PAINTED PONIES

ALAN LE MAY

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CHAPTER I

Luck of Roaring River

1

A POINT of light came into view beyond the rise, a yellow light in the yellow dusk, like a tawny diamond in sand; and Slide Morgan reined his tired horse to a crawling walk. With an easy movement the rider lounged sideways in the saddle and looked back, leisurely examining the trail behind. The mouse-gray horse sagged to a stop and went into a systematic fit of blowing, a habit of his; the bellows-like heave of his ribs swayed the man in the saddle, and waved the loose flares of the rider's chaps.

"Ain't comin'," the man muttered, as if to keep the horse informed of the situation in hand. "Move along, some."

He heaved a sigh of relief, for the day had brought happenings which he neither liked nor understood; then he settled squarely into his stirrups again as the tired gray horse plodded on up the rise.

Flaky dried spume showed on the mouse-gray hide at the edges of the saddle blanket, before and behind; Morgan rubbed away some of it with slender-fingered hands. Below the saddle skirts the animal's coat lay in tough spikes, where muddy water had dried into the harsh hair; cannons and fetlocks were patched with caking mud.

Morgan himself was not much more presentable. His worn blue shirt was wrinkled askew, the result of swimming the North Platte at a point not commonly chosen; and his chaps were heavy with the dust that had clung to them as they dried. Everything about the outfit looked tired and over-traveled—except, perhaps, the man's face, which remained as pleasantly casual in expression as it might have been just after breakfast on a quiet morning.

It was a young face, happy-go-lucky in spite of its straight bony nose and prominent cheek bones; a face as friendly in expression as that of a six months' pup. An ancient saying has it that a man's eyes show what he was born with, while his mouth shows what he has done with it. Slide Morgan's dark eyes were intelligent and comprehending; but his mouth was leisurely and easy-smiling, with no trace of any faculty of rigidity or compression.

From a pocket he dug a wet red ball of handkerchief, and rubbed the dust from his face and neck; and removing his broad sombrero, ran the soggy rag over his shock of limp black hair.

Other lights were now raised as they topped the rise, lights of open doorways, and windows only partially transparent. Below the man and horse lay Roaring River, a handful of a dozen careless buildings arranged on either side of a street space almost as broad as long.

Just beyond the little cluster of buildings a dark, twisting line of willows and sedges marked the course of Red Creek, a stagnant trickle of water that lay in flat pools, averaging perhaps six inches in depth; this was the stream that gave the town its name. South and to the left, five pistol shots away, swam the slow, majestic reach of the North Platte. Into the main street, then out onto the prairie again, wandered the rutted old Overland Trail to Salt Lake City, a wagon track deep in dust; this, more than any other thing, gave the tiny town its reason for life.

The dim yellow dusk was swiftly fading into a blanketing gray that would soon be black; and the golden lights of Roaring River gradually became more bright against the thickening dark. An intangible scarf of smoke hung over the hamlet, woven of the soft smoke-ribbons from half-a-dozen cooking fires.

Man and horse proceeded down the slope at a jog trot; and presently the shambling buildings took on detail as they entered the broad square of street. Almost without exception the dozen frame buildings boasted false fronts. Prominent among them was the only two-story building in town—a great square structure, sumptuously lighted, and announcing itself as the "Happy Chance Hotel & Bar." Across from it stood "Harker's General Store and N. Platte Bank," and next to it was the "Post Office and Genl. Store." A dim hovel was "Wilson's Restaurant."

There was one other open saloon; the rest of the frame buildings were closed, relics of the brief day of a hope that had died. Here and there a dim light showed in one or another of the old wrecks where some human derelict had taken possession, as unheeded as the haunting rats. Morgan noticed the great shapeless heaps of tin cans, slowly rusting into oblivion between the buildings.

That was Roaring River in the June of 1878.

At one time, a few years before, it had been believed that the railroad, striking westward over the plains, was going to come to Roaring River, following the old Overland Trail to the salt sea. By daylight there could still be seen sketchy outlines of decayed corrals, which enthusiasts had built in

preparation for the day when Roaring River should be the gateway to all the west. But the day never came, for the railroad chose to follow the south fork of the Platte, instead.

To the north of it, in 1878, there still lay a vast Indian country, roughly bounded on the east by the Missouri River, on the west by the Great Divide, and extending northward to the limit of territory. Since the gold rush of 1876 numbers of miners had infiltrated the mountain regions of this country; the beginnings of Deadwood already stood in the Black Hills. But although between the Plattes the good cattle ranges were taken up, only a few of the boldest ranchers had pushed into the Indian country to the north of the Salt Lake Trail.

On the trail itself, on the very edge of the land of cattle, Roaring River clung precariously, a rendezvous for border cowmen, and a pausing place for the trains of covered wagons that now hardly ever came.

To-night the most conspicuous features of Roaring River were the huddled rows of horses, a score or more of stock-saddled mounts, tied along the hitch racks.

"Guess it's pay day," Morgan informed his horse.

He rode somewhat aimlessly down the south side of the street, and paused before the Happy Chance. The door was open to the warm night, and within, golden in the comparatively bright light, he could see careless figures, each comfortably slouching, glass in hand. A slender young woman leaned against the bar, endowed with the fictitious beauty that a distant glimpse conveys; Morgan caught a brief impression of a studied curl, resting on a shoulder that gleamed white in the yellow light.

Now that he was within hailing distance of people again, a swift wave of loneliness came upon Morgan, with a sense of vast unreal distances, and an odd tightening of the throat; and though he desired above all things to join the throng in the brightly lighted bar, something within him held him back. Dismounting, he tied the pony with slow hands; and wasted time over the gray's cinchas before he jerked his hat aslant and sauntered toward the door.

As he reached the entrance a smother of hoofs sounded to his left; four riders had entered the street, coming in abreast at a jogging trot. The horse on the right was a pale gray—almost white. Morgan suppressed an uneasy desire to quicken his step, and turned to a stranger who lounged by the door.

"Whose fog horse?" he asked as casually as he could.

"Marve Conklin's; constable," was the reply.

A slight crawling sensation occurred under Slide Morgan's hat. He did a little careful thinking, but without any notable result; and so, with an interesting feeling of uncertainty, he stepped into the big saloon.

2

To the cowboy the Happy Chance was a blaze of gayety, after the silences of the prairies and the dim twilight of the street. Nearly two score of cowmen, of all ages and states of attire, thronged the great square room. Hanging kerosene lamps, many of them elaborate with colored glass pendants, so filled the bar with an almost brilliant light that no shadow remained. Two long counters on each side of the room were of polished wood, battle-scarred, but retaining an air of elegance; behind each was a long mirror, crowned with rows of horns, and embuttressed with ranks of bottles at its base.

An upright piano, a little jangling in key, sang tinnily at the back, drummed upon with energetic abandon by a dissolute old man with a goatee. Above the swift, clattering chords of this old instrument rose the living hum of male voices, cut through by shouted words, strident laughter, or whoops from the crowd in the corner about the roulette wheel. There was a smell of horses and leather from the riders, a familiar reek of alcoholic spirits; and overlaying these smells with a genial, enticing warmth was the odor of roast beef from a steaming barbecue at the end of the right-hand bar.

Slide Morgan's eyes savored the rich brown crust of the roast wistfully, but he passed it by. Securing a single silver dollar in exchange for his pocketful of small coin, he pushed his way into the packed throng about the roulette wheel.

The cowboys were jammed against the layout four deep; necks craned as the croupier spun the wheel, all eyes following the little white pellet that raced about the sides of the spinning bowl; and as the ball came to rest in a numbered socket a grunting "Oh!" came spontaneously from the crowd. Morgan wedged his way into the second rank.

For several minutes he watched the play, clutching his lone dollar in his palms. It was not easy to find an open number to his liking; as fast as the croupier's rake cleaned the board, lean brown hands reached in from all sides to litter the numbered squares with gold pieces and stacks of silver dollars. But presently he wormed his arm through the packed front rank, and laid his own single silver disc upon the seven.

A corded hand thrust down beside his from another direction as his dollar rang against the wood. Morgan sensed, rather than heard a scorching oath. Then his eyes kindled furiously as he saw the hand flick his dollar out of the way, and place a flat stack of four gold pieces in its place. His own coin came to rest upon the six.

Morgan peered savagely between the surrounding heads to see who had executed this inexcusable affront. A cold eye, curiously expressionless and light in color, met his insolently.

"Get off that number," said Morgan in a grating voice.

There was no reply. The curiously light eyes of the offender suddenly flashed to the wheel; the forward sway of the crowd told both that the galloping white ball of fortune was on its way.

"I'll even that up," Morgan said distinctly, and turned his own eyes to the game.

Rattling and skimming, the little white marble caromed about the speeding bowl; tried to settle; bounced twice; and came to rest. For a moment no one could discern the number on which the ball had stopped; then, as the wheel revolved more slowly, there came that growling "Oh!" from the crowd.

"It's the six," a voice said.

Into Morgan's hand were counted two gold pieces and a heavy stack of silver dollars, as the croupier raked the board and the game went on.

Exultantly Slide backed out of the crowd. A few moments later he sunk his teeth into the grateful warmth of roast beef.

3

As Morgan bit into his third sandwich, fragments of the conversation about him began to filter to him through the fragrant steam of the beef under his nose. He found himself pausing to listen to some of the remarks.

"Hear the Horse Creek outfit's put up five thousand gold for the ears o' Injun Frank." The low voice drifted to Morgan across a burly shoulder.

"That's Vigilante blah," said a dark, sharp-faced man.

"Wouldn't say such. Not too loud. Might start arguments. Considerable shootin' fools has flocked over to the Vigilantes, recent."

"Blah."

"See Marve Conklin's back—empty-handed," said a third voice, husky and deep.

"Hear Marve says not," said the burly man.

"Reckon if he had ears in his pockets the world would know it," said the sharp-faced one.

"I heard somethin' more," said the burly man, in a small, close-lipped voice. "I heard Marve aims to take Injun Frank in, 'fore the night's out, by not no more than reachin' out his hand."

The voices became hard to understand; not whispered, but casually constrained, so that their import was almost lost in the general hum, the clatter of the tin piano, the ring of glasses on the bars, and the chink of restless coin.

"Must figure he's pretty close by," suggested the dark man, eyeing the burly speaker.

The answer was barely audible to Slide Morgan's straining ears.

"In this room."

The three fell silent, and presently separated tacitly, as men who have probed too deeply into a ticklish subject, and at the wrong time. Morgan bought more bread and beef, speculating upon this Indian Frank, whose fortunes in some mysterious way seemed to border on his own.

Then a voice began to sing behind him, mockingly intoning his own particular song:

"Easy swing, easy slide,
Easy eat, easy ride,—"

He turned to find a short, bow-legged cowboy who sung stridently through his nose.

"Jake Downey!" Morgan shouted; and the short cowboy's face burst into an exultant grin.

Slide snatched the man's hat down over his eyes, seized him in his arms, and executed three waltzing whirls that brought them up against the opposite bar with a bang.

"Is that the way to treat a purty near absolute stranger?" Downey asked. "You old son-of-a-gun! Who yuh ridin' fer?"

"Nobody. I just come up from down on the Solomon."

"Then yo're ridin' for me. Foreman, I am!"

"Whoopee! Come up some, huh?"

"Not up so much. Old Seth Russell gimme the meanest, stinkin'est job he could cook up. Three riders an' myself, stuck up here at the Hickory Lookout camp, waitin' round to git kilt."

"Where's Hickory Lookout?"

"Well, yuh ride way up yonder along Red Crick, an' when yore plumb wore out, that's it. Seth's shoved two thousand Box R head across the Platte into Injun country; also enough head o' horse to be a nuisance, and a bait to git murdered with. Me an' the boys aim to keep the stock out from among the Injuns, an' the other way round."

"Sounds real attractive," Morgan agreed.

"An' now, to add corruption onto misery, two o' the boys has lit out with a gang o' crazy men fer the Black Hills. The whole mob here has gone clean nutty over somebody findin' a little piece o' gold up there. Prob'ly they'll git kilt on the way. I hope so. Anyway yo're signed on."

"I s'pose."

"Say—you know Talky Peters?"

"Nope."

As Jake Downey half turned to look about over his shoulder, Morgan noticed that a deliberate sureness of movement was replacing the nervous activity that Jake once had shown. His blunt red face was thickening through the jowls. Sixteen years before he had been a rider for the Pony Express; but that was before Slide Morgan's time.

A lean, sandy young man now strolled up with outspread ears, his air quizzically mournful. A smouldering cigar drooped at a steep slant from one corner of his mouth, counter-balancing the backward tilt of his hat with peculiar effect. He had the expression of one who looks upon an act of mortal folly, with a superior foreknowledge of the result.

"This is him," said Jake. "Slide, meet up with Talky Peters. Talky, shake hands with Slide Morgan."

The two men shook hands gravely.

"Both goin' to ride with me," Jake explained. "Yo're all I got. I could purty near cry."

They had a drink.

"I think my luck's leakin'," said Slide. "What say we have a turn at the wheel?"

Both declined, and Morgan left them to shoulder back into the crowd about the spinning bowl. He noticed a lean face, with thin lips about which hung a faint trace of a mocking smile; and a pair of curiously light eyes, expressionlessly set upon his. It was the man who had thrust Slide's silver dollar off of his chosen number. Certainly Morgan had no quarrel with the man now, and he grinned. The light eyes dropped to the wheel without sign of recognition. In the next moment Slide forgot the man in the shifting fortunes of the game.

If Morgan's luck were ebbing it showed no sign of it yet. He lost repeatedly for every time that he won; but one win at roulette covers many a loss. Morgan's cash resources began to grow. As he won he placed larger stakes, and won again. The whirling bowl held him with a hypnotic lure; the faces about him hung in a golden blur of tobacco smoke, veiled in a haziness with which his many drinks had much to do.

The little white ball bounded and skipped in the whirling bowl, aimlessly deciding the fortunes of the men who played; and again and again, with an uncanny repetition, the lot fell to Morgan. How long he stood there watching that dizzy wheel he did not know; but as he played he lost all count of how much he had won, knowing only that his pockets were becoming heavy and bulging with silver and gold.

When a hand with iron fingers gripped his elbow and dragged him out of the staring throng, he reeled away with the belief that he had made a killing, a historic slaughter, one that would be told of for years. He thought that he must have all but broken the game.

"Leggo!" he snapped at Jake Downey, the man with the commanding grip. Morgan's eyes were red and smouldering. "Yuh want to smear my luck? Leggo, I say! I'm gonta break that wheel!"

"Time yuh bought a drink," said Jake gruffly. Then, growling into his ear, "Fer God's sake come over here! D'yuh wanta die? There's somethin' goin' on here, an' *I don't like the looks*!"

Slide subsided, and allowed himself to be led to the bar, where he called for drinks. Downey talked very low and rapidly into his ear. "Act like I'm tellin' yuh jokes—keep laughin'—an' when I laugh, laugh fit to die!"

He suddenly slapped Slide Morgan's shoulder, and burst into a loud guffaw. Morgan was unable to comprehend what Downey was getting at; but he was high-strung, and over-stimulated by alcohol and fortune, so that laughing was easy. He followed suit.

“What kind o’ ruckus you been in?” Jake demanded softly, his face jovial, but his voice tense.

“Don’t rightly know,” Slide answered, picking his words slowly, to conceal the thickness of his tongue. “I was ridin’, about twenty miles out, when four strangers rode out on me sudden, wavin’ their guns, an’ yellin’ for me to give up. I can’t tell yuh what was the idee. I slapped in the steel an’ struck out. I happen to be ridin’ a streak o’ horse flesh. So I shook ’em off, after a little loose swappin’ o’ lead. I didn’t hit no one. I think one of ’em was the constable; I dunno.”

They both laughed again, leaning close together on the bar.

“They got an idee yo’re Injun Frank,” Jake said. “There’s a reward out.”

“But I can prove—”

“Mebbe. But by then, if yuh ain’t lynched already, you’ll be shook loose of all this coin, an’ be rode over to Horse Crick—eighty-five miles if it’s a foot. An’ after that they’ll be so darn disappointed they’ll mebbe git kind o’ rough.”

“They ain’t takin’ me any place,” said Slide with half-drunken conviction.

Jake Downey laughed tremendously, and Slide rallied enough to imitate him.

“Do what I say,” Jake grated, dropping all parley. “Act as drunk as yuh can. I’ve hired a room upstairs. I’ll act like I’m helpin’ yuh up there. Talky Peters is puttin’ my horse under the window. Come along!”

He dragged one of Morgan’s arms across his own shoulders. Slide pretended to stagger, and Jake Downey led him to a rear corner where a narrow stairway opened. Up they went, clumping heavily and unrhythmically on the squeaking treads, like drunken men. A man with a beard, and a woman who reeked of cheap perfume, stood aside at the dim stairhead to let them pass. Then Jake turned to the right and kicked open a door of rough boards. A candle on a narrow shelf struggled perilously against the draft as they pushed into a tiny room.

Jake Downey immediately barred the door. The window was shut, and the little place was dense with airless heat, but he appeared not to notice that.

“Now you listen,” he said, “an’ listen fast. This Roaring River show is run by Abner Cade. He owns the Happy Chance, and he runs the Vigilantes we got here. An’ he’s shore fastened onto you. You’ll know him when yuh see him because his eyes is light colored, like dishwater—purty near white.”

“I had a run-in with him at the wheel,” Morgan guessed suddenly.

“No, the one playin’ roulette was Lew Cade—Ab’s brother,” Downey told him. “Shut up! You’ve shot at the constable, an’ some other Vigilantes, an’ you’ve purty near broke their wheel, an’ yuh got five thousand dollars’ reward on yore head, an’ yo’re marked fer a low, murderin’ Injun half-breed. Yuh must have upwards o’ ten thousand dollars in yore pockets right now. That makes yuh worth fifteen thousand dollars to ’em, an’ now yuh tell me yuh had a row with Ab’s brother! Anybody in yore fix wants to scorch out o’ here!”

“Oh, all right, all right,” Morgan conceded. “Anythin’ to suit.”

“Talky Peters is waitin’ down in back here, below the window. They got a man watchin’ yore horse, so Talky’s holdin’ mine fer yuh. He’ll ride with yuh—an’ he’s a lad that won’t give a inch, if it comes to shootin’ it out.”

He heaved at the parchment-paned window; it stuck, so he kicked out the tough pane. A rush of fresh air relieved the hot stagnation of the little room.

“It’s only two whoops to the ground. Now you jump!”

“Here!” said Morgan. “Take the money!”

“You fool!” snarled Downey. “Here they come!”

Morgan hesitated a second to listen. On the stairs he heard the tramp of many feet; not the loud clumping of careless men, but the quiet steps of a number that made the stair timbers creak and groan.

“Jump!” commanded Downey grimly.

With a swift grin at Jake’s exasperated face, Slide Morgan lowered himself over the window ledge, and dropped.

4

Jake Downey now found himself in a predicament not easy to explain. He reached out a quick hand to squelch the candle; then thought better of it. The approaching steps were already in the narrow hallway, and the sudden disappearance of the gleam of candle light under the door might tell its tale. He drew his gun, cocked it; the steps were just outside. There was a rumble of voices, low-pitched, incongruously casual.

Then there was the sudden sound of a door being shaken—but it was not his door. Slide Morgan’s pursuers had tackled the room next to the one they had intended.

A voice, hard in timbre but hardly above conversational pitch, said, “Open up that door!”

A moment’s pause for response brought no result. Then Jake heard a mumbled conference, immediately followed by a terrific crash of splintering wood. The window frames rattled with the shock. He could hear the hostile party cautiously investing the narrow cubicle next to his own.

Jake’s wits now returned, and he very softly unbarred the door of his room. Then he gently eased himself down onto the edge of the bed, stretching himself out full length. There came another mumbling conference; and at last the quick shifting of many feet to his door.

It was suddenly thrust open, and Jake Downey could perceive the frantic flutter of the candle in the draft, though his eyes were to all appearances shut. Some one swore in a low growl, and rushed to the window. Mutterings, and oaths. Then a man bent over him, and shook him by the shoulder.

Downey let himself flop inertly, and emitted a drunken snore.

He was shaken more violently.

“Come out o’ that!” said a voice close to his head. He was shaken again.

“Hey,” said Downey. He vaguely tried to turn onto his face.

This time he was so shaken that the bed clattered against the wall. He opened his eyes blankly, and stared up into an angry face.

The face was at once round and singularly firm in appearance, like a circular loaf of smooth-crusted bread. Square-shaved burnsides of an indeterminate color clung close to its round borders, and small eyes gleamed hotly in the wavering candle light.

“Where is he?”

“Hello, Marve,” said Jake dully. “How’s the constable business?”

“Where’s the feller yuh brang up here?” Marve Conklin insisted fiercely.

Sleepily Jake Downey looked about him, and allowed his eye to rest speculatively upon the ruined window.

