, eyes turned inquiringly on Lin Hung. A word from their leader and they resumed their recumbent positions.

Cursing, Hendricks dabbed a handkerchief to his scratched face. He eyed Lin Hung who had returned to his pipe.

“Don’t you know that we haven’t much time to get this place cleaned out tonight?” he barked.

The Chinaman looked sleepily up at the speaker.

“Too muchee dark.”

“*Socorro!*” Hendricks swore. “You get busy right now. What did you do with the bull?” he asked anxiously.

The Chinaman waved a listless hand toward the next room.

Hendricks’ mouth opened. “Do you mean to say that its still in there?” A string of oaths escaped him. He took Lin Hung roughly by the shoulder. “Get these Chinks up and get rid of that stiff,” he commanded frantically.

Arlen felt his scalp prickle and gooseflesh form upon his body. Unless he could gain the outside in a few seconds he was trapped. There was a stirring of feet in the other room. No time for caution. He lowered his head and charged for the faint light that marked the window. He flung himself desperately to the sill. The rifle barrel thumped against the side of the opening and the butt flew up and struck him a jarring blow on the jaw. The gun flew from his hands and clattered on the floor. There was a sound of harsh, biting curses; clack of Chinese voices and the sound of running feet.

CHAPTER XVII

ARLEN hurled himself from the window ledge. He struck joltingly on all fours and from this position, like a sprinter toeing the mark, he tore for the protecting fringe of trees. He was a fine mark now, he thought, as he sped across the open space in the starlight, expecting each moment to feel the sting of a bullet.

The roar of a six-shooter was like a clap of thunder in the frosty silence. A bullet buzzed past him and then another that thudded into the ground at his feet. A steady fusillade came from the building but the fleeing man had reached cover and the bullets flew harmless and wide.

For a hundred yards he ran along the dry creek-bed, the stones cruelly cutting his stockinged feet, then swung to the north. He realized that he must reach the one and only exit before Hendricks and his cohorts blocked his path. They were out to kill. He had to get ahead of them. A nick in the horizon before him told him that he was headed in the right direction.

He heard Hendricks' hoarse voice bawling orders; Lin Hung's staccato Chinese; the volley of sing-song syllables in answer, and the crash of Hendricks' big body as he floundered through the brush.

It flashed on Arlen that he had a decided advantage over his pursuers. The smuggled Chinamen would not be familiar with the lie of the land; he doubted if in the dark they could locate the outlet. Lin Hung was stupid from the effects of the opium. Hendricks, heavy-footed and slow, was the only one he had to fear.

The timber gave way before Arlen and the open space lay ahead of him. He glanced behind. There was no one in sight, but he heard the patter of many feet and the scrape of Hendricks' boots on the rocks. He'd have to chance it. His body doubled, he let out another link of speed and flew across the treeless area. Sharp rocks burned and lacerated his unprotected feet but he felt no pain.

When within a few feet of cover Arlen heard Hendricks' gun bark. The bullet ricocheted from a rock behind him. Again the gun gave voice and the leaden messenger sang over his head. At the third shot Arlen stumbled and fell. Hendricks' throaty cry of exultation changed to an oath as the fallen man sprang to his feet and was lost in the brush.

The fall had dazed Arlen. He broke from the brush and meandered uncertainly over a rock-rubble. He stared through the dark but could not

locate the break in the rocky wall. Five precious minutes passed before he discovered the cleft in the valley rim and resumed his flight.

By and by he came painfully through the narrow gap and slid down a slippery ledge to the sandy floor below. The sound of dripping rivulets was like music to his ears. He buried his face in the cooling waters; sucked great gulps down his parched throat. This act nearly proved his undoing.

The rush of running water drowned the sound of Hendricks' approach. The first intimation Arlen had of his pursuer's presence was when a huge form bulked above him against the starlit sky.

Arlen, crouching, watched Hendricks descend slowly, hugging the face of the wall, his gun held in readiness, testing every new foothold with his big feet before he trusted his heavy weight upon it.

Arlen's stomach went empty and sick. So this was to be the end—a bullet from Hendricks' gun. He knew that the man was desperate—he would shoot to kill.

One more step and the oncoming man would see the crouching figure on his right. Breathing stertorously, Hendricks reached the sandy floor, swung his head to the left—and in that split second Arlen leaped; leaped with the springy jump of a cougar and seized the barrel of Hendricks' gun. The six-shooter roared close to Arlen's cheek. He felt the singeing smart of powder-grains still burning. He gave the gun a jerk and with the same movement struck out with his left. The weapon flew in the air and the big man staggered back and almost fell.

Taken completely by surprise, for an instant the big man sensed that he was trapped. He glared wildly about him. Then, satisfied that only Arlen opposed him, he lunged desperately at his assailant.

"You're a bull after all," he gritted. "Well, I'm not drunk this time."

Arlen aimed a blow and missed. The impetus swung him off his balance and before he could recover himself Hendricks pinned both his arms to his sides in a rib-cracking embrace. Like a rag the lighter man was jerked from his feet and thrown about. Hendricks knew all the tactics of rough-and-tumble fighting. He jerked his head suddenly forward and butted Arlen in the face. With a prodigious effort Arlen wrenched one arm free and seized his opponent by the throat.

Gasping, Hendricks pushed Arlen from him and swung for the jaw. It landed on the younger man's eyebrow and laid it wide open. Hendricks rained showers of blows into the darkness. Some of them were stopped by

Arlen's protecting elbows, but many pierced his guard and stung his face and body.

In an attempt to avoid punishment Arlen ducked under his antagonist's flailing fists, clutched his arms about the big man and held on. Again Arlen was jerked from his feet, battered at with hard fists, torn at with desperate clutching hands and he was forced to break his hold.

Logan was right, Arlen thought. It was best to keep away from Hendricks' clinches. He was too strong for him. He changed his tactics. Like an untamable power, a bulk of indomitable strength, Hendricks surged about his antagonist. Backing, weaving, ducking, side-stepping, Arlen conserved his strength until the other man should slow up.

Minutes passed. He can't stand this pace much longer, Arlen thought. Hendricks began to draw air into his lungs in great gulps. He stumbled. Arlen's fist shot up in a wicked upper-cut that caught his opponent on the jaw and sent him staggering. Arlen followed up this advantage and crashed two more blows to the body. A stunning shock came from the dark and smashed against his own jaw. The stars fled and exploded in the sky. He was groggy. He fought mechanically. Get that right up—now shoot that left—now step back—now again—while darting things came out of the darkness that shocked and stung.

Arlen felt his face on the ground. They rolled and twisted, striking convulsively. A taste of blood was in his mouth and his brain was dizzy. A terrific, smothering weight heaved itself on to him. He felt a knee on his back; hands searching blindly for his throat. The man was going to kill him.

Arlen felt a hot, black passion rise up within him; a searing rage that said: "Get up and fight this brute. Get up and fight!" Dimly he realized that the big man's fingers were losing their strength on his throat. He heard the choking, sucking intake of air into the big chest above him. He felt the air rush to his own lungs as his opponent's fingers weakened.

With a writhing contortion Arlen flung the big man from his back, then struggled to his feet and with head down bored into the kneeling man with a shower of blows that sent him smashing against the ledge. Hendricks' head, with a sickening thud, crashed against the rock. The impetus of Arlen's charge sent him sprawling on top of the unconscious man. He lay there, weak, inert and gasping.

At long last Arlen stood up, swaying. Every movement was painful. His body was sore and the cut on his brow bled steadily. He smeared the blood from his eyes with his sleeve and started weakly in the direction of the trail.