“Yuh want to know what *I* think?” said he noncommittally. “I think he must ’a’ jumped out.”

“This hombre knows good an’ plenty,” said a snaggle-toothed man, turning away from the window. “Didn’t we see him give away our hand? Yuh know what *I* said, an’ say now!”

His voice, dry and malignant, came out through a dirty, tobacco-stained gray mustache. Downey thought that he had heard it before.

“Now you look here,” said Jake, shaking off the last appearance of alcoholic drowsiness. “I’m Jake Downey. Everybody here but you”—he fixed the snag-toothed man with a malevolent eye—“knows I’m a foreman with the Box R, an’ know my business, an’ leave other people’s be. The boy I brought up here is named Ben Morgan, an’ I vouch for him. If this passel o’ ugly looks is on the shoot, I say he done well to drag his freight. Yuh don’t look like yuh was figgerin’ to make this joint any safer fer honest men!”

“Don’t get so all-fired cocky,” said Marve Conklin nastily. “You’re talkin’ to the law!”

“I put a friend to bed,” said Downey. “If yuh want to take me fer it, hop on. But if I had nothin’ but a bunch o’ meddlin’ loafers back o’ me, I wouldn’t go to work an’ pull the Box R down on my head!”

“Damn the Box R!” burst out Conklin, reddening.

“Here,” said a heavy voice from the door, a voice that seemed weighted down with rocks. “Goin’ to talk all night?”

Downey turned his eyes to a square, strong, tired face in the doorway—the face of Abner Cade.

The former express rider knew Cade for a quiet-spoken, solid man, a speculator in cattle, whose word was as good as cash in hand; this although he was known to be the son of one of the most notoriously ruthless desperadoes that ever swaggered between the Plattes. His peculiar chalky-gray eyes moved from one to another of the group with a weary contempt.

“Think this is gettin’ somewhere, do yuh?”

“Guess that’s right,” conceded Marve Conklin gruffly. “Let’s get goin’, boys.”

The round-faced constable and the others crowded out of the room; Downey could hear them cursing and grumbling in their chests as they clumped along the hall and down the narrow stair. Abner Cade let them pass, then remained leaning in the doorway, one hand resting against the door frame above his hand.

“Jake, who is this Ben Morgan?”

Downey noticed again the comparatively youthful texture of the man’s face, contrasting with its mature, burdened lines; the grayness under the tan; and the sagging lower lids of the level, assured eyes.

He said, “That’s his name, Ab. Most folks call him Slide. I’ve known him fer years. A rider, an’ a good one. Square as they come.”

"Why'd yuh railroad him out o' here by way o' the window, Jake?" Abner Cade's words were measured and regular; only the fixity of his eyes indicated that he knew he was on treacherous ground.

"To save lead, Abner. When yuh gang up on a man out of a clear sky, somebody's liable to get hurt!"

"We sashayed him six-eight mile this afternoon, before he outrun on us on that gray o' his. Didn't seem like he wanted to be looked into much, Jake."

"Well, ger-reat jumpin' Jehosaphat, Ab! I s'pose yuh rushed at him full gallop, irons wavin'! What would any man do?"

Abner Cade shrugged, and turned away from the door.

"He sure looks like somebody else," he commented as he disappeared.

When the other had gone, Jake Downey walked downstairs to the bar and bought himself a drink. The tin piano still clattered, though less vigorously now, under wearying old hands; reeling, bear-like dancers sometimes still caromed in the space between the bars. The Happy Chance was a gay place yet, full of voices, and the comforting odor of whisky and roast beef. But an old thrill was stirring in Downey, and he felt the urge to be away from there.

Out on the Red Creek trail there would presently sound the thudding beat of racing hoofs in the dark; ahead somewhere, Slide Morgan, riding Jake's own black gelding, would be slipping away into the night. The black, tired but game, settling into his long, hard-mouthed stride; Talky Peters, hanging back a little, fooling himself with the idea that he didn't actually want trouble; a trading of shots, maybe; whispering lead. . . .

In his mouth there was the taste of copper; he could almost smell burning powder, an odor full of memories with a harsh, lifting tang.

And here was Jake Downey, minute by minute growing older in the rummy clutter called Roaring River,—without a horse. He had forgot to ask Slide Morgan what the latter's horse looked like.

Jake restlessly lifted his hat to run blunt fingers through his rusty hair. Then his hand dropped to fumble at his square, cleft chin, where the reddish stubble was already beginning to reappear. Finally he slapped his tiny whisky glass viciously onto the bar, and stalked out into the warm night.

Abner Cade had let fall the word that Morgan's horse was gray. A hasty survey of the hitch racks revealed that at least a dozen gray geldings, only two of which he had ever seen before, were sprinkled through the horse population there assembled. Jake speculated upon the possibility of picking

out Slide's horse by deduction; but he also thought of what might happen if he took the wrong mount.

With a snort he put temptation behind him, and pushed his way back into the Happy Chance.

CHAPTER II

Moccasin Lake

1

SLIDE MORGAN lit clumsily, having misjudged the distance to the ground. As he sprawled forward on hands and knees the big, shadowy forms of two horses loomed over him. A wiry hand seized his left wrist before he could rise, jerked him to his feet, and planted his hand upon the maned neck of a horse. Morgan felt pliant reins under his fingers, and, groping for the stirrup, swung up.

As his horse moved forward, yanking him into his seat, Morgan began to get his bearings. There was no moon, but the faint mistiness of starlight enabled him to make out dim forms. Talky Peters was already mounted; he could see the man's broad hat, blocking a place out of the dim sky like a black saucer. Talky's horse was moving off at a shamble.

"Will yuh move?" Peters inquired. "Of all the slow fellers! Come up here!"

As Slide spurred his horse alongside, Talky reined over, until his knee jammed against Morgan's with the force applied by a horse when he leans against another.

Behind them, somewhere in the second story of the Happy Chance, they heard a splintering crash.

"Five fellers went up the Red Crick trail about an hour ago," Talky told him hurriedly. "They're goin' to the Black Hills country on this gold scare, an' they couldn't wait till mornin'. We'll dig over an' cut into their tracks. Then you turn in the trail, an' cut back towards town about fifty yards. Then swing west an' north in a wide circle—anyways half a mile off the trail.

"The trail goes northwest along the crick. Ride alongside it, only about a half mile away. I'll prod along. When yuh hear me singin' 'Maria Suzanne,' come in onto the trail. That'll be about ten miles out. If yuh lose track of the trail, cut east once in a while, 'til yuh can see the crick, then swing out again. See? That way we'll dumfound 'em complete."

"Punk," Morgan adjudged. "I'm supposed to stay in singin' distance, sight unseen in the dark, an' half a mile away. Ain't that kind o' crazy?"

"No, it ain't crazy!" Talky answered abruptly.

“Why not jest mosey along the trail until we hear them comin’, then duck one side an’ leave ’em pass?” There was a momentary pause.

“Yuh got to cut out this argument,” said Talky in a strained voice. “They’ll be comin’ any minute. Do like I say! If yuh miss me in the dark, follow out the left fork o’ the trail to Hickory Lookout. It swings west up there. It’s a easy little forty-mile ride, an’ yuh can’t miss the trail except by ridin’ over it.”

“Whooee,” said Slide. “Forty miles. I think I’ll go back to the Happy Chance an’ get a night’s rest first.”

“Here’s the trail,” said Talky shortly, swerving his horse into it. “You sure are a frivolous gent. I see why they call yuh Slide. If ’twasn’t for yore friends you’d Slide right off the edge. Now cut back fifty yards, then swing west and light out!”

“ ’Sall flapdoodle,” said Morgan; “never see such a bother.” But he obeyed.

As he pivoted the horse the black gelding resisted; but Slide tapped the animal with his roweled spurs and they sprang down the trail toward the foot of Roaring River.

After ten long jumps Slide reined the horse away from the town, due west. They swung away into the night, the black settling into the walloping, swaying stride that marks the born pacer. Slide’s spirits began to rise with the head-clearing exhilaration of the night air, and the hammering lift of the pacing horse.

Irregularities of ground heaved under them, or dropped sharply away; sagebrush swished against the horse’s cannons, and taller brush rattled against the rider’s chaps. But nothing altered the pacer’s long, slashing stride.

The chinking drag upon all his pockets recalled to Morgan his fortune at the wheel of chance. His hands moved to stow the money more securely, and as he fingered the milled edges of the heavy handfuls of gold pieces he chuckled exuberantly.

“I’ll bet I’m the luckiest leather-pounder alive,” he told the horse.

“Easy swing, easy slide,
Easy eat, easy ride,
Let the leather in the saddle take the wear;
Easy come, easy go,
Spend it fast, get it slow,
One place is like another, anywhere!”

2

He was riding on an elephant. What the elephant looked like was somewhat unclear in his mind, for he had never seen an elephant before. It gratified him, however, to realize that it was a pacing elephant, and therefore an unusually good one, probably one of the best.

Something had happened to the reins, something peculiar, for although they were looped over his wrist he was unable to reach them. This was a pity, for he had a feeling that the elephant was going the wrong way. The animal appeared, in fact, to be pacing backwards; Morgan was of the opinion that he had mounted the animal the wrong way, facing the tail. This idea was partly grounded on the extremely awkward feel of the saddle; it didn’t seem likely that a saddle could be so uncomfortable if sat in correctly, in the usual way.

He brooded over this a good deal. If he were in truth facing the elephant’s tail, and the mount were proceeding backwards (probably as an accommodation), then they must be receding from the place that they were going to. He thought that they might get there in this way, but it would take much longer.

The boys would probably think it odd to see him riding backwards, and be surprised; but he would act as if it were a matter of course, and maybe they would think it was just a way of his. But his main worry was caused by the fact that the elephant seemed unable to keep his feet on the ground.

They had, in fact, reached a considerable height; the elephant was now pacing very slowly across a dark expanse of clouds. His efforts to keep the animal near the ground had been of no avail. Perhaps some son-of-a-gun was holding the elephant up, for a joke. That was Slide’s idea of a pretty serious kind of a joke. Still—

The elephant suddenly stepped into a post hole in the clouds, and plunged headlong—

The shock of solid, uprushing ground against his face and the harsh reality of a mouthful of sand brought Morgan to his senses. He knew

instantly that his horse had stumbled and gone down. As he gathered himself to rise he saw his mount heave to its feet scarcely two strides away. There was a slap and jingle of saddlery as the horse shook himself.

As Morgan got to his feet the black horse was walking away. The animal broke into a trot as the man tried to approach.

"Whoa, boy! Whoa-o-oa!"

Words took no effect. The man tried to reach the horse by a sudden rush. Then sand spurted into his face from the animal's heels, and the black rushed off into the dark.

Morgan shook his head to clear it of the last wisps of his fantastic dreams. He recalled feeling his way rapidly northwest from Roaring River, keeping his bearings by occasionally swerving toward Red Creek, along which ran the trail. At one time he had thought he heard horses on the run, some distance away. But, as he had expected, he had heard nothing that sounded like Talky Peters, singing "Maria Suzanne."

He judged that he had traveled in this way for perhaps two hours more, before he had begun to doze in the saddle. There his memory quit. He knew that from time to time he had awakened, and at least twice more had sought the Red Creek trail, to be sure of his way. Probably his horse had chosen to follow the trail itself while the rider slept.

A dim gray light was invading the east, indicating that it must be past four o'clock. Assuming that he had left Roaring River at nine, he judged that he had traveled somewhere between thirty and thirty-five miles from Roaring River, the distance depending upon the performance of his horse while he slept in the saddle.

No sign of the trail, nor of any watercourse was perceivable in the dim light. The trail to Hickory Lookout he assumed must lie to the northwest; for he knew that it swung west from the creek, and the horse would not be likely to cross the trail without turning into it. Therefore, he thought, by walking northwest he would be likely to cut into the Hickory Lookout trail without going out of his way.

Long afterward Slide Morgan realized that this bit of careless reasoning irrevocably altered the course of his life.

3

A slender thread of smoke, as vertical in the still air as if it had been suspended from above, was discovered by the horizontal rays of the rising sun, and etched out into a faint cobwebby line, lighter than the dark northern

sky against which it lay. Guided by this thread-like signal, Slide Morgan swerved to the north, stepping painfully in his high-heeled boots. A gawky sixty-foot shadow hobbled at his side, writhing its way over the uneven prairie floor.

As he advanced the smoke-beacon seemed gradually to recede, eluding his efforts to approach it; so that an hour was spent in uncomfortable walking before he topped a little rise, and came suddenly upon the source of the dwindling smoke. Morgan took two long steps, then stopped short, uncertain.

Blinking in the sunlight of the June morning lay a little irregular lake perhaps a quarter of a mile in width, margined with thick stands of reeds and sedges; such a place as wild geese and ducks would choose to rest upon in flight seasons. Beside the lake, backed by a brush-clothed knoll, a dozen tall cottonwoods stood in a straggling clump, and among them, at their feet, two log buildings hugged the ground.

They were small and plain, these cabins; but cheerful in the gilding sunshine, and very orderly and neat. The larger of the two cabins was of two stories; or rather, of a story and a half, there being enough room for sleeping quarters under the roof. The other was a low hut, probably a bunkhouse, suitable for the accommodation of five or six men.

The weathered remnants of a hay stack were protected by a stake and rider fence; a number of plump hens scratched in its edge. Far out here on the rugged, tameless prairie the casual hens added an air of comfortable friendliness to the place, as if it were a snug farmstead, instead of in truth a precarious outpost where men watched and waited, riding between livestock and hostile Indians until better days should come.

Beyond was a small shelter, scarcely more than a windbreak, probably used as a stable for the night horses.

Small as it was, the little camp had an atmosphere of satisfying completeness such as Morgan had not expected to find in the work of Jake Downey. He had thought of Downey's outpost as a harum-scarum, makeshift stand, characterized by ingenious provisions for the minimizing of work, and a prosperous outpouring of tin cans. Then, as they came closer, he sighted another astonishing incongruity.

At the foot of the larger cabin lay a little strip of tended earth, bordered with stones, and gay with the pink and green and purple of—flowers.

"Mister," said Morgan to himself, "this ain't it."

Again a queer sense of loneliness came into Morgan, the sensation he always felt when after an interval he approached a place where people were. For among people Slide Morgan felt awkward, ill-adapted. His friends had been few, and such of them as he had known were men like Jake Downey, outcrops of the prairie, like himself.

He knocked on the jamb of the open door, and there immediately appeared in it—a girl.

"Mo'nin'," she said gravely.

Slide Morgan reassembled himself. "Mornin', ma'am. I don't reckon this is Jake Downey's outfit, is it?"

"This is John Chase's ranch," the girl told him in a Texan drawl.

She looked to Morgan to be seventeen at the most; but in this his judgment fell short by a year or so. He thought her face beautiful, though this, too, was perhaps an inaccuracy. It was a face of gently rounded lines, with quiet lips, and smiling eyes of a hazel color, as if the brown-green of the sage at certain times were shot through with flecks of sunlight. Her hair was of the color of misting rain when the sun faintly touches it with a breath of gold. Probably cowboys would have described it as ash-blonde.

"Jake Downey's camp is about twelve miles south," she concluded.

"Yes, ma'am. I reckon."

Morgan shifted uneasily before the girl's upturned eyes, for they were as unlike the eyes of the bar room girls he had known as they were unlike the eyes of men.

"My horse fell," he told her. "I was ridin' up this way, headin' fer Hickory Lookout, an' I was sleepin'. So he got loose from me," he finished lamely.

"He did?" The girl's eyes were beginning to smile, and Slide reddened.

"Yes, ma'am. He did. An' I was wonderin' if you could loan me a horse while I ride over to Jake's Hickory Lookout an' get mine."

The girl looked vague. "Was the hawse aimin' to meet you at Hickory Lookout?"

"Why, it was a Hickory Lookout horse," Slide explained. "An' probably the boys will have picked him up—"

"I guess we can fix you up," said the girl. "Prob'ly pa will be glad to catch you up a hawse when he comes in. But you'll have to wait fo' him. Had breakfast?"

"No'm."

“I’ll fry you some cakes. What did you say yo’ name was?”

“Morgan. Benjamin Morgan, gener’ly called Slide.”

“Well, Mo’gan, any good at imitations?”

“Why,” Slide floundered, “what kind?”

“Why, actin’ like things—different things.”

“I can whistle like a wapiti.”

“Won’t do,” she told him solemnly. “Wapitis can’t come in the kitchen. If yo’ goin’ to eat in my kitchen you’ve got to give a imitation of a first-class gent.”

The words came incongruously in her low drawl. Slide stared, completely at loss. “Guess I’ll ride on,” he decided.

“On what?” the girl demanded, turning away.

CHAPTER III

Seed Cows

1

NOW that yo' heah, why not stop a while?" said John Chase in a southern drawl much like that of his daughter. "I need a riduh. Not that I've got much stock around, since I made that drive; but what with the Injuns up in the White Clay country, this is a kind o' leaky place to hold stock in. A man has to hold his stuff pretty well togethuh, if he's goin' to have anythin' left at all."

He was a man of more than fifty years, years spent in a life that makes men old before their time; his mustache was dark, but his well-kept beard, combed outward toward the sides, was almost white, and his hair, whacked off in back just above his neckerchief, showed a silvery glint.

"I kind o' promised Jake Downey—" Slide Morgan began.

"He doesn't need riduhs," said Chase. "Anyway, a riduh heah will do him 'bout as much good as one o' his own." He added hastily, "O' co'se I'm not urgin' yuh. I don't think most riduhs would like this place. Too liable to see action."

Morgan shot a swift grin at the stocky old man, and the broad, genially whiskered face grinned back.

"That don't figure," said Slide. "I'd like to ride here, if it's all right with Jake."

John Chase finished his unsaddling, and they stood idly for a moment or two, waiting for the stranger who had returned with the old man.

Slide noticed how squarely Chase stood on his flat heels, and how his good-humored old eyes traveled with a sort of caressing satisfaction over the little buildings, the fruits of his toil.

"That old felluh ain't no riduh o' mine," Chase told him in an undertone. "He's jest stoppin' by, like you. Seems to be checkin' up on the situation, or somethin'." A faint flicker of mockery twinkled in his eyes.

"Happy Bent is the only riduh I got now," Chase went on with good-natured openness. "Nice boy; but lackin' in expe'ience."

The stranger now came forward from the small shelter under which he had tied his horse, and John Chase perfunctorily introduced them as they

started for the house.

"Mr. Geer, meet up with Mr. Ben Mo'gan."

The man called Geer was elderly, with a trailing iron-gray mustache under a fierce ax-like nose. His hair was unusually long, more than brushing his neckerchief in back, but placed behind his ears as if to demonstrate that those members had not been cut off for thievery, as long hair sometimes implied. His appearance was not otherwise eccentric, except that his trousers were of buckskin, worn black and shiny.

As Geer extended his hand he seemed to be studying Morgan quizzically with eyes that carried an unusual boring force, even through the dusk.

"Morgan, eh?" he said in a friendly voice.

Then as his dry old fingers clasped Morgan's hand, he suddenly spoke half a dozen syllables of some Indian dialect. Morgan started, not because the strange old man had spoken something unintelligible, but because the odd jumble of sounds had seemed weirdly familiar.

"Huh?" said Morgan.

Geer repeated the jargon, slowly and distinctly, his eyes boring into Morgan's face. Vague memories stirred in the back of Slide's mind, as if some signal had reached him from a past which he could not recall. To his own mystification he realized that he now understood what the old man had said: It had been some trivial remark about the weather—something to the effect that he thought it would be warmer before morning.

Syllables fumbled to Morgan's lips, as he replied haltingly in the same dialect, "I think so, too." He knew that he had spoken in the Cheyenne tongue.

The whole incident had consumed something less than half a minute, but as Geer dropped his hand and turned casually away Morgan felt mystified and shaken. As he trailed after the others toward the house he feverishly sought to drag the lurking memories in the back of his mind into a clearer light. A practical man, living in the action of the moment, he had seldom given thought to his past. He now recalled that he had been able to speak the Cheyenne tongue as a small boy. Mental pictures returned to him of long trains of oxen, two by two; there were four, five, or six yokes of them to each of the great covered wagons, and there were sometimes one, sometimes three or more of the heavy wagons in the train.

He could recall his father distinctly, a man with a brown curly beard, and dark, hollow eyes that were always watchful, yet always at rest. He remembered times, too, when the heavy wagons were warped into a little

circle, with the restless, bellowing oxen inside, and the air filled with the smell of powder and the barking roar of guns. When Slide had been eight years old his father had died in a delirium of fever on the floor of one of the wagons as it creaked and jolted over an endless plain. The little boy had been afraid to climb into the wagon in which his father lay dead.

No doubt, he thought, his father had taught him the remnants of the Cheyenne tongue which had returned to confuse him out of the past. That was the simple explanation of this experience that had called up old ghosts. He wondered that those fragments of Indian tongue had never stirred in his mind, so far as he could remember, for almost fifteen years.

Geer, who had unexpectedly addressed him in Cheyenne, still puzzled him. He took an opportunity to speak to the old man apart from the rest.

"Haven't I seen you before?" Morgan asked.

"Have you?" said Geer without expression.

There was a vague hostility in the man's attitude, and Morgan realized that his question had been a personal one. Many of the men he had known had been touchy about questions pertaining to the past.

"I dunno," he concluded feebly. "I guess not."

2

The visitors, together with Happy Bent—a lean, freckled lad of eighteen or less—were bedded down for the night in the little bunkhouse. Morgan's bunk was a section of the floor against the wall, shallowly boxed off with boards to keep the mattress of loose hay from scattering. Except for two second-story bunks built across the cabin's end, the other beds were like his own.

After the lantern had been put out Morgan lay awake for a long time wondering what to do with the heavy freight of gold pieces that he had won at the wheel of the Happy Chance.

His fingers felt cautiously about the slab floor under the hay, and when he had located a good-sized crack he began dropping gold coins into it. He could not drop many in one place, because of the sound made when one coin fell upon another; but cracks in the floor were plenty, and little by little he was able to dispose of most of his wealth.

As nearly as he could judge in the dark he possessed nearly four thousand dollars—a sum well short of Jake Downey's estimate of ten thousand, but a nice stake nevertheless. Whenever a crack in the floor had

received its full quota of gold, Morgan stuffed it full of hay, a slow business, hard to accomplish quietly.

By the time that Slide at last let himself sleep, most of his fortune was under the floor slabs of John Chase's bunkhouse.

3

Upon the following day Slide borrowed horse and saddle, and rode to Hickory Lookout. One small cabin not much larger than the Chase bunkhouse, a good corral, and a small granary comprised the Box R camp under the charge of Jake Downey; no other work of man was in sight.

Here he found a saturnine old man, from whom Morgan learned that Jake Downey had not yet returned from Roaring River; that Downey's horse had not been picked up; that Talky Peters was riding, and not likely to be back until late in the day. Marve Conklin's posse had been there, however, seeking a man whose description the old fellow tactfully chose to disremember.

Morgan went back to the Chase camp.

Upon the second day Slide again rode to Downey's meager camp, and found it as nearly deserted as before. Downey's horse, however, had come in the previous afternoon, with gear intact.

When his third call at Hickory Lookout found Downey still away, Slide began to wonder if Jake had run amuck.

"Well," said Morgan, "tell him that I'm helpin' out old John Chase, an' I'll be along in a little while."

Thereafter for some days Slide Morgan visited Hickory Lookout no more.

In the meantime Partridge Geer, the queer old figure with the buckskin breeches and the long mustache, departed for parts unknown.

Slide Morgan rode daily with John Chase. The old man's domain was somewhat indefinite in extent, consisting merely of the square miles of ground upon which he grazed his stock.

It seemed to Morgan that the white-faced cattle that were scattered in rudimentary herds over this land were surprisingly few. He had commonly circled herds to the south that were numbered by thousands of head; Chase was husbanding little bands that seemed to number in tens and dozens. Slide Morgan marveled. This old man was a mere nester, clinging precariously to

his bit of prairie between the true cattle country and the Indian lands on the north.

Morgan ventured a question.

"Mr. Chase, what do yuh want me here for? Two men could handle this works easy. One even, in most seasons. I feel kind o' in the way."

"That's right," Chase agreed, with his genial frankness. "But we got to be ready fo' emergencies, yuh know. Anyway, I don't figuh to lose much, in case yuh hook on. You bust broncs, I s'pose?"

Slide admitted that he did.

"I thought we might catch up twenty—twenty-five hawses fo' you to peel. Ought to average better'n twelve dollahs a head."

Morgan's wonderment grew. Here was a ranching operation in a tin cup. He recalled an old rhyme:

"Get good an' plenty horses,
An' about a million cows,
Grab a lot o' prairie,
All the law allows,

"Take in all the water,
Shoot up all the sheep,
Hire fifty riders,
Never let 'em sleep,

"Brand ten thousand in the spring,
Drive five thousand in the fall,
An' mebbe you'll make some money—
An' mebbe you'll lose it all."

That was Morgan's idea of it. But here was a man who thought of cows and horses individually. The breaking of twenty horses made it worth while for him to double his force of riders. Slide wondered if Chase had all his cattle named.

"I don't figuh to ride much more, myself," the old man went on, shifting a bit to lounge in his saddle. From the slight eminence of the knoll upon which their horses stood his eyes searched the range. "I've got to keep goin' twenty yeahs yet, if I'm goin' to make this pay out. Last yeah I was laid up a spell by tryin' to ride in rough weathuh.

"So while you an' Happy does the wuhk—if you stay with me, I mean—I figuh to take a team o' oxen, an' my ax, an' go aftuh timbeh fo' a corral. Need one bad. Have to haul wood quite a piece fo' it, too. I guess yuh noticed I cleaned out all the wood around Moccasin Lake in buildin' them two houses. Nothin' but these few cottonwoods left at home, theah, an' I aim to leave them be."

Slide Morgan considered, whistling softly.

"Don't know but what somethin' could be made o' this, in time," he said at last. "Yuh got nice grass, an' plenty o' water; I guess the Injuns is all quieted down now; an' the big ranches don't seem to be crowdin' yuh much—yet."

"They'll crowd good an' plenty in the next few yeahs," said Chase, smoothing the part in his beard with his fingers. "That's why I have to figuh so close, an' not spare any expense or labuh that will build this place up. I got to be big enough to hold my own when the push comes. These few cattle heah is jest a slim staht; jest seed cows, that's all. Theah pickin' up pretty good; but I'm sho' honin' to buy mo'."

"They're a good grade," Morgan said. "All white-faced stuff, pretty near. They'll run a heap heavier than most herds I've seen."

"Lot o' pilgrims among 'em," Chase explained, "from ovuh the Mississippi. The longhorn strain yuh see is from stuff I brung with me ovuh the Chizzum trail. The rest I bought an' traded fo'. I could 'a' had mo', by buyin' ratty stock; but I'm buildin' this from the ground up, an' I want to build it right. If only I'd knowed what I do now when I was yo' age, an' stahted this thing then—!"

Morgan ran a keen eye over the sweep of the plain.

"They's a little spring lake up here about nine-ten mile northeast, I noticed," he said presently. "Jest a little one—"

"I call it the Cayuse Spring," said Chase.

"Now, if Happy an' me," Morgan went on, "should go over there bimeby—say next year in the slack season—an' build a little camp—I wonder if that camp wouldn't control a whole sight o' ground? Didn't look to me like there would be good water handy fer quite a piece east."

Chase slapped his thigh so suddenly that his horse started sidewise, as if at the crack of a quirt.

"Dawgone," he chuckled, "if I don't b'lieve yo' the young felluh I been lookin' fo'! I been thinkin' about that thing myself. They's only two little holes neah the Cayuse Spring that stays wet in the summeh; an' nothin' else

from the Blue Wateh sink east fo'—gosh, I dunno how fah. Thousands o' head can be grazed from that wateh. An' the range joins on nice to the Moccasin Lake range."

"By leavin' the Blue Water country for the big fellers to fight over, an' bitin' down on the range east—" began Slide.

"You see it!" exclaimed Chase enthusiastically. "Boy, they's a futuh heah fo' a young man that can see ahead!"

They sat silent for a little time. Slide Morgan's eyes were glowing like those of a miner when the color in his pan begins to increase swiftly, promising great things just beyond. For the first time he seriously considered the possibility of his owning, himself, vast herds of cattle, and great remudas of saddle stock. The four thousand dollars under the bunkhouse floor would do wonders on this range. A partnership with Chase—

But that would have to wait. First he must prove himself to this old man who, while he could build dreams of empire in the twilight of his life, was yet practical, hard-fisted, and sane. Morgan's day would come. "Benjamin Morgan, cattle king of the sand hill ranges—"

In the meantime, here was a place where a man could work with all his heart; a place where one man could work for two and make his work show. Here was something to build up, to nurse along; to labor for, plan for, live for, giving the best he had with the assurance that there were high stakes at the end, if victory could be won over rival cattlemen and the grim old prairie.

"Mr. Chase," he said at last, "I'm goin' to back yore play. I shore am!"

"Good," said the old man.

He studied Slide with the satisfaction of a man who has found the one thing needed to make his plans complete. Morgan didn't notice; his mind was already casting about for work to tie into.

"It all biles down," said Chase, "to a question o' holdin' the Injuns off. I know the main bands are a long way no'th now; but they'll travel some to make a raid. I ain't neveh been hit; but since I been heah they've raided ranches south o' this, south o' the Platte, even. Well, if they wasn't dangeh heah, they wouldn't be no room fo' us by now. I'll fight real obstinate. Always would. Gawd, how I hate a Injun!"

Slide was inattentive. "Now I wonder," he said, "speakin' of our new corral—"

CHAPTER IV

Walking Papers

1

NEVER in his life had Slide Morgan been less prepared to receive a savage smash than upon the day that John Chase fired him.

It was still early in July; for a matter of eight days Morgan had ridden for John Chase, going far in the hot, dry weather to find and turn back the straggling cattle that had drifted off the chosen range of the Arrow C. Careful plans were forming in his mind as he rode, plans no less practical and cautious because they were of the stuff of dreams.

He had ridden for many owners, on many ranges, and for men of many types; he was a wanderer who called no place home. Yet, in his few brief days at the Arrow C, Morgan had become peculiarly attached to the monotonous stretch of hinterland over which roamed the cattle of John Chase. He had found and turned back several hundred head that had wandered afield; but more than that, he had made Chase's problems his own, with a live interest in the welfare of the tiny ranch such as he had never felt for the vaster fortunes of other cattlemen.

John Chase was old; Happy Bent was only a kid. Morgan had felt that he was the one who was taking care of this outfit, which revolved, after all, for the welfare of Nancy Chase. Further, he had prospects here of his own. He was feeling for the first time the great sweep of opportunity offered by the open range. He counted every dollar of the four thousand under the bunkhouse floor as a fighting man in the campaign that was forming in his mind.

A swift maturity of viewpoint was coming over the careless cowboy whom his familiars had called "Slide." For the first time in his life Morgan was putting down groping roots.

The presence of Nancy Chase had more to do with it than Slide knew. He had spoken hardly two dozen words to her in the eight days; their conversation, what of it there was, had been of the most casual sort. He had not yet offered her a compliment, nor sought her society in any way. Yet it had been extremely interesting to have her about, and a comforting thing to know that she would be in the cabin at night when he came in after a hard

day's ride. He counted on that as he counted on the meals she cooked, without realizing how important it was to him.

And on the ninth day in the morning Morgan was fired.

There was an incongruous air of the commonplace in the way that John Chase accomplished this. Morgan had saddled, and was preparing to ride after horses. Chase approached.

"Well," said the old man, casually smoothing his beard, "how much do I owe yuh?"

"Nothin'," said Morgan, tying his latigo strap. "Why?"

"Five dollahs about right?"

"I can wait till pay day all right," said Morgan, mystified.

"Figuh to pay yuh off," said Chase distantly.

"Pay me off?" Slide repeated.

"Can't use anothuh rideh afteh all," said Chase without expression.

"What's the matter?" Slide asked, searching the old man's face for some sign of humor. "Don't I suit?"

"Can't afford it," Chase answered shortly.

"Oh"—Morgan grinned swiftly—"that's all right. I'll be glad to help out over the summer. Have to live some place. You can pay me a horse or two. Or pay me some other year. Don't need money."

Chase stood squarely on his flat heels, as firm on the ground as a rooted tree. "No," he said decisively, "I've made up my mind. That settles it. I'll pay yuh off, an' you can ride."

With this a vague hostility seemed to come into the old man's attitude; or perhaps it was only the stony finality with which he spoke that made his voice sound that way.

Morgan's mind reeled from the shock of the punch. He never before had been caught so completely off his guard. Stammeringly he sought for words.

"What—" he began.

"I don't want to argy," Chase cut him off grimly. "How much?"

For a moment Morgan stood hesitant, while his bewildered mind sought to gain equilibrium. Then the smoke began to clear from his brain, making way for a swift surge of wrath.

"Good," he said; the word came mechanically to his throat, because he had used it in like circumstances before.

He turned and finished tying the latigo, his hands methodical and quick. If there was one thing in the world for which he could thank his waning gods, it was that the saddled horse was his own mouse-gray. At least he wouldn't have to putter about changing a saddle among the smoking ruins of his dreams. He put on the gray's bridle, and dropped the reins on the ground. Then he went to the bunkhouse a few strides away, and swiftly rolled his few belongings into his bed.

Chase hovered in the backyard as Morgan lashed his bed roll behind his saddle. "Sorry," said the old man.

The word inflamed Morgan's bitter wrath to the cracking point. He dared not look the old fool in the face, lest he lash out at him with his quirt. He mustn't do that. Old muddler that Chase was, he was Nancy's pa.

Silently Morgan swung into his saddle, and reined the gray's head southward. John Chase called after him.

"Heah's yo' pay!"

Morgan did not heed. His buck-skinned fingers toyed with the loaded butt of his quirt; he longed to slash the gray flanks, to strike home the spurs, and leave the place in a mad gallop. But he held himself in control, and did not. He avoided looking toward the cabin as he passed it, fearful lest Nancy should come to the door and he should meet her eyes.

When he was a hundred yards south of the little camp he heard loping hoofs behind him. In a moment Chase came alongside, astride a saddleless horse. The old man extended his fist, palm downward.

"Heah's yo' five dollahs," he said.

Slide Morgan turned his head with the slow movement he had learned from Jake Downey. Then suddenly he extended his hand, took the fistful of heavy coins, and dashed them into the broad, bearded face.

2

Jake Downey squatted on his heels smoking his pipe, an old companion of his; it was a slender briar, a type of smoking implement not often seen in those days in the regions of the North Platte. It was said of Downey that he feared nothing in the world except the breaking of its stem.

For some minutes after Slide Morgan had finished the tale of his mysterious discharge, Downey remained silent. The bricky stubble bristled on his solid cleft chin, and Downey felt of it tentatively with his fingers, as a man feels of cactus spines.

“Lew Cade is back o’ that,” he said at last, looking up. He tossed off the opinion casually, as if it were only an obvious minor point in a complicated problem.

“I knew it!” Morgan snarled, slamming his hat into the dust. “Him! The sneakin’—”

“He been out there?” Jake asked.

Lew Cade had been, upon the evening before. Morgan and Cade had acknowledged their introduction with perfunctory nods. During supper Morgan had studied Cade’s face, lean, handsome, and paler than those of other men, made unusual by those ash-gray eyes, oddly light in color beneath his dark brows. The man talked fluently and well; often his remarks were edged with a taunting humor that made folks laugh.

The man from Roaring River had spent the evening playing checkers with Nancy under a lantern in one corner. From this position he had alternately talked to the girl in low tones, and raised his voice to rally Chase or Happy Bent. The two had still been playing when Morgan retired to the bunkhouse, annoyed by the sight of this man talking to the daughter of John Chase.

“He’s kind o’ sweet on Nance,” Jake supplied.

Morgan’s naturally friendly face was furious. In the heat of his anger the angles of his cheek bones, high-bridged nose, and jaw stood out sharply, making him another man.

“He most likely told ’em I was Injun Frank,” he fumed.

“Don’t think that was it,” said Downey. “It took me jest three days to squash that little theory. But these Cades is a sour pair if yuh rub ’em the wrong way. Abner has a lot o’ sense, an’ tries to hold Lew down, but Lew is off the same piece he is, an’ Ab can’t do much with him. Half the time they ain’t on speakin’ terms, like now. But once one of ’em gets in a tight place, then it’s Cades against all, an’ Abner can go as crazy loco as Lew can, if he wants.”

“Then what d’yuh s’pose he told ’em?” Morgan wanted to know.

Downey considered. “He rode off before you did, did he? Prob’ly saddled before breakfast? Uh-huh. Well, prob’ly Lew jest says to old John Chase, he says, ‘Nice boy, this Morgan. *Pity he’s a breed.*’ An’ when old Chase looks surprised, then Lew prob’ly looks plumb astonished. ‘Never knew that?’ he says, says he, ‘Why, I thought *ever*’body knew that.’ An’ mebbe he mentions that his brother has knowed you all yore life.”

“A half-breed, am I?” raged Morgan. “Why, that—”

"That's what *I'd* say happened," said Downey. "Old Chase is terrible sour on Injuns. He wouldn't have a breed around that girl o' his at no price."

Morgan felt a wrenching sickness, a nausea of choking wrath. Through a muffling red fog he heard Downey's voice.

"Partridge Geer left a letter fer you, when he stopped by goin' south."

"Where is it?" Slide forced himself to ask.

Downey went into the wretched little shanty that served him for a ranch house, and brought a bit of paper into the hot morning sunlight. Morgan unfolded it curiously.

To Whome It May Consern [he read]:

I have knowed Benj. Morgan 20 yrs. I also knowed Henry Morgan his pa and Julie Morgan his ma & know positive that there was not any Indian blood in ether one. Benj. Morgan come from a sqwar famly & is full-blooded white.

Amos Geer.

Morgan twice puzzled through the tangled scrawl before he looked up. Then he silently handed the sheet to Jake Downey.

"Up until last week, I never saw the feller in my life," he told him.

"Seems to know you," Jake replied.

"How'd he know this would come up?"

"He said it might come in handy to yuh—he didn't know."

"Nothin' else?"

"Nope."

Downey put one foot on the bench by the door, and lounged against the wall. "Geer don't say a whole lot. Most o' his remarks has a question tied to their tail. He listens a whole heap."

Morgan slumped down onto the bench, his hands dangling between his thighs, his eyes distant. "Well," he said heavily, "still got a job open?"

"Shore. Yo're takin' this a sight too hard, Slide. What the heck is one or two firin's to a rider that's rode as many as you have? 'Smatter with yuh? Yuh look like yuh tried to crawl off somewhere, an' got pulled back."

"Aw—ain't nothin'."

"Well, fer cripes' sake come to life, then! Stand up, once."

He heaved Slide to his feet by one arm, and planted a firm, fatherly kick in the pants that sent Morgan staggering.

"Get the saddle off o' that ratty-lookin' hunk o' picket fence," Downey ordered, "if yuh call that man-eatin' sawbuck a saddle. Such a crool-shaped place to sit I never see. Ridin' that dislocatin' contraption from Roarin' River I thought I was kilt. I tried layin' crossways, like a sack—"

"That's the most comfor'ble little saddle—" Slide rallied feebly.

"I got a boneless wonder, here," Downey offered. "He can snap hisself jest like a whip. He's one o' these zebra duns, with a stripe down his back."

"Where's he at?" asked Morgan, showing a flicker of interest.

"I'll point him out," said Downey, leading the way. "I been keepin' him fer a curiosity. I think some o' gettin' Hank Harris over here to ride him."

"Pooh," Morgan scoffed. "Leave the Hank party stay home. I guess I can take care o' these little details."

"Might have once," Downey admitted. "But not right now. Yuh shore look weakish. What they been feedin' yuh—milk?"

"Drop a rope on him," said Slide. "I'll get my saddle."

"Ain't a bit o' use. That dun'll unload yuh quicker'n chain lightnin'. Wait now, Slide. Some day when yuh feel—"

"You rope that horse!"

"Oh, all right."

There was something lacking in Morgan's general attitude as he swung onto the zebra dun. Jake Downey cast loose the halter shank; he had hardly dodged around the snubbing post before the fight was over. Three savage, up-ended plunges, and Slide Morgan snatched for the saddle—and clutched two handfuls of dust.

"Now that's too bad," said Jake Downey as he made much over helping Morgan to his feet. "You didn't stay long enough to see nothin'. He was jest gettin' ready to warm up. What made yuh fall? The horse was plumb astonished."

"I can ride him," said Morgan, a trace of a fighting gleam in his eye. "I could ride him the best day he ever see. I'll do it, too. To-morrow." The gleam flickered out.

"To-morrow?" repeated Downey, his jaw dropping.

"One o' these days," Morgan said listlessly.

Downey whistled a little tune softly through his teeth as he turned away.

CHAPTER V

Over the Edge

1

BY the clear light of evening Morgan resaddled the mouse-gray horse.

"Where yuh goin' now?" Downey asked. Throughout the day he had taken a sarcastic fatherly attitude toward Morgan, whom he conceived to be acting like a child. "Goin' to work all night?"

"Gimme that hunk o' paper," was Slide's answer.

"Huh?"

"The one Geer wrote."

Mystified, Downey searched his pockets and dug up the peculiar affidavit left for Morgan by Partridge Geer. "What's the desper'te campaign now?"

"I anyways want these folks to know I'm white," Morgan muttered.