He crawled painfully over rocks. Several times he stumbled and fell, and each time lay for a moment, breathing hard. The trees confused him, slapping at him with their branches and slashing his hands and face. He pushed gropingly on; fell forward to hands and knees in a puddle. He immersed his face in the water and drank, choking. A vague memory tormented him. What was it that he had to do? The night was still, but there was a drumming in his head. He was tired; wanted to lie down and rest. He stretched out, face downwards, and lay still. The canopy of red and gold leaves about him whispered sadly as though scared spirits hovered in the tree tops.

He stirred uneasily. He must move on. There was something he had to do. Now he knew. He had to get Logan—Anne—the police. Dougherty was dead. He must find the trail. He remembered this open space. The trail led downward to that opening. In stumbling haste, dragging his bruised feet, his breath coming in agonized gasps, he started down the hill.

CHAPTER XVIII

SOME time later, lost to any sense of direction, Arlen crashed his way through the brush some distance from the trail. Hatless, his socks cut to ribbons, his battered face a mask of red, he broke from the bush and was almost blinded by the flash of an electric torch.

“Hand’s up!” a voice ordered tersely. “Steady, now. We heard you coming a mile away. I’ve got you covered. Turn with your back to me.”

Arlen obeyed the injunction. A hand felt along his belt and slapped his pockets.

“No guns,” the voice grunted. “Swing around and stick out your hands while I click these bracelets on you.” Arlen felt the bite of steel on his wrists. The man flashed the light in his face. “Now, who are—Good God, what a sight!”

“Goddlemighty! Its Arlen!” It was Logan’s voice.

The horror of the night, the beating he had suffered at Hendricks’ hands, had sapped Arlen’s strength. The sudden feeling of relief that swept over him left him sick and dizzy. He sat down weakly.

“Sorry, old man,” his captor said as he removed the handcuffs. “Here, take a shot of this,” he added, pushing a flask into Arlen’s hand.

The fiery liquor cleared his head and sent the blood warmly through his veins. The first grey streaks of dawn disclosed to Arlen that the party consisted of six men besides Logan. Five were in the olive and green uniforms of the Provincial Police and the sixth, dressed in civilian attire, was a stocky, square-shouldered individual who was so much like the murdered police officer that Arlen stared at him in amazement.

Revived, Arlen came to his feet. There was need for haste if they were to capture the criminals. Rapidly he recounted the events of the night. At the point where he haltingly described the finding of Dougherty’s body the man in mufti seized Arlen’s arm.

“You say they’ve murdered Larry?” he asked hoarsely.

“Dougherty,” Arlen corrected.

“Larrigan’s his right name.”

“Yes,” Arlen sadly confessed. “He’s dead—stabbed to death.”

The shock of the news turned the man's body rigid. His face turned grey and when he spoke his voice was hoarse with a terrible passion.

"By God, I'll get the men who murdered Larry!" he swore through twitching lips. "We've been working together for twenty years." He turned swiftly up the hill. "Come on! Let's go!"

The grey sky in the east had turned into a dull gold when the posse reached the entrance to Blind Gulch. A few words of instruction from the officer in charge sent the men to points of concealment. The leader, with Logan, stationed himself near the entrance, while the others lay in the bush at either side of the trail.

Day was coming swiftly. The grey light in the east broadened into a dull brilliancy which made the edge of low-lying clouds a luminous gauze. Late birds began faint cheepings and the ever-present coyotes answered each other with wailing cries.

Logan had removed his boots and given them to Arlen. Wincing with pain Arlen pulled the heavy boots on and stretched out his stiffened body. What a night it had been! Watching the peaceful coming of day it seemed that the whole thing had been an illusion; it was unbelievable that cold, stark murder stalked red-handed in this land of beauty, peace and colour. How stupid he had been not to have got wise to all this, long ago. Smuggling Chinamen and dope. He wondered how they worked it and how long it had been going on. He questioned Larrigan's friend who sat with shoulders slumped, his face wrapped in gloom.

"In the first place my name's Harrigan," he began in a low voice. "Larry and I are not related, but we are known as Larry and Harry—the Irish twins. Now Larry and I have nothing to do with this affair. We are with the narcotic division of the U. S. Secret Service. This man Pedro Gonzales—Hendricks you call him—is a quarter-breed. He and his Chinaman have been doing their stuff on the Mexican border for years. We had a hard time landing him, but finally we got enough on him to give him the rap for a double murder—but he got wise and beat it. Our office got a tip that this man Hendricks might be our man and they sent Larry and me up from the Mexican border to look him over." Harrigan paused for an interval. "He's the guy all right, damn him! There's one *hombre* that I want to take myself. He nearly got me once." He lifted his hat. "Look here." A scar ran straight across his forehead. "He got off because his lawyer proved that his client, out hunting, mistook me for a deer.

"I'll give you an idea how they've been pulling it off," Harrigan continued. "In a straight line west we are a surprisingly short distance from

the coast. Some of the inlets reach as far as a hundred miles inland. They land their Chinamen and dope in some hidden spot on the coast and walk 'em over the mountains. They send one man ahead and if there is any danger in sight they scatter like a bunch of quail. They don't use the regular trails except in the dark. One Chinaman walking on the road looks like another and believe me it takes a clever man to catch them. They hole up in places like this layout here until they get an opportunity to spread out in the different Chinese ranches. Most of them stay in Canada but lots of them are smuggled across the line to the States. These men get as high as a thousand dollars apiece for every Chink they bring in. They make plenty of money all right. Just figure out for yourself what the profits are when they handle fifteen to twenty Chinks a month and maybe from ten to twenty-five thousand dollars worth of dope. The small tins of dope sell for a hundred dollars apiece. It's got booze-running looking like a shoe-shine stand.

"It looks as if the local authorities haven't been attending to their job. But your friend Logan tipped off the Vancouver headquarters and besides they got a line on this layout by keeping tab on this hop-head jockey. They've been watching him—" The speaker's head suddenly jerked erect. "They're coming," he whispered.

There was the sound of a body pushing through the bush; a rattle of pebbles and Hendricks, his face swollen and discoloured, came to view at the top of the ledge. For a moment he looked about, then slid down the rock.

The next instant his arms shot aloft. Logan and his companion searched their captive, slipped the handcuffs on his wrists and pushed him before them into the bush.

The minutes dragged interminably to the waiting men.

Arlen's companion chafed at the inaction. "I'll be damned if I can stand it any longer!" he exploded. "I can't sit here while a bunch of heathen Chinks bury poor Larry!" He stood up, but suddenly ducked to cover. "By gad, here they come!"

Lin Hung came in the lead. Behind him straggled the others, each with a sack on his back. Their feet slithered down over the rocks and they came forward swiftly with a dog-like trot.

Their surprise was complete. The officer's command to throw up their hands was not understood by the newly arrived Chinamen but the menacing guns sent them in a milling huddle and their voices raised in a startled cackle.

Lin Hung stood with hands hidden in the sleeves of his tunic. He was still under the influence of the drug. His eyes were slits and he bared his teeth in a wolfish snarl. Logan moved toward him.

“Look out for that hop-head!” Harrigan yelled, lifting his six-shooter.

Like a flash a gun appeared in Lin Hung’s hands. The report of Harrigan’s six-shooter roared in Arlen’s ears. Lin Hung’s revolver discharged harmlessly into the ground. Screaming with pain he clutched at his shoulder and mouthing vile curses in a mixture of English and Chinese he fell to his knees.

“Guess you saved me that time. Fast work,” Logan said admiringly.

“You can’t tell what a hop-head will do,” Harrigan said. “I’ve seen so many of them that I never take a chance.”

One of the Chinamen, evidently expecting the same fate as his leader, made a wild bolt for cover. Several guns barked. The fleeing man toppled to the ground, flashed and twisted from end to end in an awful movement, then lay still.