"Well, of all the crazy, dang fool—"

The gray horse moved off, headed northward. Downey made extravagant rejecting motions with the palms of both hands.

"Puddin'head!" he roared after the rider. "Yuh pore woolly sheep!"

Slide Morgan sloped forward in his saddle with a weary motion, and ignominiously spurred the gray out of earshot.

As he rode north he detested the move he was making, ashamed that he should care to justify himself before any living man. The odd testimonial in the scrawling hand of Partridge Geer was a slender expedient, unworthy of use. But above all it was bitter to know that his blood had been questioned, and that the question stood.

The doubt of his blood must be dislodged from the minds of these people, especially in the case of the girl. For he realized now that it had been Nancy Chase who had hovered behind his ambitious dreams; it was she who had made the Arrow C cabin his first home, the logical center of the world.

He consoled himself that he was not seeking a reconciliation with Chase. When he had knocked out the half-breed question he meant to ride out of the range for good. After he had thrashed the living daylights out of Lew Cade

he would be free to ride south, letting the long reaches of the prairie drift between himself and the Arrow C.

Twilight was deepening as Morgan, embittered of mood, approached the log buildings in the cottonwoods by Moccasin Lake.

A heavy drag of reluctance was upon him as he guided the gray toward the night-horse shelter under the trees; and he let the horse drop to a slouching walk, its hoofs silent in the dust.

Figures stood by the shelter, and Morgan reined his horse to a stop. A swift thrill stirred him as he saw that Nancy was there. Then the angle of a broad hat told him that the other figure, standing so close and talking so earnestly, was that of Lew Cade.

Suddenly, with a rush of fury, he saw the two figures merge together as Cade gathered Nancy into his arms. For a moment that seemed to reel on endlessly the figures stood as one.

It may be that Morgan would have turned his horse and ridden away; but for the next few moments a foregone fate seemed to control him, as if he were a puppet being put through movements that had been decided upon ages ago. As he sat frozen in his saddle his horse moved forward of its own accord, drawn by the smell of hay. The two figures by the night-horse shelter separated as the gray horse came close. Morgan heard Nancy's gasp, and glimpsed that her face was white in the dusk.

"Now," something said, "is the time to thrash this man within an inch of his life."

He dropped from his horse and rushed. Cade stood for but a fraction of a second, uncertain; then, with a quick step forward, he met the attack. They reeled with the shock of their impact, and clinched. Morgan pumped in three terrific smashes to face, neck, and ribs with his right hand, his buck-skinned fist as hard as parfleche-wrapped rock. Cade's breath whistled in his ear as they locked and went down, and Morgan felt a savage exultation as he recognized that his man was hurt.

Cade's right arm writhed to his thigh, and as it jerked upward Morgan's ear caught the swift movement of steel on leather. Cade's pistol was out; his wrist struggled in Morgan's grip as he strove to bring the muzzle to bear. Slide flung himself backward, wrenching his right arm free. As he drew, both men gained their knees.

Cade's gun exploded into the ground, and Morgan, winning free with his right arm, struck down desperately at the man's head with the gun butt in his

clenched fist. Fist and gun butt missed as the men swayed, but the pistol barrel crashed down upon its mark. Lew Cade went limp.

Morgan slowly rose, his knees quivering with the shock of the effort, and bent to examine his enemy's face. The man's breath was coming hoarsely through his teeth; the light eyes stared, half open, unseeing. Across the forehead a dark trickle crawled, as if a fly crept there, a fly that had been dipped in blood.

All of these things must have happened within the bracket of a few seconds; for he had swung unsteadily into his saddle and turned the gray's head south before he heard some one running from the cabin.

He let the mouse-gray horse walk away at his own pace from the Arrow C. Behind him he could hear a startled exclamation, hurrying feet, a hail from the place Cade had fallen, an answer from the house.

The strides of the gray were slow; he seemed to creep by inches over the ground, yet Morgan held himself in check, disdaining to urge the animal on. Gradually, as slowly as the movements of a fever dream, they drew away from the cottonwoods. The alarmed voices receded, slowly becoming small against the prairie silence; until at last a single sound of a voice far behind cut through him like an arrow, Nancy's voice, choked with tears. Then nothing more; he found himself alone in the gathering night.

After long plodding the gray horse broke into a swinging lope. He spurred the animal into a run, struggling to shake himself free from a nameless dread. Presently, as he rode, he took from his pocket the ragged testimonial of Partridge Geer, and tore it into bits that fluttered away into the thickening dark.

2

For almost an hour, an hour that had seemed like five, they had sat in silence, Slide and Talky Peters. The kerosene lantern that hung from the beams above cast broad, lumpy shadows behind them upon the close-pressing walls.

Talky Peters rose and stretched. He strolled to the grub boxes at the end of the shanty, and quietly began to rearrange some of the materials he found therein. Morgan saw him roll a third of a sack of flour into a compact bundle, and tie it with string. Then Talky cut a slab of bacon in two, stacked the two pieces, and wrapped them in a clean piece of gunny sacking.

"Whatcha doin'?" Slide asked.

"Nothin'."

Talky placed the two packages on a shelf, and on them a can of baking powder. There was another long silence.

"Wasn't that Jake's black pacer yuh rode back?" Morgan asked.

"Uh-huh." Talky offered no explanation.

They were alone. After Slide's brief narrative of what had happened at the Arrow C, Jake Downey had averred that he didn't so much like Slide's description of the way Lew Cade had looked after Morgan had laid him out; and he guessed he would ride over and see how things were coming on. Talky had gone with him.

For two hours Morgan had played seven up with the other hand, a man named Wilkes. Then Talky had returned bearing news of an indifferent nature.

Upon hearing that Lew Cade was still unconscious, Wilkes had been overcome by curiosity, and had ridden off for the Arrow C.

Slide Morgan played solitaire with steady hands. Another hour passed, slowly ticked away by the cheap clock on the shelf. It was eleven o'clock.

"Ought to be back by *now*," said Morgan.

Talky was silent for some minutes. "Looks like you'll have to ride," he said at last.

"Me? No, not me. I don't do things that way."

"Happy Bent rode for the doc at Roarin' River," said Talky.

"No sense in that."

"I dunno. Looked like he had a hole in his head, to me." Talky's thin, angled face wore the look of one who watches a badly managed affair with a faint, sarcastic amusement, but his voice was freighted with gloom.

"Be a long time before the doc can get there, anyway," Morgan observed.

"They'll be there by sun-up. Abner Cade will be there, too. An' that's jest the same as sayin' there'll be holy hell poppin' if Lew ain't comin' around by then."

"I don't care. Let 'er pop. Lew Cade asked for it."

"Yuh don't realize what an unlucky pick yuh made, Slide."

"I didn't pick Cade. He picked me, Talky."

"I know. But this Abner Cade is p'ison, if ever he gets on a tear. He's runnin' the Vigilantes, yuh know; an' they's always a lot o' rip-rap an'

bobtail ready to string along with any one that's causin' trouble, pervidin' they's no hit-back."

"How'd yuh figger no hit-back?" demanded Slide, looking up.

"Well, the five big brands are backin' this Vigilante play; an' from what Jake says, the big fellers don't know you very well up here. An'—"

"I know that. But—"

"An' if yuh figger yore goin' to get a square trial, an' get off by jest givin' yoreself up—"

"Abner Cade isn't goin' to get hands on me, nor none of his kind," Morgan stated. "I got an argument in me yet. You ask Lew Cade."

Talky digested this for some time.

"I dunno as us three can stand 'em off very long," he decided at last. "O' course if we could pick off Ab Cade, the rest might get discouraged, an' throw up the game. But that would bring the Flyin' B crowd into it. Ab owns a lot o' stock in the Flyin' B. Mebbe by then Seth Russell would get heated up, though; that would throw twenty-five—thirty men in on our side. The old man is kind o' sour on the Flyin' B. But then there's the Bar 66 feelin' kind o' edgy toward Seth, an' awful strong Vigilante. I s'pose—"

"Holy Smoke!" exclaimed Morgan. "What yuh framin', a general war? Yuh started with three men, an' now yuh got about a hunderd in. Where'd yuh figger three in the first place? I'm *one*, ain't I? This is my scrap!"

"I guess yuh figger me and Jake is goin' to hide someplace outside, in case Ab comes for yuh. Or mebbe set here an' read the catalogs while you stand 'em off. I guess you see me an' Jake crawlin' under the bunks when the bullets start leakin' through the walls on three-four sides."

"Good gosh!" snapped Morgan. "I never see such a fuss about one feller bein' lammed on the head in a fair fight!" He swept his cards together disgustedly. "This country must be full o' nothin' but old ladies. Ridin' fifty miles after a doc because a lyin' rattlesnake collected himself a headache! Vigilantes this, Vigilantes that. Yuh talk like yuh want to get rid o' me!"

"No-no. We jest—"

"Don't worry! I'm ridin'!" Slide's high cheek bones flushed, and his dark eyes struck fire. "I wouldn't stay on any range where they's nothin' but fool notions an' corruption. I'm goin' some place where a cattle country is!"

"That's what I'm goin' to do," agreed Talky Peters equably. He fumbled at his hat-bent ears, ears that stuck out from his head like brackets.

They fell into silence. The minutes dragged slowly by, measured by the steady clicking of the cheap clock. For a long time Talky Peters intoned the inexhaustible stanzas of his favorite song in a mournful quavering tenor:

> "The cowboy laid his head upon his saddle;
> An' they heard his voice a-moanin', soft an' low—
> Oh Maria, oh Maria, doncha leave me,
> I'm a-dyin' now, Maria, doncha go.
>
> "Maria Suzanne! The darkness was a-fallin';
> Maria Suzanne! He couldn't lift his haid;
> Maria Suzanne! He thought he heard her callin';
> An' w'en they trun him over, he—was—daid."

(Very softly and lugubriously):

> "Maria Suzanne! The mold is on his saddle;
> Maria Suzanne! You should of spoke before;
> Maria Suzanne! His grave is cold an' lonely;
> You'll never see yore lover, an-ny mo-ore."

The song died away. Presently a trade rat ran along the edge of the floor, carrying a tin spoon to some hidden treasure cave under the walls. A horse squealed out in the corral. There was the constant flabby snap of the cards that Morgan played in his solitary game of chance. The foreheads of the two men were moist with the heat of the night.

It was twelve o'clock. . . . It was one. . . .

At one fifteen they made out the distant sound of a galloping horse. Morgan's cards hung poised for a moment in his hands while he listened. Then he very softly played the ace of hearts and laid the deck down. His cold hands sought his pockets. Talky also listened intently, but he did not move.

They heard the running horse swiftly approach, moment after moment; until at last they heard the animal brace himself to a short, bounding stop just outside. Then Jake Downey appeared, his ruddy face wet with sweat.

With his movements studiedly deliberate in his habitual manner, Downey walked to the water bucket and drank. The others sat motionless, waiting for the news that still delayed.

"Lew Cade is dead," Jake said at last.

The two that had waited sat in silence for a little time, their hands quiet. The trade rat appeared silently on a lofty shelf, his shadow bigger than a cat. Slide Morgan played the king of spades, and turned the card beneath.

Through the cards he could see the loft of the cabin by Moccasin Lake; a rude bunk; upon it a figure seen by candle light, uncouthly rigid, unnaturally long, its hardened face hidden by the trailing sheet.

3

The trade rat dropped something from the high shelf with a clatter, and the three men started nervously. Jake Downey spoke, his voice sounding unnaturally loud in the quiet cabin.

"Thing t'do is to lay up for a while, till this blows over," he said. "Abner is apt to act nasty, otherwise folks wouldn't give it a second thought. In three-four weeks the range'll forget it. Course Ab will stay on the shoot; but you can prob'ly avoid him all right. An' even if yuh can't, he ain't so quick, an' once he's settled, that's the last o' the Cades, an' a end to the whole business."

"Nothin' to worry about," put in Talky.

"But meantime, I'd lay up," Jake went on. "Nick LaFarge's is the place. He's practically alone over there; he has jest a nester layout on the South Platte, an' he hates the Cades like they was snakes. Talky knows him real well."

"I'll ride over with yuh," said Talky, as if the South Platte were but a few moments away.

"Meantime," continued Jake, "they ain't no positive evidence who done it."

Morgan looked up sharply. He was certain that Nancy Chase had recognized him in the twilight.

"Well," said Jake, noticing his movement, "there wasn't no one else there, was there?"

"No," Morgan lied slowly, "there wasn't no one else there."

"Happy Bent says he saw a feller on a dark-lookin' horse movin' off; that's all. Fine evidence that is. A dark-lookin' horse! Li'ble to be took for most any horse but yore horse. An' o' course Talky and me didn't let on to know anythin' about it."

"Abner Cade is hell on guesses," Talky offered.

“He’ll call the turn pretty close,” Downey agreed. “But the general misconfusion will help out. All in all, I say you two ride to-night; yuh can get over the North Platte about sun-up, an’ pretty well clear o’ the whole works by to-morrow night. You should sleep in Colorado easy, to-morrow night.”

“No call for Talky to go,” said Slide. “I guess I can—”

“Ain’t no trouble,” Talky declared. “I need the ride.”

“Meantime I’ll do what I can to smooth it out at this end, an’ pretty quick we’ll—”

“I figgered to head south anyway, Jake. I—”

“Best take the black pacer for a extra horse, so’s you can push along steady. Sorry to work off a old plug like that on yuh, but prob’ly you’ll want one that won’t be missed here, in case anythin’ happens to him. He’s worthless, but mebbe he’ll do to hobble along on when the gray starts limpin’.”

“The black?” Slide exclaimed. “Next to my gray, that black is the best —”

“Pooh,” said Jake, “that jest shows yo’re not used to a real horse country like we got here. Did yuh oat him, Talky?”

“Oated all four soon’s I got back,” replied the other. “I put travelin’ oats in a sack.”

There was a mechanical smoothness about the plans offered, telling Slide that these men had discussed every move when first they had foreseen the probability of Cade’s death.

Talky, with a few efficient motions, packed into a pair of saddlebags the provisions which Slide had seen him lay aside.

“Talky doesn’t need to go puttin’ himself out,” Morgan protested again. “I guess I—”

“Don’t blame yuh a bit,” Jake said. “He shore is pestiferous. Mebbe you can give him the slip, after you’ve rode a piece.”

“I guess,” said Talky, “a man has a right to ride a ways with a friend,—or don’t the Vigilantes allow that, any more?”

Morgan, weakened by the after-effects of his first kill, protested no further. There was a bracing comfort in the dependability of these men, as rugged in their casual friendships as in the arduous labors which twisted short their lives.

They were on the prairie at last, riding southward at a steady trot; the muffled hoof-beats of the led horses, added to those of their mounts, gave the two-man outfit the sound of a cavalcade. It was curious to Morgan that by his side rode Talky Peters, the gangling, ribby fellow with the quizzically homely face, riding all night in the hope of rendering service to a man whom he scarcely knew. It added to the unrealness that shrouded everything about this night.

It was a strange thing to him, Cade's death by his hands. Perhaps if it had happened anywhere else than at the Arrow C he would have been able to regard it in a different light. But the nearness of the thing to Nancy Chase gave it weird colors. He tried to picture horror upon the girl's softly rounded face, but could not. It was terrible to know that the work of his hands had brought the death rattle to her ears, filled the cabin that sheltered her with the horrors of the unknown. . . .

The beat of the horse's hoofs began to drum a single word into his brain, over and over, until he broke into careless song to drown it out:

"Easy swing, easy slide,
Easy eat, easy ride,
Let the leather in the saddle take the wear;
Easy come, easy go,
Spend it fast, get it slow,
One place is like another, anywhere.
Anywhere, anywhere, *any*where!
One place is like another, anywhere."

The song drifted onto the breeze with a lilting semblance of gayety; there was a lifting swing to it that brought the gray horse temporarily into a light lope. Yet, presently, when the song had died away, that chanting word crept into the rhythm of the hoofs again: "Murderer . . . Murderer . . . Murderer. . . ."

CHAPTER VI

The Test of a Horse

1

FOR the second time within a brace of fortnights Slide Morgan leaned against a bar and heard himself discussed in ways that were strange. This time the bar was in Three Fingers, a one-saloon stop-over on the South Fork of the Republican River. The place was many a long day's ride from the nester's cabin on the South Platte toward which he had started, and Morgan was now alone; yet, as he listened to the appalling feats that were credited to his name, he found himself well content. In the long days in the saddle much of his natural buoyance had returned.

"Ten thousand dollars for takin' Cheyenne Morgan," marveled a mustached man, one of a group of five who lounged along the bar. "Ten thousand!"

"Dead or 'live," added the bartender, leaning his elbows on the bar.

Morgan's hair raised with sheer astonishment. He had never seen Abner Cade save at a distance; but he had heard him spoken of as a substantial, solid man, quiet, sure, and cool-headed. Evidently he was also a wealthy man; and it was apparent that his quietness had gone up in smoke.

"Biggest reward I ever heard of," commented a mild-mannered man with a blonde beard. "He sure must be a tough lot o' people."

"From what I heerd, he's *plenty* tough," said a swarthy cowboy with washed-out eyes. "I heerd they had him cornered in a saloon at Roarin' River, up on the North Platte, but he shot out the lights an' run up stairs. He was catched between two outfits on the stairs, but he fit his way clear, an' jumped out a window, an' stole a horse."

"They say Cheyenne Morgan's an awful close shot," said another. "They say he can shoot so's to light a match at a hundred yards."

Slide noticed how the men rolled the sonorous "Cheyenne Morgan" upon their tongues, as men speak the names of the unknown great. He began to wonder if he were the Cheyenne Morgan of whom they spoke, after all. He had never been called "Cheyenne" before. This doubt was removed by the next remark.

"Anyway, he overstepped when he killed Lew Cade," said the blonde-bearded man. "I've heard of Abner Cade before, an' he'll never leave go a thing, once he's took holt."

"He's got his hands full, from what I hear," said the swarthy cowboy. "They near nailed Cheyenne Morgan at Wrangle Crick; had him bottled up so's not even a rat could get away. But come mornin' he was gone."

"That's the Injun of it," said one. "An' a breed's forty times worse than a full-blooded Injun, *I* allus say."

"Abner Cade's posse is turrible on the shoot," said the man with the mustache. "Cade killed a feller over at Hammer Bend, jest fer lookin' at him cross-eyed, I guess. Folks there had to kind o' pass it off, admittin' it might o' been self-defense."

"Reckon one or two of 'em will get theirs, before they take Cheyenne Morgan."

"Mebbe. But *I* sure would be willin' to take a chance at him for that ten thousand!"

And, "So would I!" came the chorus. "Me too!"

Slide Morgan began to wonder just what he was up against. He strolled over to the open door of the saloon, on the half-finished boards of which was nailed a small handbill, printed in the black, awkward type of the day. He had noticed it as he came in, but had been too thirsty from his all-day ride to pause. He now casually read it.

$10,000
REWARD
for the capture of Cheyenne Morgan, murderer,
DEAD OR ALIVE

Outlaw is 22 to 25 years old. Half-breed. Black hair, black eyes, dark skin. Five feet nine or ten inches tall. 160 pounds. Last seen riding gray, black tail, fifteen hands. Also had black pacer, white saddle mark on off shoulder, sixteen hands. Speaks English perfect. Reward guaranteed by Abner Cade, Flying B.

MARVIN CONKLIN,
Constable, Roaring River.

Slide Morgan softly whistled through his teeth a bar or two of his principal song:

"Easy swing, easy slide,
Easy eat, easy ride,—"

Very casually he peered out into the warm dark to where his two horses were tied to the short hitch rack. The gray was unmistakably gray in the light of the full moon, but the black might have been brown or bay, for all a man could tell. The improvised pack that Morgan was making the black pacer carry seemed to cover that white saddle mark. Morgan turned back to the bar.

He marveled that his name and imaginary exploits had traveled so far from the region of the North Platte; but of course the monstrous reward placed upon his head by Abner Cade, coupled with the natural speed of spectacular rumors, accounted for that. It was now his hope that he might pick up some stray fragments of information as to what the pursuit was doing.

Of course, if Cade's posse of Vigilantes were on the right scent he could not expect to get advance knowledge of their approach; their fresh horses would outrun even rumor's wings. Yet this was a strange pursuit, with much about it that he did not understand. Never before, for instance, had he heard of a hunt so stubbornly persistent. For three weeks Morgan had twisted and turned, thinking at each doubling of his trail that he was clear at last. But though they had thrice lost the trail entirely, the Vigilantes came on. When they lost him altogether they quartered the country with almost uncannily accurate guesswork until they were close on his heels again.

A scrap of random information as to the posse's whereabouts might mean the little, slender difference between life and death for the pursued. Morgan ordered another drink, and, while appearing to drowse over it, listened.

"Did they get this feller Peters?" somebody was asking. And Slide, who had heard no word of Talky since they had become separated two weeks before, felt his interest redouble.

"Nobody knows," the blonde-bearded man replied. "I guess he jest went to work an' disappeared."

A sudden premonition of danger came to Slide Morgan out of the night, so suddenly and so unaccountably that his hand paused with his whisky glass half way to his lips. He listened intently for a distant sound, and studied the other men along the bar; but, search as he might, he could find no cause for his swift hunch. He thrust it down, and tried to listen to the conversation.

“I know this much,” said the man with the mustache gravely: “They’ve got there all the fixin’s for a first-class cattle war. An’ if things don’t change ____”

Once more, wrenching his mind from the words of the strangers, there came to Morgan a keen sense of danger, this time so strong, so impelling in its tugging urge that it was no longer to be ignored. His ears strained; and now it seemed to him that he could hear a faint, low, shuffling murmur, so vague that it might have been a breath of air upon an eyelash—or it might have been the sound of horses, far away. For only a moment it came to him, so weakly that he couldn’t tell whether it were imagination or truth; then he heard it no more.

Very gently he set his empty glass upon the bar, and laid a gold piece quietly beside it. The instant the gold piece was out of his fingers he forgot it; again his ears were searching the distance for that faint, almost indistinguishable murmur of hoofs. He could hear nothing; perhaps, if riders were indeed coming in, they had reined their horses to a walk, so that they made little sound upon the springy soil.

Thus, walking more softly than he realized, Morgan left the Three Fingers Bar, and went into the night without waiting for change; and the eyes of five strangers and a barkeeper were impelled by that gold piece to follow him as he went.

2

Reaching the hitch rack, Morgan instantly began to unsaddle the gray horse, his fingers working swiftly with the latigo strap. When both cinchas hung clear, Morgan dropped the pack of the black horse on to the hitch rack; then he placed the saddle on the rack beside it.

He could hear those approaching hoofs again now, much closer than he would have believed; some trick of the dull, hot breeze had held those sounds away.

As he took the saddle and blanket from the gray, a third indescribable warning came to him, subtly different from those he had received before. No voices now issued from the bar. Without raising his head he peered along the side of the low building which housed the saloon. Something had stirred there in the shadows. He studied those shadows from beneath the brim of his hat, while his hands automatically shook the blanket free of folds.

He could see figures there now, the figures of at least three men. Two or more of them appeared as a mere black huddle, against the outer wall of the

saloon; but the third stood a little apart, a tall, bow-legged figure which stood as motionlessly alert as a listening fox.

An odd tensity, together with a peculiar cold calm, came over Morgan with this certain knowledge that he was watched. In the instant that his hands continued to shake the sodden blanket, he decided that these men were not yet certain; that they merely watched, and waited for a sign.

Then the black horse pivoted, and for an instant the white saddle mark shone dully in the moonlight, full broadside to those erect watching figures in the shadow.

Morgan's hair raised, but he gave no sign. Quietly, efficiently, the speed of his hands gauged carefully to that of the approaching hoofs, he saddled the black horse. As a precaution, he untied the animal, keeping the rope end in his hand. Then he crossed behind the gray horse to its near side; took the reins from where they lay loose across the hitch rail, and deftly removed the bridle. It seemed to him that his progress was terribly slow; yet he dared not hurry, lest a quick move assure those motionless strangers in the shadow that his was the $10,000 head.

"Jest a minnit, stranger." The words came in a mild drawl, gently brushing aside the silence of the night.

It was the long-boned man with the out-curved legs who spoke; he had stepped out of the shadows as quietly as an appearing ghost. Across his arm lay the long, dull barrel of a heavy buffalo gun; behind him four other men moved quietly. The brilliant moonlight caught here the glint of an eye, there the exaggerated flash of a belt buckle. But for these shining things, the figures in the moonlight might have been rudely molded from a greenish clay.

Morgan's left hand gripped the black mane of the gray just before the withers; with his other elbow he forced the horse to turn so that he no longer faced the hitch rack.

"Yeah?" said Morgan.

"Jest come round from behind the horse for a minnit," said the mild voice apologetically. "We want to talk to yuh." The tall man took a half-step closer, with a movement curiously like an old dog who inspects an unknown thing.

"All right," said Morgan agreeably. The sound of approaching hoofs was closer now; if he had dared turn his head to the northward, he knew that he might have seen the approaching men and horses, dim through the

moonlight. He shifted the black's lead rope into the hand that gripped the mane. His fingers found the quirt that dangled from his right wrist.

Then suddenly the quirt cracked upon the gray's rump. Morgan, gripping the animal's mane, bounded forward with the horse as the gray leaped ahead. The black's lead rope whistled through his hand, taking with it the skin; but just before the end of the rope was reached the drag upon it ceased. The black followed, full stride.

On the second bound of the gray, Morgan's revolver was in his hand; on the third bound he fired over the back of his horse as he ran with a sort of galloping step by its side. Meantime the heavy buffalo gun roared with a mighty report, and death streaked over Morgan's head.

The revolvers began to speak now, their sharp, staccato barks following the roar of the heavy gun as wolves follow an elk. Lead whistled and whistled again, but there were no hits in the uncertain light. On the fifth bound of the gray horse Morgan leaped astride, fairly swung into his seat by the haul of the gray's motion.

Riding low on the horse's neck, Morgan raked with his spurs. The lead rope of the black horse strained, and the pacer was forced into a hard gallop as they streaked for the open prairie.

Now a new element entered the situation. Morgan had counted on gaining a lead of at least a few rods while the other men found their horses and mounted. Instead, a terrific smother of hoofs sounded close behind him. Peering back over his shoulder through the silvery half-light, he could clearly see three hard-ridden horses. The approaching riders had swung into the chase without halt.

Already the three were beginning to string out; a horse the dim color of the moonlight was well in the lead, much nearer than a hundred yards, and distancing the other two.

Now the guns began to speak again behind him. First one report; then another; then three that blended together, like the breaking of a stranded rope. They crashed violently in the still night, insane voices of death. Morgan could hear the brief whirring whistle of the bullets over his head, instantaneously with the explosion of the guns.

There was a pause. Then a single gun banged, a trifle closer than before. Almost at the instant of the report a savage jolt shook the horse beneath him; the gray's breath left him in a great gasping snort, and his head went up, bared teeth to the sky, as his hindquarters stumbled and sank. The gray was

down, hind legs crumpled, forelegs sprawled before him, pawing impotently as he desperately strove to rise.

Morgan had wound the lead rope of the black pacer around his left hand. The black leaped over him as the man was thrown almost under the galloping hoofs; then Morgan's arm was almost jerked from its socket as the horse hit the end of the rope. The hauling shock jerked the man bodily several yards, and the black horse, his head snatched downward, tripped and somersaulted. The report of the gun and the sod-tearing thuds of the falling horses had sounded almost together; yet, as Morgan turned on his side, gun still in hand, the horse whose color was moonlight was almost upon him.

The fallen man fired two snap shots, as rapidly as his thumb could raise the hammer; and the moonlight horse went down.

The black horse scrambled to his feet, and in the instant that the animal stood trembling with spraddled legs Morgan gained the horse's head. The black whirled away from him in a panic as he tried to mount, but somehow he grasped the horn with the same hand that held his gun, and heaved into the saddle as the horse bolted.

An unrecognizable voice was crying out from where the moonlight horse had fallen, a voice twisted in agony, almost a scream. "Oh, good God!" it yelled. "For Christ's sake help me! I'm pinned!"

Looking back over his shoulder, Morgan saw the two other riders pull up, and one of them sprang to the ground. The other paused for only a few seconds, then came on; but in that brief space of time the bolted black had given Morgan a lead of many rods.

Now from between the three buildings of the town there came scurrying riders, first two, racing abreast; then another, and finally one more. The men from the Three Fingers bar were into it at last. Morgan pumped the ejector of his forty-five, and replaced the three empty shells with cartridges from a pouch at his belt. A random shot or two came from the pursuers from the town from the extreme limit of pistol range, but the bullets were lost.

The single rider from the posse of three came on without firing, riding straight up and up, his outpointed elbows waving with the motion of his horse in the cowboy way. He was well within range, but he held his fire, striving to close the gap. Morgan fired no more.

Thus they fled south through the moonlight from Three Fingers on the Republican; and as the seconds lengthened into minutes the black horse began to gain. How far the other mount had traveled, Slide Morgan had no means of telling. He was certain now that the three men who had dashed

through Three Fingers in pursuit of him were the Roaring River posse—perhaps all of it, perhaps only a part. The man now riding hard behind him rode with the solid seat that he now knew characterized Abner Cade; Talky Peters had pointed the man out to him at a distance upon a day that they had lain in the sage and watched the hunters pass.

He believed, too, that he had recognized the stocky figure of Marve Conklin, the Roaring River constable, upon the moonlight-colored horse; the other man he did not know. He knew these men would be riding the best saddlers that money could procure; but if their horses were jaded by a hard day's travel the black had a racing chance. The pacer was worn lean from three weeks' travel, but he had been constantly bolstered with grain, and though he had a long day's journey behind him he was a fast horse still.

It was an even chance that the cowboys of Three Fingers would be upon horses of inferior worth. It was inconceivable that in this night's race there should be a fourth horse as good as the black pacer, the gray, and the streaking moonlight horse that he had shot down. Already his mind was reaching forward to his next expedients, as calmly as if the brother of the man he had killed were not but a scant hundred and fifty yards behind.

As he watched that other racing horse, dropping away ever so slowly behind him he saw a sudden stab of flame from the gun of the man he believed to be Abner Cade. Four more shots followed in swift succession, then silence again, and the drumming of hoofs. Then, for a time the pursuit fell rapidly behind, the cowboys from Three Fingers closing up upon Cade's failing mount.

Now that the first phase of the chase was over, a swift urge came upon Morgan to spur the panting black horse to a heroic effort, in an attempt to lose the pursuit once and for all in the dimness of the moon-bathed prairie. But instead he began to steady the horse with the hackamore rope; so that presently he brought the black out of the gallop into his long walloping pace. A hard pace will equal a dead run, sometimes; and every moment that he could hold his own by pacing was in his favor.

There were cloud banks to the west; not solid banks, in great billowing blocks, but long wispy reefs, obscuring the stars like dark smoke. If they should climb the sky and overtake the high moon he would have his chance of escape. Bunched together now, almost a quarter of a mile behind, rode three pursuers; two more strung out behind, perhaps nursing their horses along for the ultimate spurt, when his own black and the others should have tired.

And so they rode and rode over open prairie where low clumps of milkweed, tumble-weed, and thistle varied the monotony of the buffalo grass; and though sometimes the pursuit was lost to sight among the long swells and sags of ground, those three clustered riders hung on, apparently always the same distance behind. The steady breeze of the pacer's motion cooled him, drying the perspiration that had dampened his shirt during the heat of the day, and an exhilaration came upon him. In his heart was but one regret, one sorrow—and that was for the game gray horse that lay far behind him on the plain, perhaps still struggling to rise from the prairie that his hoofs would never spurn again.

3

At the end of an hour's ride Morgan approached a river along which rose a long phalanx of willows, cottonwoods, and ash. And here he would have turned along the stream, in an effort to shake at least a part of his pursuers by means of the shielding trees; but because of the more treacherous footing he dared not. So he forded the nameless river and pressed on, taking such advantage as he could of the terrain to make his movements more obscure. And still the black horse paced, paced, and paced, lengthening his swaying gait at the touch of the spur, but never breaking that long stride.

When the pursuit presently emerged from among the trees they were a little farther behind. At the distance an untrained eye would not have perceived them in the deceptive dimness of the light from the moon; but Morgan's eyes caught the faint blur of shadow, and the distant, minute suggestion of movement on the plain that told him they were there.

On they went, on and on and on, and still the pursuit clung; only two horses followed, he thought, now, the third, fourth, and fifth having fallen away. Doubtless, he knew, the others would be in at the kill, if any; though they had dropped out of his sight, they probably had retained sight of each other, and could thus compute his own movements as watching buzzards know the news by watching each other from miles away.

Another hour passed, and a third; Morgan could no longer tell whether behind him were two horses, or but one. It seemed certain that by now the following mounts would be badly worn; probably there was not one among them who had not done a day's work before the setting of the sun. And though they had probably been under less prolonged a strain than the black, it was also likely that they were grass-fed horses, while the black was grounded in grain.

It was an even race yet; he knew that the pursuing horses must be galloping, and galloping hard. But the black pacer, blowing now, with the foam driving back over the rider's chaparajos in great blobs, was pacing still —and held his own.

He was wearing down, that black; fresh from ten days' rest he would have been tireless, untouched. But the three weeks of steady travel had told. There had been plenty of grain, but too little grass; plenty of water, but not enough rest. There had been no time in the southward flight for the black to sustain the reserves that would have proved his true worth now. And at last, as the long hammering stride wore to a harsher, laboring pound, Morgan knew that the time for escape was short.

He waited until that dogging blur far back there in the moonlight had been hidden behind more than one long swell of ground; then swiftly he turned to the left, and rode eastward, at right angles to the course of the pursuit. Now he touched with the spurs and the laboring horse strove to respond. He touched again, without effect, then three times more; and the black at last broke into a hard stretching gallop, strong headed, game to the core. In that horse there was but one means in life, and one religion; to run, run, and run, until his long legs gave from under, and he dropped.

A low whistling moan came into the desperate breathing of the black; he stumbled on flat ground, caught himself, and drove on. The pursuit was not yet in sight. A half a mile, a mile at this terrific pace, and horse and man would be clear, having accomplished the change of direction without discovery in the blurring dimness of the moon.

"Black horse, black horse," prayed Morgan, "give me what you've got!"

The black horse was. Once more he faltered in his stride, stumbling as they descended the faintest suggestion of a dip; almost the horse fell. Then suddenly the rhythm of his gallop changed, and belly to the ground, spraddling madly, he bolted with a terrible burst of speed.

Instantly Morgan swung from the saddle, hands gripping the halter; and, half running, half hanging on the horse's neck, he dragged the brute to a stop. There was no alternative; he knew that there could be nothing good in this final burst of effort, but only a fatigue-crazed insanity. In a moment or two the horse would have gone down, perhaps never to get up.

Quickly Morgan untied the blanket roll that lay upon the saddlebags, and flung it to the ground. The contingency now upon him was not one for which he had planned; yet now that the moment for a new course of action had come he found that he knew what he must do. Kicking open the bed roll, he found the moccasins which Nugget Sam Dunston had given him on a

day that now seemed sunk in the distant past, as if it were ages ago. He wrenched off his tight, high-heeled boots, a task that wasted many seconds, and put on the moccasins instead.

As an afterthought he tied one of the boots into the tail of the black horse, winding a wisp of hair about the spur. For a moment he considered taking his saddle from the horse, to carry it upon his own back. It hurt him to leave his saddle; he had ridden many horses, but his saddle was a part of him, always with him on them all. Never was such a saddle as the saddle that was his; but the beat of hoofs came to him, and decided it.

Hurriedly he wrenched the saddlebags containing the last of his provisions from the saddle. Then he clucked to the black horse, and cut the animal across the rump with his quirt. The horse sprang forward, paced a few strides, then broke into a hard gallop, the boot tied in his tail urging him on at every jump. Running hard, the horse faded off into the dimness of the moon.

The beat of the hoofs was closer now—too close. The clinging pursuit had perceived his change of direction, and by cutting across the angle had gained an eighth of a mile of ground. Morgan bent low to the ground and ran. He could see the rider plainly in the moonlight, coming at a laboring gallop. Morgan stumbled, plunged headlong into the patch of weed and sage, and lay still.

Moving cautiously, he drew his revolver from its holster, and twisted his body so as to be able to shoot. For a moment he thought that the rider would sweep past, following the running black. Then the rider sighted the blanket roll, far to one side, and turned his horse to make sure, perhaps, if it were not the fallen figure of a man. And as he did so, he appeared to catch sight of the movement in the sage as Morgan turned.

Morgan pressed the gun flat against the ground, covering it with his hand that the dark metal might not glint, and lay quiet. He saw the rider hesitate, draw his gun. The man's horse stood motionless, blowing, his head low, his legs spread. For a long, long moment man and horse stood as if carved of rock, the man's eyes upon the dark blot in the sage but fifty strides away.

Both men, above the hard breathing of Cade's horse, could hear the receding hoof-beats of the galloping black. Then Cade swore, and fired once into the sage where Morgan lay; then wheeled his horse, spurred on, and was lost in the night. A twig of sage fell upon the back of Morgan's gloved hand; but for the present death had passed on.

Morgan immediately rose and walked southward, his moccasined feet quiet upon the grass.

For a long time he walked southward, long after the hoof-beats had died away, until the moon itself had lowered, lowered, and sunk behind the broken rim of the west.

This after all was his element, his way of life, to be alone. The prairie was his prairie, the world that he understood. Except that he was horseless and afoot, he felt that he had never been more at home than he was this night upon a plain which he had never before trod. The prairie noises came to his ears as he walked: the whispering movement of a bull snake, in the slender-stemmed grass; the low, purring cry of a ground owl; the distant nickering, yapping cry of a coyote, far away. . . .

In the dark hour before the dawn Morgan found himself in a slightly rougher country, broken by slight rolling hills, and cut by dry ravines. Finding a coulee to his liking, he built a tiny fire, such as Indians build, and cooked himself first bread, then salt pork, then coffee, all successively in the single utensil he carried—a frying pan.

As he finished his cookery he put out the fire with scraped-up earth, and settled himself to eat sparingly, but in comfort.

As he ate, a new prairie voice came to his ears. From a high place perhaps a mile to the west sounded the long bass howl of a wolf. Twice the wolf howled, and paused, then howled twice more.

To the southeast, another mile from Morgan, a second wolf answered. And, presently, far to the east, a third wolf howled once, so far away that Morgan could barely make out the dim brute voice, faint in the quiet of the night.

The first wolf barked three times, throaty, grunting barks, undog-like and deep, but with an odd power to carry a great distance over the rolling plain. The second answered, and finally the third from the far away.

Morgan had paused in his munching to listen, but now he resumed, pondering on the language of the wolves, and wondering what it was they said. The voices continued at intervals, crying distantly to each other over the starlit plain; and presently Morgan began to wonder if he were sure of what it was he heard.

There was something unwolf-like in the barks of the second wolf. Sometimes he suspected that it was no wolf's voice that he heard in the southeast, a mile or more away, but something else. The third wolf voice was too far away to judge by; but the first was strong and clear, and so

thoroughly wolf-like that when it sounded again Morgan laughed at himself for thinking any but true wolves were calling to each other on the plain.

For a long time the wolf songs sounded far to either side of his resting place in the dry coulee, calling and answering, answering and calling again; but at last they called no more, and a living peace lay upon the prairie.

Slide Morgan rested his head upon a saddlebag, pulled his knees up under his chin, and slept.

CHAPTER VII

Laughing Coyote

1

HE was wakened by the sound of a shot, breaking his heavy sleep just before the light of dawn. For a moment he lay motionless, wide awake, but no more than half certain of the sound that had awakened him. Two more shots followed, the voices of the rifles, the reports coming too close together to be from one gun. They sounded far to the north. Presently they were followed by the distant sound of a galloping pony, to the northwest, and closer perhaps than the reports of the guns. Then all sound died.

Hurriedly he shouldered his precious saddlebags and after a hasty survey of the gray prairie, leaped from his coulee and ran southward. The light of morning was coming into the east, where hung long streamers of deep crimson, backed by an increasing glow of greenish gold. In the dusky west there still shone paling stars; not yet was there sufficient light for a man to see for any distance.

He ran in a muscle-bound trot, as riders run, taking but few precautions to avoid discovery in the shadowy dimness of first dawn. While he ran, his feet quiet in their moccasins, he strained his every sense to detect a movement on the prairie; but neither his eyes nor ears were able to learn anything more.

The light increased as his breath began to labor; he bent forward, to run more closely to the ground. The last stars died, and the prairie went gray with the dawn, so that presently he dared run no more for fear of the unseen, unheard hunters behind. There was a long, rolling rise ahead of him, clothed with weed and sage. He was about to make a final sprint to put the swell of ground behind him, when something gave him pause.

Far ahead and to the right, from some place that was hidden to him, had come the low, coughing bark of a wolf. It was short and soft-edged, almost drowned by his own breath and thudding heart; yet his high-strung senses left him in doubt as to what it was he had heard.

Ordinarily the sound would have brought him swift relief, assuring him that there were none waiting behind that long rise of ground, and that once he had crossed it he would be alone. But now that odd premonition of danger was again upon him, a nameless warning too strong to be denied.

Without reasoning, answering only the primitive urge of premonition, he dropped silently into the border of the sage.

The sage was scattering; but between its low, substantial clumps had risen silver-gray milkweed, thistle, and the delicate thorny tangle of buffalo beans, so that there was ample cover for a crawling man. Through this low-ranged cover he wormed, slowly and carefully, toward the crest of the rise.