Harrigan surveyed the terrified Chinamen who stood with eyes rolling in fear, arms gesticulating and voices raised in wild, unintelligible chatter. “Poor devils,” he said. “They don’t know what it’s all about. They expect to be shot.”

He spoke to them in their own language. Instantly they ceased their milling about, all eyes turned towards the speaker. For some time Harrigan carried on a conversation with one who appeared to be the spokesman for the captives. At the finish of the colloquy a calmness fell over the foreigners. They stood at ease and several lighted cigarettes.

“Just as I thought,” Harrigan said. “They expected to be done away with. Don’t think you’ll have any trouble with them now, but you better examine them for knives. That old reptile,” he pointed down at Lin Hung who had fallen forward on his face, “I know him of old. You’d better stick the cuffs on him. He’s like a rattlesnake at all times.”

Something in Lin Hung’s inert pose attracted Harrigan’s attention. He laid hold of the fallen man’s shoulder and turned him over.

“Deader’n a mackerel,” he announced. “The bullet didn’t do it. I just nicked his arm. The dope killed him.”

At this announcement Hendricks raised his head. With the Chinaman dead there was a chance that they couldn’t pin anything on him. The jockey was well-nigh crazy and was probably lying dead in the woods.

Harrigan turned suddenly on Hendricks. "Now, here is the man I want to talk to." There was venom in his tone. "How's tricks, Pedro?"

Hendricks stiffened as if frozen. Open-mouthed he stared fearfully at Harrigan.

"Just to let you know that there's no mistake and to freshen your memory a bit." Harrigan lifted his hat, disclosing the scar. "Do you remember this little token you left with me?"

Hendricks still stared, his eyes wild as a trapped cougar. The sweat stood out in beads on his forehead. A sickly pallor crept up beneath his swarthy skin, leaving his face a greenish colour. He tried to speak, but his thick lips seemed momentarily out of control. Finally he spoke, his tones shaky and husky.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Like hell you don't!" Harrigan flared. "We've got you red-handed. You'll get the whole sentence thrown at you this time."

Some colour had returned to the big man's face. He assumed an air of bravado. "How can you fix this on me? I've got nothing to do with this affair."

"Haven't, eh? Well, even though we couldn't give you the rap for this we've got enough on you for your stuff on the Mexican border to hang you."

"I'm a Canadian citizen. Have been here six years. You'd have to get me extradited," the prisoner bluffed.

"Look here, Pedro Gonzales. We've got you and you know it. You might as well come clean. I can't promise you anything, but it may help you when you come up for trial, but for my part I'd rather see you hang by the neck. I'm going to ask you a few questions. Don't bluff. Spit it all up. First off, who killed Larry?" At the mention of his comrade's name a paroxysm of rage swept over Harrigan. "Damn you, Gonzales, if I thought you murdered Larry I'd kill you right now!" Hendricks winced and drew back a step before Harrigan's blazing eyes.

Suddenly all eyes turned to the hill above from whence came the crash of brush, the sound of running feet and the choked breathing of tortured lungs. Jockey Cameron, clothing torn, face bleeding, eyes wild and staring, broke from the bush. With tongue lolling from foam-flecked lips he stopped and surveyed the party.

"The poor devil has gone clean nutty," Harrigan said. "He may have a gun. Better have a look."

Logan leaned his rifle against a ledge and spoke soothingly to the madman.

Hendricks raised his voice in an air of sarcastic bravado. "He'll make a good witness for you. His evidence will go a long way."

Cameron lifted his eyes to the speaker's face. He drew his fingers slowly across his forehead in a puzzled manner as if trying to recall a vagrant memory. The maniacal glare in his eyes suddenly increased in intensity. With a throaty, gasping cry, with a motion as rapid as the lash of a striking snake, he sprang on Logan's rifle. There was a jet of flame and a reduplicated roar drummed throughout the mountains.

Hendricks swayed, grabbed his left arm above the elbow; his eyes showing white in his swart face he crumpled to his knees, moaning.

The thing had happened so quickly there was no time for word or action. Before the wounded man reached his knees the jockey flung the weapon from him and leaping like a wild thing disappeared in the forest.

CHAPTER XIX

ORDINARILY, Anne would not have been disturbed by Arlen's absence from the evening meal. He had, on occasions, stayed at Logan's cabin for dinner. But today Logan had gone to Pinchbeck. Tonight Shep also had deserted her. He was probably off on one of his usual forages in the hills. Her grandfather's absence never caused her any uneasiness as he often slept at his mine; he came and went at his own will.

The place was unwontedly silent and lonely. Try as she would she could not shake off a feeling of uneasiness. Somehow the hushed stillness seemed to hold a premonition of disaster.

She started and her heart thumped when the door creaked open. It was only the Indian who did the chores. He took the nest of milk pails from the shelf and went to the barn.

The girl went methodically about her regular duties. She fed the hens, cooked the dinner and set the table for two in a vain hope that Arlen would return. She went to the door several times and peered into the growing dusk, hoping to hear the welcome sound of Arlen's footsteps. Presently she sat down to the table but found that in her present mood she could not eat.

It was a funny feeling to have, she thought. She sensed trouble and there wasn't one definite thing she could place her finger on. But was that true? Hadn't there been many unaccountable things happen in the last few months.

First and foremost there was the old man's acquisition of money from some unknown source and his evident fear of Hendricks. Why should the big man's mere presence bring fear to her grandfather's kindly eyes? She remembered the night when Arlen's carelessly spoken words had shaken Hendricks. Now came this man Dougherty with his keen, searching eyes and probing questions. What had happened to him? She knew that Arlen was worried about Dougherty's absence. Last night he had worn a preoccupied air and made evasive replies to her queries. She had been awake when Logan made his late call to inquire for Dougherty and had heard a portion of their conversation. And now both men had left that morning before daybreak. Tom never rode in a car; always made his trips to Pinchbeck on horseback. And Arlen had never before been so keen on hunting as to forgo his breakfast.

This summing up caused her to reverse her former decision. There was good reason for fearing that something was amiss—something dangerous, even tragic.

She turned on the light and put fresh wood in the fireplace. It was not yet night but the brightness cheered her. She took a book from the case and sat down by the table, but her mind strayed from the printed page. One thought leaped upon another until her mind became a tossing sea of emotions. She closed the book and began an aimless pacing.

Darkness had fallen. Black shadows had crept on to the spaces under the cottonwoods' leafy canopy in the yard. A light wind set the dried leaves fluttering in a sibilant whisper. To the lone, brooding girl the darkness outside the windows seemed to hold a hidden menace. Disgusted with herself for her unwonted trepidation she locked all the doors and pulled down the shades.

At times she paused in her pacing, listening, longing for the sound of Arlen's step outside the door. Struggle as she might, she could not keep her thoughts away from Arlen. He had been so kind to her, so gentle with the old man, and so genuinely unselfish in all things, that she could never repay him.

She repeated what she knew about him—which was very little. He was alone in the world. He had lived on a farm in Ontario and had held a position in an office in Vancouver. That was all. There was something more important to her—she loved him.

She thought of the evening he had taken her in his arms. She knew that whatever it had meant to him, their physical closeness had filled her with an unquenchable, consuming flame. A wave of sheer delight, of completed memory, swept over her. She felt his lips against hers, rough and passionate. She felt his strong arms straining her against him. It was almost as keen as the actuality.

Since that night he had not exactly avoided her but she had noticed that he had manoeuvred so that they were never by themselves. When Logan left at night, Arlen always went to his room.

At times she thought he was ashamed of showing his passion. Probably, man-like, he had followed an overwhelming sex-impulse and had at once regretted it. At the thought she felt depressed. But, no, his action had not been casual. She felt that Arlen had been stirred as much as she by that kiss and embrace. Many times since that night she had caught him staring at her.