And now, in the increasing light, he discovered a single horseman far to the rear, rifle ready in his hands, coming on at a slow walk. The man was riding slightly to the west of south; but as Morgan watched he saw the horse swerve uncertainly, until its course was slightly to the east. So, then, they had learned that he was dismounted. The man was plainly searching the prairie for a hidden thing—and Morgan knew only too well what that thing was. The horseman's direction would make him pass near the man who lay waiting in the sage—if he passed at all.

Man and horse were lost behind an irregularity of ground. Hardly had they disappeared when Morgan sighted a second horse and rider a quarter of a mile westward, and somewhat behind the first. In a few moments a third rider appeared on a low hill-top far to the east; horse and man stood for a moment in silhouette, tiny and black against the vast glow of red and green-gold; then left the hill-top and disappeared.

How they had discovered his general whereabouts Morgan could only surmise. However that may have been, it was apparent that they were now combing the plain on which he lay. Since he had seen three horsemen, it was certain there must be more—five, six, seven, or many. It might well be that the advancing riders formed a segment of a circle which widened as they advanced, so that if the leaders missed him there would still be no escape. Their uncanny accuracy in combing the one section of the limitless prairie on which he lay lent an air of fatalism to the movements of these persistent men; more and more Morgan felt that he was caught in the grip of events that had been planned ages before by unseen fates, and now moved indomitably toward their close. Later he was to learn what it was that had led them there; but now the mystery of it added a deadly weight of sureness to the riders' far-flung approach.

Slowly, cautiously, that no weed-stem might signal to a far-off eye, Morgan crept to the top of the gradual rise and over it, until the swell of ground was between himself and the pursuit. A mile away—a long, long mile—he perceived a line of close-grouped trees that told him where a river ran. Could he have gained its banks there would have been such cover there as a man might use with effect; or failing cover, he might have hidden in the

yellow waters themselves, his face concealed by a drifting branch. The river meant escape; but he could never cross that mile of open ground alive.

Nearer, scarcely fifty long strides away, ran a twisting, dry coulee, breast-deep, its banks sometimes sharp-carved and overhanging, sometimes crumbling away. It was a natural rifle-trench; in low ground of course, but better to fire from, nevertheless, than weeds which the bullets never knew were there. It would make it harder for a surrounding party to snipe him from behind; and though at this point the ridge gave the posse excellent cover, there must be other points along that coulee where conditions were nearly ideal for the defensive fighting of a cornered man.

He gathered himself to dash on hands and knees for the little ravine; yet somehow he could not bring himself to start. That nameless warning was breathing in his ears; it had increased as he topped the rise, placing upon him a caution far beyond that necessary for his end. He recalled the bark of the wolf, the natural signal of a safety which he could not bring himself to trust. He cursed himself for a fool; but even as he did so that intangible warning was telling him that within the ravine lay death.

Slide Morgan had followed hunches all his life without experiencing the deadlock of will which he now felt. He struggled to break it, but could not. And so, at last, Morgan slowly turned his body in the spot where he lay, until he could peer over the crest through the weeds at the approaching, slow horsemen, nearer now; and, laying his conspicuous hat aside, waited for the inevitable to come.

2

Now that they were at grips at last, Morgan realized that he was glad.

The weeks of dodging, long days and nights spent in uncertainty as to the whereabouts of those who hunted him, had worn Slide Morgan more than he had known. The deadly malignance of this pursuit expressed in the grim persistence with which they hung on had bewildered the fugitive and shaken his confidence.

Long man hunts were little known in the parts of the west in which he had grown up. He had seen killings in plenty. He had seen men who had not met for years open fire upon each other at sight. At least once he had seen a quiet mob of forty or fifty angered men—the entire population of a community—swing into the saddle to ride headlong after an unfortunate whose dangling body they swore should decorate the nearest tall tree. But the pursuers dwindled upon the second day of the chase, and by the third

night the last had turned back, satisfied that the culprit would travel far enough to trouble them no more.

But this chase was different. A small party—sometimes three, sometimes five—had followed him as best they could, losing the trail here, picking it up again there, but always following with the unswerving attention of wolves who have picked their meat. For them there was no halting to talk it over, no suggestion of turning aside nor giving it up. They awaited no developments, but rode. Apparently they were always able to secure horses that were fresh.

But in addition to these armed men, it seemed that certain couriers had ridden through the countries southwest, southeast, and south. While he and Talky Peters had still traveled together, much time had been lost by them in doubling, hiding out, twisting, following devious schemes that were chiefly the product of Talky's free-roving mind. Thus the news of the Cade killing together with information as to the heavy reward upon Morgan's head, had of late been ahead of him wherever he had gone.

At a lonely granger dugout, a woman had fired at him point blank when he dismounted to ask for water. On the Colorado border a suspiciously kind-eyed man named Hughes had offered him employment as a gunman in a certain project that went undescribed; and promptly set a party of three hard-looking customers upon his trail when he had declined. In Mack's Halt he overheard a rumor that Abner Cade had sold everything he had, and borrowed to the hilt, raising fifty thousand dollars to conduct the pursuit. He later learned that this was only partly true.

Not a man, nor a posse, nor a county, but a whole territory seemed to be raised against the careless cowboy called Morgan, now branded as a professional killer and a half-breed Cheyenne.

Not a little of the general animosity against him, Morgan realized, was the result of this lie as to his blood. Too many of the scattered men of the west had lost relatives, friends, or stock at the hands of Indian braves to leave an atom of sympathy for one believed to be of tribal blood. With so tremendous a reward upon his head, there were probably not three strangers in the country who would have hesitated to kill him for his scalp, as readily as they would have shot a coyote, or a snake.

Of late the black-and-yellow handbills advertising the reward had cropped up in nearly every settlement that he had been forced to visit. As much as possible he had avoided the habitations of men. But when in need of supplies he had several times ridden boldly into camps or rudimentary towns and had found that the news of the hunt was there always before him.

He often wondered whether or not he would ever be able to lead a normal life in the midst of this monstrous fabric that had been woven against him, even should he escape and outlive the malignance of Abner Cade. He was loath to leave the country that he knew and loved. Yet recently he had been searching with increasing desperation for a clear path to Mexico, California, or even the east. It seemed that his single misaimed blow in the dusk at Moccasin Lake had warped the course of his life past all recognition. Indeed, it threatened to cut off that life altogether; nothing seemed more likely to Morgan than that he should soon gasp out his life in some remote buffalo wallow, futilely fighting against too great odds.

Sometimes the mood that had been upon him the night of Lew Cade's death would return, and he would again hear the deadly, morbid refrain in the hoof-beats of his horse—"Murderer . . . Murderer . . ." At such a time it would seem to him that he was another man, different from other men, with a mark of death upon his soul that nothing could remove.

Oftener he thought of Nancy Chase and the ranch on Moccasin Lake. As the days ran into weeks the memories remained poignant, undimmed. It was his hope that some day they would come no more.

But no man can long endure a battle in the dark, nor endless flight from an enemy unseen. Morgan liked the thought of death no better than other men. He had never been a fighter, nor an uncommonly reckless man; but the seeds of battle were in him, as they were in all men whose forebears walked light-hearted into the rigors of the West when the West was young. Better a fight, be the odds ever so great, than a perpetual horse race that promised no conclusion.

Thus it was with a light heart that Slide Morgan watched the inevitable closing in of Abner Cade's men; and resting his chin on his arm, waited for what he knew might well be the end.

3

The sun now lifted suddenly above the rim of the plain, its long rays dusting the crests of the swells with gold and deepening the blue-gray shadows in the hollows that it could not yet touch. Then for a long time it seemed to rise no more; it was as if time had stopped, the world hanging poised in a cool bright light eternally young. How long Morgan lay watching the slow approach he did not know. It seemed to be for hours; it could not have been for long.

Sometimes the three widespread horsemen were visible at once. Sometimes one, or all, were concealed by the dips of ground that the shadows colored like standing pools. When they reappeared again they were closer; their eyes swept the plain. Thus a long time seemed to pass, until Morgan recognized the man in the center as Abner Cade.

He sat squarely in the saddle, this man, ruggedly erect, and yet at rest; in his bearing there was a perpetual weariness, yet in his very passivity there was that suggestion of permanence that a man feels when he looks upon granite rock. The horse plodded with low-swung head, far more tired than the man; their movements made horse and man seem one, the figure in the saddle supplying the unfaltering purpose that made them both press on. And in spite of the swerving aimlessness of their groping course, horse and rider slowly neared the place where Morgan lay hidden in the sage. It was as if the very will of Abner Cade were guiding him unfailingly to the man on whose hands was his brother's blood.

Morgan studied him curiously in the cool morning light, for, save at a distance, he had not yet seen this man who held all things less desirable than Benjamin Morgan's death. He could make out now that the man's face was square, massive, and grimly lined. The broad hat was jammed low over his eyes, which Morgan could not yet make out; but he knew that they would be curiously light in color, looking shallow and hard, with surface lights. This, then, was the man who had ridden three hundred miles that they might meet, and would gladly, for the same purpose, ride three thousand more.

A fierce exultation came upon the waiting man, an emotion that was as far from fear as from wrath. His hands were trembling from the sheer strain of the suspense, but he knew that with the first shot every trace of this would be gone. He was eager for the smell of powder now; only with great difficulty did he restrain himself from opening fire. But a part of his mind, at least, remained calculating and cool.

Closer; closer; Morgan would soon catch the glint of those light eyes. Closer; within a hundred yards now! The rider paused and studied the sage-clothed rise upon which Morgan lay. The waiting man sensed the movement of Cade's eyes as they reached the faintly bent stems of milkweed where Morgan had crawled; and an electric shock went through Morgan as the man became motionless, fixed. Then, suddenly, man and horse moved directly toward him at an ambling trot.

With fist resting on the ground Morgan aimed, slowly, carefully, and waited. When he saw those eyes, he would fire between them. When he saw those light eyes—

A spurt of dust leaped up a few feet in front of Cade's horse, and a bullet ricocheted with a moaning whine. Instantly there followed the report of a rifle from far to the left, where the coulee writhed northward beyond the end of the dying ridge. Looking westward, Morgan saw a tiny wisp of smoke drift upward from the gully's lip, and lose itself in the morning air.

Cade jerked his horse about so savagely that the tired animal became quiveringly alert. For a moment he stared while he located that faint wisp of pale smoke; then he spurred his horse punishingly, and rode at a dead run in a direction that would drive close by the point from which the shot had come.

Morgan was temporarily at a loss, amazed at the intervention of the unknown rifleman. Then a solution flashed through his brain.

"Talky Peters!"

Without pausing to think how Talky could have mysteriously arrived in the coulee, Morgan aimed at Cade and fired. Cade swung in his saddle, bringing his horse to a stop on its haunches. The bullet, Morgan judged, must have been close, by the effect of its whistling flight. Cade half-raised his rifle; apparently he could see nothing, and was waiting for a second gun-flash. Morgan waited.

Cade held his fire, attempting to steady his now excited horse. A rider from the east was closing in as fast as his horse could stretch, and Cade signaled to the man, pointing to where Morgan lay. Then he rode off to the assistance of the third rider, to the west, who was spurring hard toward the point from which the first shot had come.

Morgan turned his attention to the rider from the east, trusting Talky—or whoever his unknown rescuer was—to stand off the other two, until he himself could approach within pistol range. The rider from the east was coming headlong; Morgan could not recognize him, if indeed he had ever seen him before.

Waiting until horse and man were well within range, Morgan fired. The horse went down, the man falling clear. Morgan fired again as the man dashed for the rifle he had dropped in the fall, but the shot took no effect. A moment later the man was behind his fallen horse. Deliberately the rifle began to speak. A bullet fled over Morgan's head, whispering "Cousin" as it passed. A long pause; another.

The man on the ridge could not retire, lest a movement of the weeds mark a target. Instead, he drew a careful bead upon the top of the man's hat and waited. When the head lifted, he would fire. A new diversion caused

him to turn his head. At the bend of the gully from which the first shot had come, Cade had met the rider from the west. Apparently they had ridden boldly forward, for they were within a few yards of the coulee's edge. As Morgan's eyes found them he saw the unknown rider topple from his saddle. A tiny wisp of smoke, almost imperceptible, drifted up from a point in the coulee fully two hundred yards beyond. It seemed that the unseen gunner had shifted his position with an incredible speed. Morgan heard Cade's rifle speak; then he turned his eyes back to the man behind the fallen horse at the foot of his ridge. He glimpsed the man's eyes over the barrel of the rifle, as he apparently waited for Morgan to move.

Instantly Morgan fired twice. A third report answered from below. Morgan's right arm jerked upward as if snatched by a rope, and the revolver fell from his hand.

Dazed, he examined his hand and arm. A jagged diagonal streak showed across his wrist, marked in sudden red. Down the palm of his dangling hand a swift rivulet raced; the blood began to trickle from the end of his little finger in quick drops.

The urge of desperation took Morgan as he overcame the dazed realization that he was hurt. That this almost surely was the end he did not stop to think; he knew only that he was hurt, unable to fire, and must swiftly take cover or die. Yet a single isolated portion of his mind remained cool, so cool that his left hand stabbed the pistol into his belt, and seized both his hat and his saddlebags as he dragged himself backward, downhill, toward the coulee.

His maimed right hand was useless in crawling, so that as soon as he had placed the crest between himself and the enemy he struggled to his feet and ran. At the lip of the ravine he flung hat and saddlebags in ahead of him, and gripped his flowing wrist with his left hand. In the next instant he stumbled headlong over the four-foot drop.

In the instant that he fell, something moved in the coulee, Morgan strove to check himself, but could not. He twisted blindly as he crashed upon the sandy bottom, wrenching the pistol from his belt with his left hand.

No more than three long strides away crouched a bronze-skinned figure on the flat floor of the coulee. One lean knee was drawn up under the bowed body; one hand rested upon the ground, one upon the wall of the cut, in such a position as a cornered bear might take. Beneath the satiny red-brown skin of the naked shoulders the muscles lay knotted; over them fell strands of coarse hair, like the tail of a black horse. From a lean, dry-carved face,

close-set eyes watched Morgan, narrow eyes, dark and deep, with surface lights. In the right hand, pressed against the coulee's wall, was a knife.

Morgan swiftly counted the shots he had fired; they were five, all that his gun had held. He dared not raise the pistol, lest that lean figure be upon him; but he held it ready against the ground in his left hand, an unspoken threat that lied. His eyes were drawn to the knife; once it had been a butcher knife, to judge by the heavy wooden handle, but now the blade was worn incongruously thin, a narrow skewer like a rigid blade of marsh grass that Morgan in no way liked. He met the eyes of the Indian, and waited.

The man who confronted him was young, yet his face was drawn in hard lines that might have been an expression of suffering, of an intent purpose, or yet might have represented nothing more than the natural form of a face now in repose. The eyes told nothing, but watched unfalteringly, as an animal's eyes can watch.

Pain was now coming into Morgan's wounded wrist, white-hot, shattering; shuddering waves of it ran up his arm, sickening him. It played in his wrist with a throbbing beat, and down his limp right hand the blood ran unceasingly. He was supporting himself upon his left elbow, and now the muscles of his shoulder began to tremble. He felt that he was being bled white; his strength already seemed to be leaving him, and a mist of giddiness was rising in his brain.

Still the Indian made no move, but Morgan knew that only a miracle could extricate him now. There was no longer any doubt as to who had fired the shots that turned Abner Cade aside. He now understood the wolf voices in the night, and the bark of the wolf in the coulee that had somehow warned him that no refuge for him lay there. Armed with an empty gun and one hand against an Indian with a knife, with other Indians in the coulee, and, beyond, the rifles of Abner Cade, Morgan took the only expedient that remained, and lowered himself into the hands of fate.

He took his finger from the trigger of the gun, and tossed the weapon to the feet of the Indian. Fumbling words of that half-remembered Indian tongue came into his mouth.

"I am of the Tsis-tsis-tas," he said in the dialect that Partridge Geer had unearthed in his mind, "a Cheyenne." He hardly knew what it was he had said, but he knew that it was conciliatory—if the Indian were friendly to the tribe he had named. "I cannot shoot any more. Take my gun. Do what you can."

The young Indian did not reply. He leaned his shoulder against the wall of the coulee in an odd, slumping position that still remained alert, and

picked up the gun. His eyes left Morgan for a moment as he expertly twirled the empty cylinders, then they swiftly returned, still expressionless and enigmatic.

Morgan fumbled at his cartridge pouch, and managed to fling half a dozen shells in the direction of the Indian. That steady trickle of blood was flowing unceasingly from the little finger of his right hand, not in drops now, but in a slender stream that swelled and lessened with the beating of his heart. The Indian's eyes flickered, and he reached for the cartridges.

The die was cast now; either he was to live or he was not. Morgan relaxed his vigilance, and turned his attention to the wound, watching the Indian no more.

Swiftly he unknotted the handkerchief from his neck and tore it into strips with his left hand and his teeth. A narrow, string-like strip from the handkerchief's edge he knotted tightly about his forearm, just above the gory mass that had been his wrist; under this he inserted his pocket knife, and twisted the bandage into a tourniquet, until the strand bit deep into his lean flesh. Immediately the bleeding was reduced to slow-dripping drops, and his forearm began to puff.

His dangling right hand was limp, helpless, and bled to a deathly white; it seemed impossible to him that he should ever be able to use it again. Sagging against the steep wall of the coulee, he slowly bound the wound as best he could with his other hand and his teeth, moving slowly, that his movements might be sure; for his muscles were responding uncertainly to his will, as a result of the shock of the wound.

This done, he again turned his eyes to the Indian. The man had not moved from his tracks, but now half sat, half sprawled, against the bank, as if he had allowed himself to sink where he crouched. His eyes were dull, and Morgan now saw that the Indian's lips were as livid as an Indian's lips may become. His left leg lay awkwardly; a tight bandage of some aged cloth was bound about the thigh, constricting it deeply. From bandage to ankle the leg was marked with black, faltering streaks of crusting blood. The moccasin was soaked with it, a dark, soggy red.

Morgan's six-gun was in the Indian's hand, replacing the slender knife which now lay drunkenly in its over-sized sheath; but he made no sign of using it.

Unsteadily Slide got to his feet, and took advantage of a bit of brush to peer out of the coulee. At the crest of the rise, at the point where he had lain, he could make out through a rift in the brush the head and shoulders of the man who had wounded him. Morgan crouched back, and held out his hand

toward the Indian, signing for the gun; but the Indian shook his head, cocking the hammer.

As Morgan again peered out of the coulee, two reports sounded almost as one, the second shot coming from well to the right; a bullet sung by his head and chunked into the bank behind him. Almost at the same instant the man on the hill started violently, as with the shock of a sudden convulsion; he rolled upon his side, raising an arm as if in signal to friends far behind, then the arm fell limp, and he was still.

Slide Morgan sat down, nursing his hurt arm; and for a long time neither of the two in the coulee made a move. From time to time the sound of shots came to them, sometimes startlingly near, sometimes from far away. At last the sound of a furiously galloping horse approached the crest of the rise, and for a moment paused. Again the rifle to the right spoke once, and they could hear the snort of the horse as he shifted his feet. But in the next moment they heard the horse galloping back in the direction from which he had come. From these sounds Morgan judged that Abner Cade or another had come for the man who had been shot, perhaps killed, upon the crest.

Time dragged by, and the sun rose higher, beating into the coulee. Morgan remembered the canteen which he still wore, and for once drank deeply. He flung the canteen to the Indian, who accepted it in silence, drank a few mouthfuls, and tossed it back.

Presently, having drunk once more, he pulled his hat over his face and sank into an unwholesome sleep.

He slept neither long nor well; insane fever dreams haunted him, hallucinations shot through with pain. And while he slept the sun cooked him, drying his mouth and swelling his tongue.

When he spoke he would have talked to the Indian, who seemed not to have moved so much as a hairs-breadth throughout the time that Morgan slept. But the half-remembered words that had come to his tongue in his moment of extreme need had again sunk into the deep shadows of memories all but lost. He pondered a long time, striving to enunciate words that always just eluded him.

At last he was able to form a sentence, a question the meaning of which was decided more by the words he had found than by what he wished to say.

“What are we waiting here for?” he asked in Cheyenne. His voice was so dry and croaking that he startled himself.

The Indian turned his eyes upon him and lifted an eyebrow questioningly; the broken dialect had evidently escaped his understanding.

Morgan tried again, enunciating each syllable slowly.

The man grinned faintly, a grin that drew down the corners of his thin-lipped mouth, and shrugged his shoulders.

Speaking partly in signs and partly in straggling words that came to him out of the abyss of the past, Morgan suggested that they go to the river a mile to the south, where there would be shade and water.