Since the races a marked change had come over him. She knew the reason why. His feelings toward her had undergone a change since the races—since he met Cameron. At the thought a great weight settled about her heart. He had probably pictured her in Jockey Cameron's arms and he was disgusted. She knew that men were like that. Could she blame him?

Of course, she thought, Arlen did not know the circumstances of her marriage. The Jockey Cameron she had first known had been so handsome, so gay, so worldly. He was dressed so stylishly and gaudily. And he had painted such glowing pictures of the life they would lead. He would take her all over the country—New York, Chicago, Virginia, California, and Tia Juana—names to conjure with. She was only a silly kid who loved life and gaiety and she had believed him. She now knew that she had never loved him—she had just been a fascinated little fool.

Then there was the bitter, humiliating memory of the place he had taken her to immediately after their marriage, where she had met his dissolute associates and had learned of the depraved habit to which he had become a slave. She had fled from him disillusioned, and sick at heart.

Arlen was ashamed of her. That was why he had avoided touching her and had looked at her so strangely—he pitied her. She felt the colour surge over her neck and face—her eyes brimmed with tears. She flung herself on to the old horsehair couch and buried her face in her arms, her shoulders shaking.

“Oh, Bruce,” she whispered, “I—I was only a kid then—I was only a kid _____”

At last, weariness dulled the poignancy of her feelings and she sank into a fitful sleep.

Anne awoke with a startled cry on her lips, with an oppressive feeling of danger lurking near. Had she been dreaming or had she heard someone try the door? She lay for a moment, listening, but the sound was not repeated. She got up, washed her face, tidied her hair and built the fire in the stove. She would have breakfast ready for Arlen.

The old clock on the mantel struck six. It was so quiet that she heard the reluctance of that whole queer mechanism just before the strokes; and then for several moments the reverberations went dying through the rooms of the ancient house, the drone coming fainter and fainter. As if in echo to it, out in the straggling forest a coyote laid back its head and yowled. The thin, weird cry, age-long in its intonation of misery and desolation, split the valley's quiet, yet it was not this that caught the ear of the girl. Something moved

stealthily outside the window. She stood with uplifted head, her face strained, her ear bent attentively.

The silence was intense. It beat on her ears like an air swell, recurrent and relentless. She thought the drawing of her breath must cut the air like a snake's hiss. She could hear her own heartbeats, and felt the hair prickling upon her scalp. Summoning every ounce of courage she glided to the window and with shaking hands drew up the shade.

At the same instant she staggered back, horror-stricken. A stifled scream escaped her. Her blood ran cold. There, pressed to the glass, was the face of Jockey Cameron, blood-drabbled, warping devils in it, every spark of sanity gone from the bulging eyes. His fingers clawed at the glass. His voice rose hoarse, threatening. "Give it to me! Give it up or I'll ——!"

The face left the window. She heard him at the door. Terror was thick upon her and her heart beat sickly, heavily. With a terrific crash one half of the door gave way and fell inward. The demented man twisted himself through the opening as soundless as inhumanly swift as a hobgoblin. The girl staggered back blindly until her bare elbow touched the hot stove and she screamed.

It seemed as though her cry loosed an explosive force within the man. With a bound he was upon her, his arm encircling her like bands of iron, his fingers biting into her flesh. With horrible oaths issuing from his pale lips he repeated his demand.

Weaving, writhing in and out she wrestled with the insane man. Her hair wild, she fought like a tigress. At a point where she felt herself weakening he suddenly flung her from him to the floor and leaped into her bedroom. Frantically he tore open the drawers of her dresser and tumbled the contents on the floor.

Weak and giddy the girl came unsteadily to her feet. Edging noiselessly along the wall she reached the back door. Like a flash she sped across the intervening space to the wood-shed, closed the door and slid the wooden bolt into place. Her breath, coming in gasps, she leaned back in the half-light against the log wall.

Presently she heard him leaving the kitchen; heard his whispering inarticulate maunderings, and the sound of his footsteps as he circled her refuge. Balked of his victim his rage became horrible in its intensity.

Anne had, like most of her sex, a good eye for physical detail. What she had once seen she could reconstruct in her mind's eye even in the dark; and she remembered that she had seen the knife that Logan had used to butcher a

pig slipped between the logs. She ran trembling fingers along the wall, felt for the knife and found it.

In the dusk she stepped on a rake and the handle of this flew up and struck her a sharp blow on the shoulder. She let a muffled cry escape her—and then, her heart pounding, she stood stock still. He had heard her cry. He was outside the door.

He called her name in a whimpering, cajoling tone. For a moment the girl's fear was superseded by a quick rush of pity for this suffering wretch. She became conscious of the keen knife clutched in her fingers. She just couldn't do it. She let the weapon fall to the floor.

Receiving no answer the man again gave way to a savage, berserk fury. Repeatedly he flung his body against the door. It seemed as if only a giant in strength could break the bolt, but it snapped under the bombardment of the human projectile.

The force of his charge carried the man to his knees and before he could recover his feet Anne shot to the outer air and sped towards the lake. She could get to the boat or failing that she felt that she could out-swim her pursuer. Without slackening her pace she looked back. The man had picked up the knife and brandishing it above his head he shouted her name.

Stark fright lent her wings of speed but it could not match the uncanny strength of the madman. He was almost upon her. She would never reach the water. Her nerves gave way. All the pent-up horror of the night was loosed from her lips in a piercing scream that sent the echoes ricocheting among the hills.

She tried to vault a fence, stumbled and fell. A weight crashed down upon her. The whole world revolved about her in a red wheel of flying stars at the hub of which she dwindled slowly to a pin-point—to nothingness.

CHAPTER XX

BRUCE ARLEN, arriving ahead of the posse, got the first intimation of Anne's danger when he saw the broken door. The disorder of her room sent him into a panic. In an agony of fear of what he might find he raced madly from room to room calling her name.

Then he heard her shriek of terror.

Measuring the distance as he ran Arlen realized that he would never make it. When he was still a hundred yards away he saw Anne fall. Her pursuer clambered over the fence, caught his foot on a wire and fell on top of the prostrate girl. Arlen's labouring lungs loosed a hoarse cry in a vain attempt to attract Cameron's attention.

A wolfish snarl came from behind Arlen. A grey blur shot past. Shep, his hackles abristle, his powerful limbs spurning the ground, raced to the succour of his loved mistress.

The huge dog rocketed through the air, cleared the fence, but his teeth snapped a few inches short of Cameron's throat as the man stepped back. Always in fear of the animal the man now yelled in terror. With incredible speed he tore straight for the point of the cliff overhanging the lake. A throaty growl in his big throat, Shep recovered himself and lunged after the fleeing man.

Straight to the peak of the rocky promontory the man sped with the dog gaining at every bound. The enraged animal's teeth snapped viciously a few inches short of his quarry as the man hurled himself from the cliff. His body sailed through the air in an awing arc, struck the water with an audible smack and disappeared beneath the surface.

There followed a space of time of which Anne had no recollection. When she opened her eyes she was not sure of the vision presented to her. Faces appeared out of a heavy mist, pale and almost featureless. Slowly they took shape, form and distinction.

She found herself on a couch. Logan was leaning over her, his rough features tenderly solicitous. She felt the trembling of his thick fingers as he laved her face with cold water. She struggled weakly to a sitting posture, shook the hair from her eyes and stared about.

The room seemed full of men. Strange men, some in the uniform of the Provincial Police. Hendricks sat sullenly in a corner of the room, hands

manacled, his face pale, a blotch of red showing on his wounded arm. Outside the door a uniformed officer stood guard over a number of Chinamen who sat about in the sunshine smoking cigarettes, their tongues jabbering unintelligibly. Arlen sat at a table opposite a stalwart constable who was making entries in a note-book. Arlen lifted his head and his swollen features twisted in a wry smile of reassurance. The sight of his mutilated face brought a gasp from the girl. She turned startled, questioning eyes on Logan.

Sketchily he outlined the night's tragic events and disclosures. As he talked, Logan saw a growing fear in Anne's deep blue eyes. "Horrible! Horrible!" she breathed. Suddenly she clutched his arm. "Tom, tell me, where is—is—Grandad?" Logan stirred uneasily. Avoiding her eyes, he said: "They've sent an officer up to the tunnel to fetch him, Anne."

There was a stir outside. A shadow darkened the door. The stooped and twisted figure of old Jack Lee stood on the threshold. The pale sunken eyes peered uncertainly about in the dim interior. The brilliant Cariboo sun played about the venerable figure, formed a halo about the snow-white head, glorified the soiled clothing and touched the gnarled, toil-worn hands as with a golden caress. Anne, watching him, saw him wince as his eyes encountered Hendricks, then drifted to hers and held for a moment.

Suddenly, as if the suffering in his grand-daughter's eyes had imparted strength to his being, the venerable old man's demeanour underwent a swift change. Like a discarded mantle the weight of years fell away. The stooped shoulders, once broad and powerful, slowly straightened and the proud head lifted. An atmosphere of dignity enveloped him. Once again he was the renowned Jack Lee of bygone days to whom the whole Cariboo paid tribute; whose open-hearted generosity, physical strength, and wealth had made him the pride of all his fellow men. Once again he was master in his own house.

Involuntarily every man in the room came to his feet. Lee turned to the officer standing by the table, and when he spoke his voice was surprisingly deep and virile.

"To whom am I indebted for this intrusion?"

The officer said respectfully, "Mr. Lee, won't you please sit down. I would like to ask you a few questions."

Anne was not deceived by her grandfather's grandiose manner and his well-simulated show of courage—knew that inwardly he was a seething whirlpool, a tempest of fear. She watched the proceedings with an ache in her heart.

The officer said gently, "Mr. Lee, I have to tell you that anything you say will be used against you." The speaker hesitated. "I also suggest that it would be much better for you to make a frank statement of all you know. First, have you any knowledge of opium being stored in a building on the property known as the Lee Mine in Blind Gulch?"

"No."

"Did you know that this building was being used as a rendezvous by Chinamen who made illegal entry?"

"No."

"Have you collected rent for this building from any person or persons?"

"No."

For a moment the questioner sat silent, frowning. Leaning forward he asked quietly, "Mr. Lee, are you sure you have nothing further to say?"

"I know nothing about it," the old man declared stoutly.

The officer arose. "Mr. Lee," he said regretfully, "I dislike doing this but I'll have to take you along." He motioned to one of the men in uniform and before Lee realized what was happening to him there was a flash of bright metal, a snap, and he felt the bite of steel on his wrists.

Dazedly the old man came to his feet. Staring down at his fettered wrists the full depth of his humiliation fell on him like a cloud. Like a slowly deflating balloon he seemed to shrink within himself. His features writhing in an agony of emotion, he tottered back to his chair, stretched his manacled arms before him on the table and bowed his head upon them.

Anne was the first to reach him. With a choking cry she flung her arms protectingly about the stricken man's shoulders. Her slender fingers tore at the manacled wrists. "Take them off!" she cried hysterically. "Take them off, I say— He's kind and good—he—he wouldn't do anything wrong. Oh—Grandad—Grandad—" She broke off in a tempest of sobbing.

Lee slowly raised his head. Senility had suddenly overtaken him and when he spoke his voice was cracked and broken.

"Anne, dear, I'm going to tell the truth. I lied to this officer and I haven't been square with you. I've deceived you, but I thought it was for the best. Will you forgive me, Anne?"

The girl could not trust herself to speak. She leaned over and touched her lips to his brow.

The quavering voice went on.

“I’ve always felt that I’ve not done the right thing by you, Anne dear, felt that you were not taking the place in the world to which—as a Lee girl—you’re entitled. I planned to send you to school at Vancouver for training as soon as I got the mine paying but—but I haven’t struck it rich yet.

“I have a sister in California who is wealthy. She wanted me to send you to her, but I couldn’t do it. I should have let you go, Anne, but I just couldn’t let you go to her as a charity child and admit that I, Jack Lee, was a failure. I felt sure if I had a little cash I’d make a fortune in my mine. Then Hendricks made me the proposition. It seemed providential.

“I accidentally happened in on them in the old building,” he went on wearily. “The Chinks would have knifed me, but Hendricks was afraid. He kept them off me and offered me fifty dollars a month for the rent of the building and to keep my mouth shut.”

The aged man paused for a moment. He was very, very weary. It seemed that his throat had closed tight and it took all his strength to force the words into being. He looked up at the girl, his eyes brimming. “I—I’m sorry, Anne—I took the money.” He raised his tired eyes to the policeman. “That’s all, officer. I—I’m ready to go.”

During the period of interrogation to which Lee was subjected and throughout the old man’s halting confession, Logan was in a welter of agitation. He sat stiffly erect in his chair, crossing and uncrossing his legs, twisting the wide brim of his hat in nervous fingers. Several times he opened his mouth as though to speak but held silent until Lee had finished.

Flustered, his face strangely without colour, Logan came to his feet.

“Look here, officer,” he blurted angrily. “Something’s gone wrong here.”

The officer looked at the speaker inquiringly.

“I gave this show away,” Logan went on angrily, “with the understanding that Lee was to be let alone. I’ve known this thing has been going on for some time, but—but I didn’t say anything be—because—” He floundered with embarrassment for a moment. “Because I didn’t want Anne to know—knew it would break her heart. I—”

“Who gave you that promise?” the officer interrupted.

“Our M. P.,—Mackenzie. I went to Pinchbeck to see him and he arranged with your Chief in Vancouver.”

“Have you a letter to that effect?”

“No,” Logan gloomily admitted. “Said he couldn’t do that.”

For an interval the officer conferred with his subordinates, then turned to Logan.

“Sorry, Logan, but I haven’t the authority to turn him loose. Accessory to the fact—an accomplice.” He beckoned to Hendricks and Lee. “Come on, we have to go.”

Logan blocked the officer’s path. He pointed to the wall.

“There’s the ’phone,” he said desperately. “Get your Chief and find out.”

“That’s fair enough,” the man conceded. He put the call through and sat down to wait.

Save for an occasional sob that escaped Anne, the room was silent. She stood with her back to the men, a handkerchief pressed to her eyes, struggling bravely to control the grief that wracked her slender body. Lee sat with head bowed on his manacled wrists. Logan was slumped forward in his chair, staring at the floor. Arlen tried to roll a cigarette but the tobacco escaped through his shaking fingers and he gave up the attempt.

The minutes dragged interminably. The tick of the clock was like the sound of hammer strokes; the scraping of a chair like the grinding of brakes. Outside, the Chinamen, resigned to their fate, set up a laughing chatter. Arlen’s nerves were on edge. “Make them stop that damned noise,” he said harshly.

The shrill sound of the ’phone was like a fire-gong in the silence. There was a stirring and scraping of chairs. The officer strode quickly to the wall and lifted the receiver.

Anne swung about, her eyes eager, tense. She saw the listener nod his head at intervals. “O. K.” he said finally, slammed the receiver back on its hook and crossed the room to the bowed prisoner.

“It’s all right, Mr. Lee, we don’t want you,” he said gently as he removed the handcuffs. “Come on, boys. Let’s beat it.”

The shock of relief was too much for the elderly man’s over-wrought nerves. His head dropped forward, lolling like a knot in a wet towel, and but for Logan’s watchfulness he would have slipped to the floor.