Slowly gathering himself for a tremendous effort the Indian heaved himself upright upon his sound leg, leaning against the bank with his hands; but the knee trembled and gave from under him, and he sank back awkwardly. He shook his head. Evidently he was weak from a very considerable loss of blood. For all Morgan knew the Indian had not eaten for several days. Certainly the man was a long way from where any Indians were supposed to be. It was plain that he was too weak to travel of his own strength. No doubt his move to spring upon Morgan when the latter had stumbled into the coulee had represented the final desperate effort of a wounded and cornered man.

"Where are the others?" Morgan asked.

"I don't know."

Morgan's arm was swollen into a shapeless club of pain; his right hand was numb, and appeared shrunken; it was as stiff as if it were dead. He loosened the tourniquet, and although the bleeding began again it appeared to be but a slow seepage, of which he held no fear. He could not move his fingers, and to touch them was to rack his whole arm with pain. New, dry pains played like heat lightning in his fingers as the blood began to return into the strangled member, but he did not replace the tourniquet.

Instead he increased the bandages on the wound with strips torn from his shirt; and beneath the highest of these he wedged a pebble at the place where the pulse could be felt. The pain remained, nagging, sinister, with no promise of surcease. A terrible feeling of helplessness was upon him, the feeling of a wounded man denied by his kind. There was a lost sensation in the pit of his stomach as he reflected that wherever he turned for help there would be guns raised against him. Talky Peters still believed in him, he knew, and Jake Downey; but they were far away. There came to him now a realization of the cruelty of these animals called men. Like starving wolves, they turned upon the first of their kind to go down; except that these men were neither starving nor in need, but well-fed, complaisant, hunting him as they hunted the buffalo which they were killing by the thousand for their hides.

Every affront that he had ever suffered throughout his varied life returned to his memory now, piling evidence upon evidence that in the world he knew there was neither friendship nor mercy, but only the war of each man for himself. He remembered self-minded men with whom he had brawled in bars, and hot-tempered foremen he had quit with anathema ringing in his ears long before the days when he had got his growth and made himself recognized as a top hand.

He recalled old John Chase, the kindness of whose eyes now reappeared to him as a leering fatuousness. Here was a white-bearded old man upon whom he had counted; yet Chase had been swift to turn against him at the word of a pallid-eyed gambler who lived by chance and the strength of his brother's name.

A great wrath swept into him, a deep and bitter hatred of the breed from which he came. For the first time he was glad that he had killed Lew Cade, glad that the blind blow in the twilight had found its mark. What injury Lew Cade had actually done him Morgan could not be sure; but in his present insanity of wrath and hate it was enough for him that Cade was of a piece with the rest.

Nor could he recall the people at the ranch on the Moccasin Lake without remembering Nancy Chase; even now his mind's picture of her stood as representing something visionary, something clean and fine, distantly apart from anything that his workaday world contained. Yet he had seen her in Lew Cade's arms, an incongruity so savage that it had brought the world crashing about his ears in a mist of red.

A terrible determination came upon him that he should not die in this place, defeated by the human rubbish that was striving to make the prairie their own. They would get him in the end, he knew; but when they did—Lew Cade would not be alone.

He dragged himself out of the coulee onto the flat of the prairie on the side toward the river to the south. Then he extended his hand downward for the Indian to grasp, and with Morgan's help the man drew himself up the bank.

"Give!" Morgan commanded, pointing to the gun.

The Indian hesitated, but the cowboy extended his hand with such a supreme aspect of assurance that the other obeyed. Morgan thrust the weapon into its holster.

He had forgotten his saddlebags, containing all that he owned of any use. He went back for them, and gave them to the Indian to hold.

“What do they name you?” he asked haltingly.

“Laughing Coyote.”

“Can you walk?”

The man called Laughing Coyote could make nothing of this question; but it was plain to Morgan that the answer must have been that he could not.

“Ride,” said Morgan.

He stooped low, took the Indian’s right wrist in his left hand, turned, and hoisted the Indian onto his back. Not so much as a gasp came from Laughing Coyote, but Morgan felt the Indian’s naked muscles knot and shudder with pain.

Morgan’s knees quivered with the effort, and for a fleeting moment they sagged beneath him. In that moment something far greater than the petty accomplishment attempted hung in the balance. A year, a month, a day before Slide would have put the man down as too heavy for his remaining strength. But a new power had come into Morgan with his determination not to die in the hands of the Vigilantes in this place; a power greater than his own strength, as scornful of physical limitations as of pain.

He straightened his knees with a heaving jerk, and stepped off with a firm stride. Thus they crossed the long mile of rolling prairie to the banks of the nameless river, where the willows and the cottonwoods clung close to the life-giving water. And here the Indian would have let himself down and stopped; but Morgan went on and crossed. He turned eastward where the hard ground took little mark from his moccasins, and at last halted well down stream, where a matted thicket of young willows offered an impenetrable cover.

There they lay upon their bellies at the margin of the little river and drank and drank. Morgan sank his wounded arm in the limpid water until only the bandages remained dry; and presently the throbbing pain was somewhat cooled.

Cooled, somewhat, too, was the hot anger and hate that had surged within him with his first full realization of what his outlawry meant; but as it cooled and the smoke cleared from his brain, a new element, cold and hard, remained behind, a lasting thing.

CHAPTER VIII

A Man's Horse

THEY dared not light a fire, these wounded men, so close to the place where they had last been seen; but they hungrily devoured the last of Morgan's raw salt meat and the fragmentary remains of the bread he had cooked between midnight and morning in the hours of the stars.

It was while he groped in the deepest corners of the saddlebags for lost broken crumbs that Morgan found a crumpled scrap of paper. He flattened it upon his knee and studied out its hurriedly penciled scrawl.

"Deer Slide," it said. "I maid up my mind to maik yu taik Irn Hed, my Big blak paser. I did not tel yu what all yur up agenst I did not dast But it is plenty, yu wil need the best horse there is Any plais like as not. Iren Hed is that Horse. I looked twenty yeres for that horse and this is him. Never was such a Horse in the world befor. Save him all yu can, there aynt any mor like him wher he come from. Feed him good, saim as if he was me, only mor so, he has got me beet evry way. But if it comes to the pinch, kil him. I gess that is what he was foled for, mayby. Trust old Irn Hed. He will give yu all he has got, and Brake his Big old hart under yu if yu say the word.

JAKE."

"P S that naim Iren Hed is jest a joke. Maybe part of him is Irn, but it aynt his Hed. He is the Best frend a man ever had. I am kind of sory I naimed him that now."

Morgan re-read the scribbled note three times. There came back to him the quiet cabin at Hickory Lookout, and once more he could hear the voice of Jake Downey insisting that he take the black pacer. ". . . old plug . . . one that won't be missed . . . worthless . . . do to hobble along . . ." Morgan now knew what a grinding grip of will it must have cost Jake thus to run down his beloved mount, branding the brave black worthless, of little account, that the horse might go to a running death.

Jake Downey was known to Slide as a man of frosty sarcasms, chary of praise. In the crumpled scrap of paper the man's very soul lay open. Morgan knew that he must have valued the horse above all things; all things, that is, save one—his love for his friend.

Against the ugly background of the men who were hunting him down, Jake Downey stood out in Morgan's mind as one alone, a single instance of loyalty and worth in a breed gone small. Slide had himself known what it was to love a horse, and knew that had it been feasible Jake Downey would far rather have rushed headlong into battle than to send that black pacer into an unknown from which he might never return. Truly in Morgan's mind these horses that died in service were so far superior to the men they carried that the riders were shamed and belittled by the presence of their own mounts. Only Jake Downey stood apart from the rest, alone.

Not alone either; there was Talky Peters, the quiet man with the foolish ears, who had voluntarily cast his lot with Slide, outlawing himself to tote a gun for a chance friend. In the midst of adversity the friendship of these two men remained to Slide as the one good thing in which he could yet believe.

He slowly tore the fragment of paper to bits, and buried the pieces in the sand. His battered nerve almost cracked under the stress of this last emotion; he knew that the tears were close to his eyes, and as he fought against them he lowered his head, lest the Coyote see and judge him unfit to be called a man.

But when he raised his head again his face was stoically hardened as the Indian's own.

CHAPTER IX

Hunting Dog

1

"YOU'D better move along," said Laughing Coyote at last. "They'll be here pretty quick now."

The long day was gone, and the afterglow had faded away. In the west, in the dimness where the last red-gold light of the sunset had died, there hung a single great star of melted silver, seeming to throb and quiver like the high, liquid note of a bird.

Morgan did not understand what the Indian had said, and the Coyote repeated, slowly, with descriptive signs of his hands. When the cowboy had made it out, he listened attentively for the sounds of an approach, but heard nothing but the living things of plain and creek—the "peent" of a night hawk, the quick slap of a fish, the faint, distant squeak of a rabbit whose leaping was at an end.

"Who? Where?"

"Tsis-tsis-tas," said Laughing Coyote. "Cheyennes. Hear them? Three—four horses, jogging along back there by that coulee."

Still Morgan could hear nothing—unless it were the faint, ghostly bark of a wolf, far off. He looked questioningly at the Coyote, and the Indian nodded. Morgan had already found that the Indian spoke no other language than Cheyenne. Their speech was a motley mixture of Cheyenne words, gestures, and flashes of the sign language with which Morgan was but little familiar.

"Get out of here," the Coyote insisted. "You helped me. Now I'm helping you—you're lucky to keep your gun and stuff."

"You damned dirty Injun," exclaimed Morgan in English, "I'd like to see yuh take 'em!" Then he returned to his fumbling Cheyenne dialect. "I haven't any place to go; I haven't any horse. I'll stay here. I'm your friend, I tell you, a brother to the Cheyenne people."

"They'll kill you," said the Coyote. "They'll kill you to shut your mouth!"

"The whites know about you by now," Morgan pointed out. Then, with a swift deduction, "They were following your horses when they found me."

“That’s so,” the Indian admitted. “But they were only following ponies in the dark. We may have been Pawnees, Kiowa, or who? But you know we are Cheyenne, and they’ll think you’ll tell. Me, I’ll risk that. Now get out, while you can!”

“The whites have sent many men with guns to kill me,” Morgan answered haltingly. “A thousand horses are offered for my scalp. I would rather be killed here than die walking on the prairie without a horse. I’ve tried to help you. But if your people wish I will fight them here.” He paused and decided to add a boast. “They call me ‘Cheyenne,’ because I can fight like three.”

The Coyote considered. “Half-breed?” he asked.

At this point Morgan would have denied that he had Indian blood; but a strange doubt suddenly overwhelmed him. After all, he had little knowledge, save that his father had been a bull whacker, of whom he might be. At Roaring River they had taken him for Indian Frank, and he knew that now he was called Cheyenne Morgan. His cheek bones were high, his skin dark. . . .

With his own world gone mad, the epithet had lost its sting. Perhaps—who could tell?—these men had perceived in him something of which he himself was not aware, some fatal characteristic marking that had turned men against him as certain horses are made outcast by their kind. He considered a long time, and finally spoke the truth.

“I don’t know.”

The Indian studied him in silence; what was going on in his mind Morgan could not know.

“I have given you food,” Morgan went on. “I have carried you to water. I am willing to help you and your people, if you will help me.”

Laughing Coyote said nothing, and for a long time they were silent. Presently Morgan heard again a faint wolf’s bark, short and low. It was nearer now, and Morgan knew that unknown to him the Indian must have left some sign showing the direction in which he had gone.

This time the wounded Indian answered, a low carrying sound like the cough of a wolf, and another faint bark far out on the prairie to the north, told them that his friends had heard.

Three horses were coming toward them; two of them were ridden by dark figures, the third was led. The first horse was dark, bay or black, a shadowy moving shape against the moonlit prairie. The second horse was gray, harder to see than the dark horse, well adapted to the color of the night. At times he was almost invisible, except for a certain old-silver sheen on thighs and shoulders when the moon caught the muscle-rippled hide aright. Again with a dark background of sage, he stood out clear-cut, a ghostly figure. But the third horse was a true eye-cheater, of shifty, ill-defined outline, seeming to flicker deceptively and almost vanish as it moved in the uncertain light.

As the group came closer Morgan recognized the third horse as a pinto, colored in huge black and white blotches of indeterminate shape. In the dimness of the moonlight these garish, irregular colorings tricked the eye, making the familiar horse shape almost unrecognizable against whatever background it might be placed. Had the animal been motionless he would have looked less like a living thing than like a buffalo skull, a boulder, and a dark clump of sage; many an eye would have passed on.

With the riders there was approaching a crisis in Morgan's life. Laughing Coyote had said nothing more. What the intention of this wounded man might be Morgan could not even guess. If the two approaching Indians wished to kill him, it was very probable that they could; for Morgan's left hand was untrained with the gun, and hence would be slow and probably shaky. Yet he was prepared to fight if he must. There was still a forlorn chance—if there were no more Cheyennes on the way.

Even now while his hidden destiny approached, life or death, the end of all things or another chance to defeat his enemies, Morgan studied the peculiar semi-visibility of the pinto horse. It was a thing he had never noticed before; he had believed that any horse but a white horse was harder to see than a pinto. Perhaps, after all, there was reason behind the Indians' love of painted horses . . .

He would have liked to have stood up, for greater facility in action; but he dared not, lest his conspicuous white man's garb have too swift an effect. So he crouched cross-legged, his belt twisted about so that the holster hung on the left. This brought the butt of his gun toward the front, an awkward thing for him, but it was the best that he could do.

The horsemen hesitated as they drew near, searching the covert of the willows with their eyes. "Here," said Laughing Coyote; and they turned and came directly to the hidden men, the horses crushing down the swishing stems of the willow shoots with their big hoofs.

Then Laughing Coyote spoke rapidly in Cheyenne, using short sentences that yet seemed long; for in the Cheyenne tongue are many words made up of groups of smaller words, chained together into long polysyllables. Morgan could catch but little of what the Indian said, strain as he might to arrange the few words that he recognized into thought. The combination words tricked him, leading him astray with names of things that had a bearing on the thought only in conjunction with the words to which they were joined, so that the Coyote seemed to be speaking in a disjointed code.

He could see the riders, he knew, far better than they could see him, even allowing for the superiority of the Indian eye. They and their browsing horses were half silhouetted against the star-set sky, half outlined in dim silver as the moonlight caught the glint of hair or the outline of shoulders. They lounged easily on their saddleless mounts, their weapons resting carelessly in their hands. One sat his pony with a certain lithe erectness, as if his body had no weight; the other rested in a side-slung slouch, supple, poised, beautifully at ease.

The latter suddenly spoke in a voice deep and hard, cutting through the utterances of the enfeebled Coyote. The perfectly understood words struck Morgan like a blow in the face.

“Kill him; we must have his gun.”

A weapon shifted slightly in the Indian’s hands. Morgan recognized the deep breech and high-horned hammer of a Sharps carbine.

The third Cheyenne, he who sat so lightly erect upon the horse that was gray, now quietly spoke a single word: “Wait.” Laughing Coyote stirred, as if pulling himself together; then there burst from him a torrent of words, of which Morgan could make nothing.

Slide caught desperately for words of this dialect that only half eluded him, and spoke in a voice steady and strong.

“I have carried more bullets in my body than there are in your pouch,” he lied, approximating his meaning as nearly as he could with such Cheyenne expressions as he could call forth. “It will be an honor to kill me. I am ready.”

The two mounted Indians glanced at each other hesitantly, each turning to his comrade in search of decision that somehow was not there.

“He may be of our blood,” said Laughing Coyote. “The Cheyenne who kills a Cheyenne rots away inside. Also remember Hunting Dog’s whip.”

There was a long silence on the part of the men; the jaws of the horses crunched steadily as the animals tore off twigs with their lips and teeth. The

gray horse shifted a pace, stretching a long neck for better provender.

"This is a brave man, a good enemy," said the quiet voice of the gray horse rider with a hint of a chuckle.

"He could have killed you as you came up," declared Laughing Coyote. "He can kill you where you sit!"

The Indian with the carbine gave a neutral ejaculation that seemed to convey negation.

"This is a brave man," said the quiet voice again. "Give him a horse, and let him ride."

"He'll get no horse from us," said his companion shortly.

At this Slide Morgan silently moved his hand to the butt of his gun; for he had made up his mind that from this encounter he would either obtain a horse, or accept now the death that must surely follow. It was a stealthy movement, made in the thickness of the shadows where no moonlight came. Yet the erect Indian on the gray horse perceived it and stiffened into an attitude peculiarly motionless and alert, like a listening bird; and his face did not again turn away from Morgan.

"Take him to Hunting Dog," said the Coyote.

"Will you go to Hunting Dog?" the deep voice asked.

Morgan considered hastily. Who Hunting Dog was he did not know; but he assumed that he must be the leader of these far-wandering Cheyennes.

"Yes," he said at last.

3

There were but two Indians at the place to which Morgan was taken. One of them was a young man, scarcely more than a stripling, with a long, passive face upon which rested an air of impermeable calm that was belied by the impetuosity of his movements. He lay sprawled by the compact fire, with the red light glinting on eyes and greased hair, and instantly scrambled to his feet upon perceiving that the returning scouts were not alone.

The other rose from a squatting position with a smooth movement, and stood waiting. It was this man that the Cheyenne scouts addressed; and Morgan perceived that he was Hunting Dog, to whom the scouts acknowledged a leader's authoritative rights.

As he studied this man who was to have so much to do with his immediate welfare, Morgan felt surprise that he, rather than one of the two who had brought him here, was the leader of the party. The man was far

from prepossessing. His figure was wiry, but lightly muscled, promising neither notable strength nor unusual agility, and was mounted on legs remarkably bowed in a race in which bowed legs were the rule. His face was thin, with long, prominent nose and receding chin; from beneath a forehead broad but very low, small eyes peered beadily, without expression.

Hunting Dog wore a breech clout and sleeveless jacket worked with porcupine quills in blue and red; nothing more. He stood watching the approach of the four men—Laughing Coyote sitting awkwardly upon a led horse—with an edged intensity; there was something sinister in his face when his eyes were upon Morgan, suggestive of a veiled malignance. Yet his hands rested relaxed upon his hips, and he made no hostile move.

Certainly Hunting Dog did not look to Slide Morgan like a chief of scouts, nor a leader of men. Later he was to learn that the Cheyenne possessed certain qualities that his fellows did not. Hunting Dog was that rarest of Indians, the type that never rested but in sleep.

In Hunting Dog there could never exist that assured complaisance, that haughty confidence of safety in power that throughout the centuries has repeatedly betrayed the tribes into the hands of their enemies. In the presence of danger he was without fear; yet throughout his career he was driven by a gnawing suspicion of evil that knew no rest. He alone of his people was perpetually on the scout. Following a victory, when his tribesmen danced all night until heavy slumber made them dead to the world, Hunting Dog always sat apart; and when his village slept the soundest, Hunting Dog was wakeful, his ears searching the noises of the night.

He knew no laxity, no assumption of safety, no carelessness in the detailed execution of a foregone plan. Lacking any particular skill in feats of horsemanship or battle, he was nevertheless of a limitless endurance; and in taking a trail or in perceiving a distant sign he was unsurpassed. Had he possessed breadth of intelligence, or any capability for original thought, he might have been such a chief as the Cheyennes have seldom known; as it was he was chief scout for Little Wolf, who was war chief for Dull Knife's Cheyennes.

"The Coyote is hurt," said the man who had ridden the gray horse.

As the firelight shone on the lithe, straight figure, Morgan observed that the young man's face was strong and handsome after the Indian fashion; but the expression was light and mocking, appearing careless, almost trivial in contrast to the sober, poised intensity of Hunting Dog. This Indian was called Blanket.

With a sort of rough carefulness they lifted Laughing Coyote from his horse and laid him near the fire. Hunting Dog examined the wound, gently running a thumb along the skin by the torn flesh. Morgan could perceive in his manner a keen personal solicitude; for these scouts were his, young men placed in his charge, with whom he must accomplish certain things. Hunting Dog would have cursed when a needed horse went down; so much the more precious to him were these young warriors which he could in no way replace.

The leader of the scouts replaced the ragged bandage and stood up. Blanket's companion now strode forward, his step firm and quick. This was the Cheyenne of the deep, hard voice, who had stood against Morgan; and indeed the whole spirit of the man was obviously different from that of any of the others. His eyes were arrogant and direct, his nose high-bridged, his mouth prominent and firm. About him was neither the light mocking grace of Blanket nor the ever-watchful tenuosity of Hunting Dog. He was a fighter born and bred, of that stock which had given the Cheyennes their fighting name.

He went directly to a buffalo skull that lay to one side of the fire, facing it, and stooped to touch the skull perfunctorily between the horns. Then, directly and without interruption, he told Hunting Dog what had been done.

"We rode northward a piece," he said in his low-pitched voice. "We found several herds of range horses—most of them broke—and we picked up a few we liked the looks of.