They stood over Jack Lee as he lay in his room, and under their ministrations saw the old face revive; life flowed for a time back again.

“Anne dear,” the weak voice whispered, “I’m sorry I— Kiss me, little girl, and say the twenty-third psalm—’cause I’m going to leave you before long.”

“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I—I shall fear no evil. Thy—” But she could go no farther.

Arlen saw the colour drain from the stricken man’s face until it was as white as the pillow on which the snowy head rested. He touched Logan on the shoulder significantly and the two men tip-toed from the room and shut the door.

Logan sat down heavily and covered his face with his hands. Arlen moved out doors. There was a suffocating feeling in his throat and something blinded his vision so that he stumbled over the wash-bench by the door.

Five minutes later Logan was washing in the basin outside the kitchen door when he heard Anne scream. Throwing the towel on its hook he made a leap for the old man’s bedroom and flung the door wide.

Anne was on her knees by the bedside, sobbing hysterically. On the bed the old man lay limply in his tattered, mud-stained clothes, his snow-white head slumped sideways, one wrinkled, work-worn hand outside the covers.

Logan crossed to the bed but he had only to look at the wrinkled face to perceive that Jack Lee was dead. He tenderly closed the faded eyes and pulled the sheet over the features. Then he placed his hand on the girl’s desperately clutching fingers.

“Come away, Anne,” he said, a wealth of tenderness in his voice. “You can’t help by staying here now. Arlen and I will look after him.”

The touch of his hand seemed to soothe her. Her sobbing gradually subsided. After a little she let him help her from the room, but when he looked into her eyes he saw that they remained wide with horror.

“The shame killed him,” she whispered through trembling lips. “Poor old Grandad.” Then she stretched her arms before her on the table and sobbed afresh.

Logan could not understand what gave him his unwonted courage. He leaned over and touched his lips to the nape of her neck. “Anne, dear,” he said huskily.

Lonely, desperate with grief, the girl longed to be comforted. She came to her feet, her eyes swimming with tears. “Oh, Tom, you—you are such a dear.” She threw her arms about his neck and pillowed her head on his breast.

Logan was filled with a pulsing emotion that held him speechless and shaken. Anne in his arms—clinging to him! He felt everything—an exaltation like a man leading a race, like a man flying, like that of a man

bequeathed sudden riches. The fragrance of her hair filled his nostrils. He touched his lips to the top of her golden head. His arms enfolded her. It was as if he were tall, handsome, rich and educated. Now they would be going through the world together, she beautiful but thinking him good enough for her. She thought him as worthy as other men who had a chance and had made something of themselves, men whom life had not abandoned. A surge of happiness swept through him. He held her close and murmured words of consolation.

It was upon this scene that Arlen entered. Seeing that he was unobserved he retreated hastily.

CHAPTER XXI

THEY buried Jack Lee in the little plot at the foot of the hill, among the poplar trees beside the singing stream.

On the day of the funeral, dawn broke with a heavy mist hanging over the lake and the gloom-shrouded house, a drizzle of rain falling. Before the services were over a wind arose that drove the rain horizontally, lashing the windows, droning mournfully through the dried leaves of the cottonwoods and forming rivulets in the rutted road.

The mourners, the greater number men and women of advanced years, filled the spacious rooms to overflowing. Groups stood on the verandah and blocked the doors. Old, whiskered men stood with bowed heads; black-clothed women tip-toed about. There was a heavy scent of flowers; an odour of wet clothes and vitiated air. The pastor's voice rose above the storm in a eulogy of the departed. Men blew their noses and women dabbed at their reddened eyes with inefficient handkerchiefs.

Arlen breathed a sigh of relief when the trying ordeal was over and the last car with its silent load of passengers slithered splashingly down the hill, through the mud, and disappeared in the mist.

Two days later, Anne's great-aunt arrived from California with a chauffeur and a maid. She was tall, slender, fur-clad and distinguished. She wore glasses looped to her ear with a fine gold chain. Her hair, snow-white, and she had plenty of it, was combed back and made into a soft knob at the back of her head. Old-fashioned earrings of beaten gold set with onyx, and the poise of her head, lent her slimness an air of hauteur, but her eyes were soft and kind and blue.

Watching the meeting of the two women, noting the tenderness in the elderly lady's eyes as they followed Anne about, Arlen was somewhat prepared for the shock when the visitor announced that Anne was leaving with her the following day.

"A girl like Anne," she said gently, "shouldn't be tied here in the wilderness. She's one of the mental type and has been working like a drudge. I'm alone and I want her to live with me. I think she's a darling. I would have had her with me long ago if I'd known the circumstances," she finished sadly.

True, to a certain extent, Arlen thought. Anne must be tired of the long hours of toil, dust and heat in the summer, and cold and blizzards in the

winter. Yet he could not imagine her as being happy for long under the conventions of city life.

He said casually, "Do you mean that Anne is to live with you permanently?"

The old blue eyes studied the speaker keenly.

"Has Anne associations here that she'll find difficult to break?"

"No, no," he hastily assured her, "but she loves the outdoors."

"Anne can come and go as she chooses," she told him. The relieved look on Arlen's face brought an understanding twinkle to the old lady's eyes.

Logan's heart grew heavy when he learned that Anne was to leave. As the hour for her departure drew near, blank despondency fell upon him like a cloud. Dressed for the occasion in his new blue suit he brought Anne's bag, stowed it away and then, embarrassed, stood by the car.

"You look nice, Anne dear," the old lady said as the girl came from the house.

Anne did look well. Her wide, sad eyes, her full, sweet mouth, her willow-slim body, her cloud of lovely hair, the brilliant sheen of her brown silk dress made of it all something infinitely lovely and adorable—a kind of dryad graciousness.

The girl threw her arms about Logan's shoulders, and kissed him on the cheek. "Good-bye, Tom." She turned and gave her hand to Arlen. Her eyes brimming, her face averted, she winked determinedly as she said good-bye. And when again she turned to face them, tears were coursing down her cheeks so that the fields and the mountains and the old home blurred before her eyes. "Good-bye," she said chokingly. "Good-bye."

The big car swung about, rolled silently down the hill and turned the corner. A tiny handkerchief fluttered from the rear seat until the car was lost in a fringe of poplars.

For a long interval the men stood silent, staring at the road below. Logan touched a thick finger to the spot where Anne's lips had touched his cheek. "Goddlemighty!" he said. "Goddlemighty!"

As though treading on air, a feeling of ecstasy pervading his being, Logan strode briskly down the hill. Nearing his homestead the sound of hammers brought a smile of satisfaction to his face. He stopped and with hands on his hips proudly surveyed his property.

Fall had brought the usual slackening of work to Lightning Creek Ranch. Logan had given up his position as foreman and was now devoting his

energies to the development of his beloved homestead. His own labours, not unskilled, augmented by two carpenters, had wrought a remarkable change in his ranch.

The money won on Anne's horse was put to good use. A temporary shed housed building materials. A frame building on a knoll among the protecting poplars which dwarfed his old home into insignificance was rapidly taking shape and form. Back of this the foundation for a new barn was being laid, and on the fertile meadow in the rear several acres of newly-ploughed soil showed darkly against the dead brown stubble.

Pat, curled on the bunk, rose and stretched as Logan entered the cabin, leaped to the floor and with a purring note of welcome weaved in and out rubbing his fur against the man's legs.

While he swiftly changed in to working clothes Logan talked to his pet.

"Pat, you lazy old sinner, you haven't done a damn thing since I left. Haven't even washed the breakfast dishes. And another thing is that they won't stand for you sleeping on the beds when we move into the new house. So you better start practising right now." He leaned over and stroked the animal. "Pat," he laughed, "she kissed me. What do you know about that?" Whistling happily he hurried outside to resume his pleasant labours.

A strange quietness that astonished Arlen in its quality of lonesomeness settled over the ranch after Anne's departure. He threw himself into work with redoubled vigour in an effort to rid himself of the depression that had seized firm hold upon him. Through the days his mind and hands were occupied with many things, but during the long, lonely evenings time moved on leaden wings.

On a night about a week after Anne's going, Arlen had finished his lonely dinner and the Indian girl had completed her day's work and gone. He sat down by the fire and rolled a cigarette. Glancing moodily about the room he thought of other evenings when all had been well. Anne on the fireplace bench, the firelight glinting in her hair; Anne at the table, reading, her face cupped in her hands; Anne sewing, her head bent low, her heavy hair falling about her face; and Anne speaking, her eyes sometimes raising to his, her voice soft and low.

The final picture of her as she stood on the steps of the car, with the sunshine outlining her clear-cut profile, the softness in her tear-dimmed eyes, the poise of her lovely body, stayed with him throughout the long days and disturbed him in his dreams.

He smiled wintrily. Why carry the farce of his engagement to Audrey any farther? He had not heard from her since her visit to the ranch. He could never marry her. His thoughts were all of Anne. It would be despicable to marry a girl you didn't love—contemptuous too. He was in love with Anne. Yes, desperately in love and his infatuation was growing every day. He'd write to Audrey tomorrow and break their engagement. He felt like a brute, but he'd have to do it.

He reached for a newspaper and settled back in his chair. Turning the pages idly his eyes suddenly became riveted with amazement. A photograph of Anton Czersky, dressed in flannels, a cane hanging on his arm, and beside it Audrey in riding costume. A two-column space carried the announcement of their engagement. The notice was the usual blurb. A statement of the future bride's high standing in Vancouver society; Anton Czersky's international fame as an artist; and, for that much desired touch of romance, the writer hinted that the groom-elect was a member of a royal family exiled from Europe for political reasons.

For a moment anger superseded Arlen's amazement. It was not like Audrey to do a rotten thing like this. As far as he knew he was still betrothed to Audrey. It made a fool of him. With all her faults, Audrey had a high sense of honour. It must be that she had written to him and her letters had gone astray.

He searched the motley heap of mail that had arrived that day. No, there was no letter. He ran hurriedly through the papers and packages. He found a small package addressed in Audrey's hand-writing. He tore it open. A diamond ring flashed up at him. Arlen sank slowly into a chair. He was thoroughly angry. To send back the ring with no explanation made it doubly contemptuous. He couldn't believe it of her. He spread out the wrappings in a vain hope that she had enclosed a note.

For a time he sat frowning, mulling the matter over in his mind. He recalled the evening she had spent at the ranch. Her display of tenderness to Anne as she was leaving had touched him. He had taken her in his arms and kissed her. At the time he was surprised at Audrey's show of emotion as it seemed out of proportion to the occasion and besides she was always self-possessed; not given to shedding tears. She had clung to him—her eyes wet. And when she said good-bye— Now he knew. He remembered her words. "I'm saying good-bye to you, Bruce old dear." Yes, he thought, the words "good-bye" had carried an emphasis, a finality of tone that had escaped him. To her, those brief words had broken their engagement and she had thought

he understood. He felt ashamed of doubting Audrey and was equally ashamed of the sigh of relief that escaped him. He was free.

Winter drew on, heralded by a lowering sun and a lowering sky. And one day a storm from the north swept across the country. Savage winds, driving sleet and snow before them, hurtled across the lake, lashed at the windows, tore at the roofs as with giant fingers and roared through the bare branches of the cottonwoods. The storm abated. There came nights of still bitter cold that locked the lake in a solid, glaring sheet of ice.

Logan was happy. All bills paid he had a snug balance in the bank. He was now a man of affairs; of some importance in the world. No more following the trap-line through snow and bitter cold, sleeping in rude shacks and carrying huge packs of foodstuffs over mountain trails. The roof and walls of his new building were completed. He laboured steadily in the warm interior, laying floors, sheathing walls, and painting, while he dreamed of the rosy future.

His face flushed with pleasure when Arlen handed him his first letter from Anne. He thrust it casually into a side pocket of his buckskin coat but did not withdraw his hand. His fingers remained about the mauve-coloured envelope until he reached his cabin.

Carefully he slit the envelope with the blade of his jack-knife and for five rapt minutes he was lost to the outside world. Pat, rubbing purringly against his master's legs was completely ignored.

By and by he raised his head and sighed happily. He turned to the first page and again read the letter. His hand reached down to his pet. The animal's soft fur crackled as Pat arched his back in response to each stroke of the big hand.

"Pat," he said finally, "Anne's having a whale of a time. Meeting lots of nice folks, going to shows, dancing, riding, boating, swimming, and she's taking up music lessons again and says that her aunt's got her a tutor—whatever that is. S'pose it's one of them new-fangled cornet things. But say, Pat. Darned if I can imagine Anne blowing a horn—can you? Anyway, in spite of all the people she's meeting and all the good times, she says that she thinks of me often and hopes the house is going up all right. And look, Pat. Look at this. See how she ends her letter. 'Lots of love from Anne.' "

He sat for a time in pleasant contemplation.

"Pat," he said seriously. "It's almost Christmas and New Year but I won't go to Pinchbeck to celebrate and I won't send for any booze. Going to stick right here and work. I'm on the water wagon for keeps—never again.

Anne says that she's coming back in the spring. I'll have the house all ready when she gets here."

He took a writing-pad from a shelf, grasped a pen in his heavy fingers and began laboriously writing an answer to Anne's letter. There were frequent pauses when he would scratch his head and frown as he struggled for words. Unnoticed, the fire died out and the room grew cold. Several times he destroyed a sheet and began afresh. At last he carefully read the finished product and sighed with proud satisfaction.

Arlen's letters from Anne were of an impersonal nature, dealing with practical matters of the farm with an occasional reference to her social activities in the south. Arlen's replies, perforce, were of like kind. He enclosed the newspaper announcement of Audrey's engagement to Anton Czersky, but this method of apprising her of his freedom elicited no comment in her reply.

Weeks of bitter cold followed the coming of the New Year. Gradually the sun rose higher in the sky sending its warming rays over the land, loosening winter's icy grip. Swellings appeared on the tips of the cottonwoods in the yard of the Lee house and one evening Arlen's heart was gladdened by the sound of a robin's joyful song.

The snow melted and there was a warm breath of spring in the air. Green sprouts thrust through the roots of tawny dead grass of the year before. Buds opened and the fresh cottonwood leaves filled the air with their heavy perfume.

Spring came with the flashing of bright wings, the song of birds and the odour of a reviving earth. Cattle were turned out on the ranges to crop the first green shoots; broody hens wandered from their winter quarters, clucking and scratching for the downy little balls that cheeped about them. Frogs lifted their voices in the gladsome refrain of spring. Yes, winter was done, Arlen thought, but not done as concerned the benefits derived from its fierce assaults. High above, every depression was filled with a snowy white blanket. The crops would grow as they had not grown for years. There was no danger of a drought the coming summer. The cattle had come safely through and were in prime condition. A prosperous year lay ahead. Arlen threw himself into the work with joyous abandon.

It was on a bright May morning that Anne's delayed message arrived at Lightning Creek Ranch. Arlen was ploughing with the tractor in the field below the barn when he was called to the 'phone. He released the wheel to one of his men and ran for the house.

A moment later he appeared on the hill gesticulating excitedly and shouting.

“Hey, Logan. Anne’s in Pinchbeck. Get ready and come with me.”

“Goddlemighty!” Logan panted as he sped down the hill.

Pat’s back arched with fright as Logan burst excitedly through the door. Washing, shaving, dressing in feverish haste, Logan addressed the cat.

“She’s here, Pat! She’s here! Where the hell’s my shirt?” His unaccustomed fingers struggled impatiently with a collar and tie. “I’m going to meet her, Pat. How d’you s’pose she’ll like the house? Where are my braces? Have you been wearing them, Pat?”

At the sound of the motor coming down the hill he dragged his new wide hat from under the bunk, gave it a hasty brush with the sleeve of his coat and jammed it on his head. He searched vainly for the red silk handkerchief. “Pat,” he chuckled, “take a look and see if I’ve got my pants on.” Then he bolted for the door.

There was no time lost on the road. Logan, always nervous in a car, was now thoroughly alarmed. His one hand engaged in keeping his hat on his head, his other hand clung to the car. His muttered protests were lost in the rush of air as the car sped down the road at a terrific pace.

Arlen brought the car to a quick stop in front of the hotel. They ran up the steps and into the office, their eyes darting eagerly about. Arlen strode to the desk and scanned the register. Logan poked Arlen with his elbow.

“Gosh all hemlock!” he muttered hoarsely, his eyes bugged out. “Look! Is that Anne?”

Arlen turned. He felt his heart pounding. In his imagination he had often pictured Anne’s homecoming; had rehearsed the words he would employ in his greeting. But now he stood staring, momentarily bereft of speech.

Anne was coming down the stairs. Anne in a grey tailored suit, grey stockings, grey shoes and a tight blue hat that matched the blue of her eyes. The rough tan had entirely gone from her skin, leaving it a creamy white. She was smiling—her wide eyes were happy at last. As she glided quickly toward them the intake of Logan’s breath was almost like a hiss. “Goddlemighty!” he whispered to himself.

She gave Arlen her hand and he stammered a welcome and an apology for keeping her waiting. She patted Logan’s arm affectionately. Surprise and consternation flowed from Logan’s honest eyes. Anne laughed at his uncontrollable dismay.

“What’s the matter, Tom?” she asked.

Logan stuttered. He tried to find words to make her understand what it was that so overwhelmed him.

“Goddle —— —— gosh, Anne, but you’re different,” he finally blurted out. “I—I hardly knew you. You’ve changed a lot.”

“Anne,” Arlen begged when he had regained his composure, “take your hat off, please.”

Anne’s colour heightened. She complied with his request and the hair Arlen loved, a shade darker, done in a new and amazingly effective way, fluffed about her head and blurred the delicate contour of her face.

He reached for her hat. “Keep it off!” he commanded, his eyes glowing. And then added, “I was afraid that you might have adopted the new fad and let it grow.”

Anne drove the car home. Hatless, the wind whipping her hair here and there, her eyes alight with happiness, her head thrown back, she drank in deep breaths of the perfumed spring air.

Arlen sat next to Anne. At times when they turned a corner her body swayed against him. He stole a glance at her. She was the same adorable Anne. There was no paint on her red lips, no rouge on her cheeks, and her eyebrows retained their natural curves. City life, he decided, had not made Anne one of the herd.

Logan, on the outside, was silent. He was numb. There was no feeling in him. When Anne had bought the new clothes in Pinchbeck a year before it had worked a change in the girl that startled him. But now— “Suffering fried eels!” he whispered to himself.

The girl drove slowly, revelling in the glorious beauty of a Cariboo springtime, the beauty of her native land—the land she loved. It was late afternoon when Logan stepped out of the car with low-voiced thanks and hurried to his shack.

As the motor roared up the steep hill to the house the occupants sat silent. Arlen unloaded Anne’s baggage on the verandah and drove the car away to the garage.

Arlen came to a quick decision. He felt his hands trembling as he walked swiftly up the hill. He thought he would find her outdoors. He walked round the house and down to the orchard. The apple trees were a mass of blossoms. Branches were loaded with their fragrance.

At the end of the orchard she stood, arms uplifted, pulling a scented branch down to breathe its perfume. The sun caught her hair. It was the colour of the golden sky, in the west—of sunshine.

She saw him coming and stood there, unmoving, only her eyes following him. As he reached her she let the branch go crashing upwards, scattering over them a windfall of leaves and scented blossoms. She laughed a tremulous, uncertain laugh as she shook the petals from her hair.

He held out his arms to her. “Anne, you sweet thing! I love you. I want you!” he said huskily.

She swayed toward him. She reached out. Her eyes became suffused with tears of joy, tears that brought a sob to her throat. “Oh, Bruce—Bruce —”

He seized her in his arms and buried his face in her hair and he was saying again and again, as though he could find no other words, “Anne, you sweet thing! I love you! I want you!”

Presently she lifted her head. “Bruce, Bruce! I’m so happy!” She laughed through her tears.

He held her closer. “Anne, dear,” he whispered, his lips touching hers. “We must tell Tom.”

She nodded a slow assent, and by and by they walked down the hill.

Logan’s labours did not cease with his duties as foreman of Lightning Creek Ranch. Since early spring he had worked every evening on his homestead; worked until darkness fell. He was harrowing a field of freshly-ploughed ground when Anne and Arlen turned up the path. They stood with their elbows resting on the rail awaiting Logan’s return from the far end of the meadow.

Spying them from the distance Logan swung the horses about near the fence and stopped. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his shirt and called a greeting.

“Tom,” Arlen said simply, “we’re going to be married.”

Logan’s thick body stiffened; rigid lines stood out on his sweating face and his strong hands clenched on the reins, shook a little, but he looked up at Arlen with slow, brave eyes.

“Why, that’ll be fine, Bruce. I—I hope you’ll both be very happy.”

He spoke to his horses. The colour somewhat gone from his ruddy face, his back stiff and straight, he moved away.

Arlen stirred restlessly. For an interval Anne's eyes followed the retreating figure, then she turned slowly away. Hand in hand they walked down to the lake shore.

Logan entered his cabin with slow and tired steps, sat down on his bunk and buried his face in his hands. For a long time he sat quiet, motionless. Finally he said, "Pat, I've got a head that's filled with laughing-gas instead of bone. Imagine me thinking that a girl like Anne would have anything to do with a guy like me."

Again he relapsed into silence. The shadows under the poplars outside the windows lengthened and deepened until the interior of the cabin grew dim, but still the man made no move to light the lamp and prepare his evening meal.

Logan stirred. "Come here, Pat," he commanded. The cat sprang to the man's knees and rubbed his furry head against his master's cheek.

In Logan's visioning he saw the doors of a Chinese restaurant and heard the sounds of laughter. Men sat at a counter or hunched over tables at which half-breed Indian girls served. There were lights and gaiety, gleam of white cloths, clink of china, the blaring of a phonograph and a medley of cheerful voices. He saw himself, in his town-going clothes, pushing his way through the door. A sloe-eyed girl with dusky hair flashed a smile of welcome as she hurried to meet him.

"Pat," he said, his voice muffled in the cat's smooth hair, "you'll have to get along alone for a while. I've got to go to Pinchbeck to see the dentist and have my teeth fixed."

Passing Logan's homestead Anne stopped. She stared over at the darkened windows of Logan's log shack. The tiny old cabin looked lonely and forlorn beside the resplendent new building that loomed grandly above it. Arlen heard Anne draw in a long breath. He took her hand. "Yes, I know, Anne," he said tenderly as he led her away.

At the brink of the hill they turned. From the lake came the faint call of feeding ducks; the surface was cloaked in a light mist that the rising moon silvered. The carpet of waters, apple-green by day, crimson and gold at sunset, was a deep purple now.

There was a great happiness in their hearts when at last they turned to continue their homeward journey. They felt that the song of birds and the evening breeze that set the leaves above their heads softly whispering were psalms of thanksgiving.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Whispering Leaves* by Alex. Philip]