"Then, as we started back, here came a bunch of cowboys. How they discovered us is a mystery to me. We tried to let them pass, but they almost rode over us; and that's where the Coyote got hit. Well, as soon as we could —"

As the man talked Morgan strained his mind to follow the tale he told; but though he could make out the thread of the story there was much more of it that he lost. Yet he was experiencing a peculiar sensation as he listened to the Cheyenne tongue, as one who visits a place he has known in his dreams. Bit by bit, in dawning vistas, there was coming back to him a language that he had once more than partly known.

Now a controversy of some sort broke out among the scouts; and many a rapid sentence came to Morgan's ears without reaching his mind. The fragments that he caught told him that they were discussing himself; and presently, when Laughing Coyote began to speak, Morgan understood the greater part of what was said.

“This man isn’t a prisoner at all,” the Coyote was saying. “He was fighting the same whites we were fighting. The Otter knows nothing about it.”

The deep-voiced Indian seemed to resent the contradiction; but except for a grunt he did not dissent.

Blanket and Laughing Coyote began to argue some point concerning Morgan, but Hunting Dog cut in sharply.

“They saw you with the horse herd!” he accused the Otter.

“No, Dog.”

“How could they come after you without seeing you?” Hunting Dog demanded furiously; and now the veins were starting out upon his forehead. “You are not fit to be scouts! You’ve shown yourselves, and given away the plans of Little Wolf! When the tribe—”

He paused, for the Otter had fiercely flung out an arm and held it rigidly pointing at Morgan, while his eyes riveted those of his chief. “This man understands Cheyenne,” said he. “If we are going to speak plans of Little Wolf, let’s kill this man first.”

Hunting Dog hesitated for only a moment. Then he swayed forward with his face so twisted with the intensity of his fury that Morgan thought the man was about to spring; and the Otter himself gave back a step.

“I’m not going to be turned aside,” said Hunting Dog in a voice quivering with rage. “I’m talking about you, and this thing you’ve done! It was given to you to find horses, to show the way for the rest. Instead, you’ve betrayed your people!”

It now appeared to Morgan that a misunderstanding had arisen over a circumstance that did not exist in actuality. Only he, of the men present at the tiny hidden fire, realized that the hard-riding posse had not galloped in pursuit of the true Cheyennes, but Morgan himself. He felt moved to enter the argument, and groped for words.

“The white riders chased me,” he said. “They have turned against me because they say I am a Cheyenne. I have fought them, and they wished to kill me. I think they knew nothing of your scouts. They stumbled onto them by chance, and saw nothing.”

“I think he’s right,” said Blanket. “When we fired, to save the Coyote, they looked surprised. Like men who hunted one man, and found more than they counted on.”

“All right,” said Hunting Dog bitterly. His mind had already wandered from the question, and was studying Morgan. For a long time the Indian’s small eyes rested upon him, while no one spoke.

“Those are Cheyenne moccasins,” said Hunting Dog at last. “He talks our language, but he talks it like a white man.” He paused, then spoke directly to Morgan. “Are you of Cheyenne blood?” he demanded.

And Morgan answered as he had answered Laughing Coyote: “I don’t know.”

The Otter made a sign, and Hunting Dog shook his head. “He’s helped the Coyote,” he said, “and he claims to be our friend. . . .” He shrugged.

Slide, wearily alert, felt that he was dealing here with beings utterly apart from his own understanding; men child-like in their reasonings, yet with the unaccountable, matter-of-fact savagery of predatory animals.

“We must have your gun,” said Hunting Dog to Morgan. At this Slide pretended not to understand; but Hunting Dog pointed to the weapon and extended his hand commandingly.

For a long moment Morgan hesitated, looking Hunting Dog in the eye. During this pause the Otter silently stepped away from the fire; and without moving his eyes Morgan knew that the Indian had gone behind him, and that the Sharps carbine was ready in his hands.

If he were to give up his weapon he would be defenseless in the hands of these Cheyennes, who might well be expected to leave him afoot and without food upon the prairie—if they left him alive at all. Yet, if he refused, he might precipitate a fight which could mean nothing but his death. There was also his predicament as an outlaw to consider. Horseless and weaponless he might still reach a settlement; but what manner of reception would he find there? Behind, in the background, there was forever hovering the sinister, implacable figure of Abner Cade, whose life now had but a single aim.

His wounded arm was paining him savagely. A hot torturing grip, as of iron fingers, was grinding into his forearm above the wounded wrist, and the entire arm throbbed as if in harmony with the measured beat of a drum. His head was beginning to swim; he was faint and dizzy from exertion, nervous strain, and loss of blood.

They were awaiting his decision. Hunting Dog’s hand was still outstretched in demand. He knew that he must speak. Once more Slide Morgan pulled himself together, and let himself drop into the blind abyss of his fate.

“Do you ask this as a gift from your friend?” Morgan inquired steadily.

At first Hunting Dog did not understand what Morgan had tried to say; but presently the keen-minded Blanket caught Morgan’s meaning, and smilingly explained it to his chief. And Hunting Dog, looking Morgan straight in the eye, answered, “Yes.”

All eyes watched Morgan fixedly as he unhooked his outer gun belt, and passed it to the waiting Indian.

Then Morgan sat down cross-legged by the fire and closed his eyes; for the fight had gone out of him, and his life was irrevocably in hands not his own.

CHAPTER X

Shadow Wagons

1

THERE was meat in plenty, though nothing else. The huddled heap of fire was broken and spread out flat, a bed of pulsing coals. Over this the beef was broiled. The youth with the long face—Morgan had now learned that his name was Feather—soon passed out great slabs of hot meat, first to Hunting Dog, then to the Otter and Laughing Coyote, and finally to Morgan. The Indians ate ravenously, tearing at the meat with hands and teeth, cutting off with their knives mouthfuls into which their teeth had sunk.

Gorged to repletion, Morgan presently drank deeply from his canteen, and succumbed to his fatigue. The pain in his arm was less, now. It had settled down to a dull, pounding throb, naggingly incessant, but endurable. He stretched out full length on the ground; his thoughts blurred, and presently the firelight and the Indian figures dimmed away.

It seemed to Slide that he did not entirely sleep, for he knew where he was, and who were with him; yet a strangely familiar dream after a time overlaid his blurred consciousness of actual things, like a thin mat of loose grass thrown upon the surface of a pond.

While still at the fire of the Cheyenne scouts it seemed to him that he was also in another place. Other figures were seated, knees hunched before them about another, brighter fire. Beyond the figures, shining yellow in the light of the flame, he could see the great, tube-like wagon covers of prairie schooners, as familiar to him, it seemed, as the light of the distant stars, and the glow of fire in the night, things forever integral with the life he had led.

A man sat cross-legged, half-facing him, so close that their knees sometimes touched. The knees of the other were huge and bony, and the man himself towered over Slide Morgan, for Morgan was a tiny boy.

The man was talking to him, telling him a story in a low voice; and, oddly, he was speaking not as others spoke but in the language of the Tsis-tsis-tas, the Cheyennes. And Slide Morgan understood perfectly everything that this man said. Gone were the misty, smoke-like veils that had befogged his memory, more than half-concealing the forgotten dialect when he tried to talk to Hunting Dog and the Coyote. He was living again in the past, and the things that he had once known he knew again.

It was some story of war that the man told, about a man named Elk Beyond the Hill. Queerly, the story was new to the little boy, yet the man who lay beside the cooking fire of the Cheyenne scouts knew that he had heard it before, perhaps many times. As the short syllables of the dialect rolled off the tongue of the story-teller the odd, brief words were as clear in meaning to him as the real talk that everybody else used, and that he himself always used except when talking to this man.

The story ended.

"But what became of the pony?" asked the little boy that was Morgan.

The man pretended that he did not understand; Morgan knew that he understood perfectly, but this was the game that they always played. The boy laughed and asked the question in the Indian language as the man wished.

"Why," said the bony-kneed man, "the pony went home to the hills where he used to live. He ate grass there, and buffalo beans. In winter his ribs stuck out. In summer he was fat."

That was all of the story. The boy's eyes wandered sleepily around the circle, over the few other men about the fire. They were bearded men; they wore broad hats, some black, some gray, and high heavy boots, but not chaparajos. He had seldom seen chaps then.

Then he looked beyond, to the great covered wagons in the shadows; and beyond these, between their tall wheels, to where the prairie lay dim in the starlight, dark, full of mystery. Out there some small, shadowy thing moved carefully and quickly; he saw two tiny green lights out there in the night, close-set glowing lamps that were eyes. He watched them with wonder and pleasure for a long time, for then the world was new.

Presently as he watched they slowly began to fade, and all things dimmed with them. People were moving near, close to him, yet they were not the people of the prairie schooners, but others of a later, nearer time; they moved through the figures of the bearded, booted men as if both peoples were ghosts. A pain, like the slow beat of a death drum, was throbbing in his arm again. . . .

The man that was Morgan realized that something he desperately wished to know was on the point of escaping him. He wrenched his gaze from the fading green eye lamps on the prairie and sought the face of the man who sat cross-legged, speaking the language of the Cheyennes. The face eluded him; it seemed dimly veiled in smoke. Then the smoke cleared; and Morgan

looked for a moment through the eyes of the boy he once had been, into the face of an old friend whom he could no longer name.

Eagerly he studied the firm, lean face, in which wind and sun were just beginning to set their marks. He saw that the man's eyes were direct and dark, his nose prominent, his jaw smooth and strong. He alone of the men of the prairie wagon was clean shaven. As Morgan looked into this face in the firelight he felt that he had seen it since, that he knew this man's name. Desperately he sought the answer while his eyes slowly dimmed and the firelight darkened. Almost he had the answer to many things. He strove harder to hold the vision of that slowly vanishing face, to solve the identity of this man of another day. He almost had it! Almost—almost—another moment . . .

Some one shook his shoulder roughly, wrenching him suddenly out of the ghost world of the past into the harsh realities of the present. The face, the bearded men, the covered wagons vanished into the dead years from which they had come. Morgan lifted his head and looked hastily about him. There was a flush of sudden anger upon him at his awakening, and the feeling that some revelation of great value had been lost to him by the breadth of a grass blade. But the dream of half-remembered things was gone past all recalling.

2

Blanket was standing over him, smiling his mocking smile; it was he who had awakened Morgan. The fire had lost its light and lay a broken bed of scattered, winking coals. As his eyes sought it there was a hiss of water-struck embers, and even the place where the fire had been went black.

Horses were moving close at hand, and he could hear the low voices of the scouts. As his eyes became accustomed to the starlight he saw that a pony stood where Laughing Coyote had lain. He could make out the rigged travois, consisting of two long poles that trailed behind, with which the pony was burdened. Dark figures of men were lifting something—a body or a man—onto the travois just back of the pony's stifles; reason told him that they were thus placing the Coyote for greater comfort in travel, but so still was the wounded Cheyenne in his comrade's arms that for a moment Morgan had a swift impression that the Indian was dead.

"We are going now," said Blanket. "Stay close. Make no noise. It will be bad for you if Hunting Dog becomes angry, or even the Otter. Here is your horse."

He pressed a halter shank of common lariat whale line into Slide's unwounded left hand, and turned away.

"Can it be that these bucks are countin' on me, a'ready?" Morgan asked himself. "A real live *horse*?"

But as he examined his new mount in the moonlight he saw that Blanket's caution to him had been purely charitable. The pony was an aged one, of a color between a dirty white and a speckly gray. He was sharp hipped and low of head, and his poor old legs were battered out of shape by the rigors of time and the plain. Any horse that a Cheyenne scout would deign to ride would overtake this pitiable old plug in two strides. Probably a runner on foot could catch him. Slide knew that only Laughing Coyote's plight would enable him to keep up on such a mount.

He rose, slung on his canteen, and threw his precious saddlebags across the back of the old pony. Then he led the pony to the side of Laughing Coyote's travois, and waited. They were moving off now, south by east, away from the river by which they had camped. First rode Hunting Dog on the painted horse that was so hard to see; with him rode Feather, a few lengths to his rear. They moved off at a fast walk, their good ponies stepping high and tossing their heads against their hackamores.

When the two were almost out of sight Standing Alone mounted his round-bodied bay mare, and struck off to the southwest, on a diagonal to the path of Hunting Dog. And a moment later Blanket, after a last word with the Otter, took a similar course to the southeast. The four who led were now spread out fanwise, moving gradually farther apart on the plain. For a time Morgan could make them out in the light of the low moon; but presently the bay horse was but a drifting shadow a long way off, and the receding gray had merged into nothingness and the misty light.

The pony who bore the travois pawed uneasily, and as each rider moved off he would have followed. But the Otter held him with one light hand upon the bridle; until at last he too moved off in the path of Hunting Dog, and the travois pony followed his mount. Morgan now mounted with the greatest of difficulty, and permitted his aged pony to fall in behind the travois.

They walked their horses for a long time; and though Morgan could no longer glimpse the horses of the other scouts, the Otter seemed perfectly assured of where they were. Once in a great while a signal drifted to them from ahead or far to the side—a single coyote-like yip, or the faint distant chuckle of a ground owl. Sometimes the Otter answered in kind, but more often not; and the wounded cowboy on the speckled old pony was usually in doubt as to whether men or animals had called out in the night.

The saddlebags modified the bony ridge of the pony's back, and the gentle rocking motion of the walk lulled Morgan into sleepiness. He dozed. . . .

CHAPTER XI

The Prairie

FOR Morgan days passed lazily. There was always enough to eat. The scouts were burning no gunpowder, but their short, powerful bows and sheet-iron-tipped arrows were more effective than many a white hunter's rifle. When rabbits and small birds were scarce there was beef; for they were not yet into the vast Indian territory to the south, and the herds, while scattering, were never hard to find.

Sometimes Hunting Dog traveled boldly by daylight, apparently without caution. At other times they lay close by day in the coverts of river thickets, and traveled cautiously after night was well advanced. But always they were on the move, their directions constantly shifting. The marches they made were long, with few rests; in three days' time the party covered an incredible amount of ground. Once in a while they passed settlements, and these Hunting Dog circled carelessly, though by night.

Occasionally Morgan saw cowboys in the distance, and twice, moving wagon trains. More often the Cheyennes sought cover when Morgan could perceive no cause.

Morgan's position in Hunting Dog's party was a curious one. He was half a prisoner, a man who knew enough about their movements so that they feared to let him go; and half a refugee, whom the Indians tolerated because he was wounded and in danger from his own kind.

Continually he pondered over the eccentric movements of these far-traveling Indians, so far from the place in which they were supposed to be. It was plain that these were no loose-wandering bucks, intent only on living their lives beyond the restraint of the United States Indian agencies. It seemed apparent that these men were at work upon some definite mission. Yet the Cheyennes to the southward were at peace, to all accounts. Perhaps, Morgan conjectured, they did not intend to remain so long.

The days had builded into a week, two weeks; three. A scout named Standing Alone disappeared, and a day later another Indian, on a horse so utterly ridden out that it was at once abandoned, took his place. The newcomer was a man with a flat face and powerful shoulders that contrasted remarkably with his knobby, stick-like legs. He was called Strong Neck.

Slide's wounded wrist troubled him less and less. For many days the throbbing ache persisted, but the bleeding stopped, and there was no infection. In another week even the ache had ceased, and as long as he kept the hand quiet he suffered no more pain. The fingers, however, continued to stiffen, and no longer responded to his will. The little finger he could move but slightly, the rest not at all.

With his chaps off and his shirt in ribbons, Morgan began to look a good deal like his companions. His neckerchief was gone, and his black hair was growing long over a neck that was almost as bronzed as those of the Cheyennes. Both Strong Neck and Hunting Dog wore hats much like Morgan's, Feather wore the rim of one, and Blanket's shirt was vastly superior to Slide's. His moccasins were the same as those of the scouts.

Only his beard marked him as of another race; and not always his beard, for Morgan shaved with more regularity than ever before, on the hazard that his Indian resemblance might prove useful. The Cheyenne language, of which only two or three hundred words were in common use by the Indians themselves, he soon had well in hand once more, so that he had little difficulty in understanding the Cheyennes or in making himself understood.

For all practical purposes, Slide Morgan had gone red.

CHAPTER XII

Talky Peters' Return

1

IT was Saturday night, and pay day. Only two riders remained to Jake Downey at Hickory Lookout, with Talky Peters gone to ride the long trails with Slide Morgan; and these two had ridden for Roaring River to change their slender wages into "ten thousand or nothin'!" at the Happy Chance.

So Jake Downey was alone, in the sultry shanty at the outpost camp of Seth Russell's Box R. He could have gone with the boys, had he wanted to; or rather, if he had decided to—for Jake did want to go, and badly. But a certain stiffness was coming into Jake's wiry frame, noticeable in early mornings. He was a long way from being old yet; but the rigors of a rider's life were beginning to make themselves felt, and Jake, unlike most, was beginning to turn his eyes ahead.

At present he was forcing himself to spend every other pay day at the camp. Later he expected to go to town only every third pay day, and finally only twice a year. Even when he went to town, Jake drank but sparingly, avoiding circumstances in which he would need to buy drinks for more than a few men at one time. The spinning bowl and the poker tables he let strictly alone. These things saved money; and Jake's scanty savings, invested cautiously in hand-picked calves, were slowly beginning to grow. Downey was an unusual man.

He knew that if he had learned his lesson but a few years sooner he would have been a cattle king before he died. As it was he stood moodily washing his own dishes in the hot cabin at Hickory Lookout, and pondered on better things.

After the frying pan was scoured he would sit outside and smoke off the mosquitoes for a while; then he would go to bed. No, he thought, maybe he wouldn't go to bed, after all. Maybe he would saddle up and ride over to the Moccasin Lake to see old John Chase; there was that matter of hay to talk about. Also there was Nancy Chase. Nancy was not for Jake Downey, and well he knew it. Still—

It was dusky in the little cabin; the long-lived twilight of midsummer left plenty of light outside, but within, with only a single half-permeable window and the open door to admit light, it was almost too dark to see. Busy

with the tinware and his thoughts, Downey failed to distinguish between the hoofs of the horses in the corral and those of the two that approached. Nor did he hear the step of a man outside upon the bare sandy soil. But when a figure blocked the doorway, reducing the dim infusion of light, he looked up quickly.

Talky Peters stood there, taller, leaner than ever, and looking vaguely older.

The frying pan went onto the stove with a bang.

"Well, fer ca-a-at's *sake*!" Jake exclaimed. "A brand from the burnin'—or somethin'!"

He seized the slender cowboy by the bony shoulders and shook him gleefully.

Talky grinned.

"Whatcha got to eat?" were his first words.

The outpost foreman instantly opened the drafts of the stove and chucked in a sparing handful of wood.

"Where's Slide Morgan?"

"Well—," Talky Peters paused and took off his floppy hat to scratch his head reflectively. "Jake, I shore wish I knew."

Downey stopped dead still in his tracks, knife in one hand and a great chunk of beef in the other. He stared hard into the sober, quizzical eyes of Talky Peters, but read nothing.

"He ain't kiboshed, is he?" he demanded at last.

"Nope. Not that I heard. I wouldn't put it past him, though. Such a nonkeerful, reckless feller I never see. Slide sure is the right name for him. I don't believe he gives a whoop *where* he slides."

Jake put fat into the frying pan on the stove, and sliced beef.

"How long since yuh seen him?"

"Oh—goin' on a month, now, Jake."

"Well, gereat jumpin' Jehosaphat, Talky!" declared Downey, banging the half-empty coffee pot onto the stove. "Will yuh tell a man somethin', or not?"

"Well—," Talky began, and appeared to ponder. There the conversation held suspended while Talky unstrapped his chaps from his belt, removed them, and slowly worked off his boots. His thin, leather-brown face looked baffled.

"We rode over to Nick LaFarge's, like we set out to. Only we stopped over the next night, to let the horses get lookin' better, an' rubbed 'em some. Well, we got there all right.

"Well, I says to Nick, 'Well, Nick, Abner Cade cer'nly is on the shoot, some!' So Nick cussed Abner a little, and didn't ask any questions, and he treated us like two brothers.

"But, come to find out, there was another feller stoppin' at Nick LaFarge's, and I didn't like his looks none either. So when I found out he was goin' to Roarin' River, I says to him, 'Guess we'll ride south to-morrow.' An' after the feller had left in the mornin', that's what we done."

"Why didn't yuh say yuh was goin' to ride north, then?"

"Why, I figgered Ab would see through that, an' know we'd went opposite to what we said."

"Yeah," scoffed Jake. "Pretty deep, you are. That's jest what Abner prob'ly figgered you'd figger. You must think he's pretty thick. Prob'ly he got one step ahead o' yuh, right there."

"I guess so," Talky admitted wearily. "Anyway, it run along four-five days, an' here they come."

He poured himself a cup of coffee, blew on it, and tasted it warily. "Well, then we rode some. It run along two-three weeks—"

Then they rode some . . . ! Days of hard riding on jaded mounts; days without food, days without water; weeks in the saddle, with guns always loose and ready in their holsters; nights of forced travel, nights without sleep, sleep without rest; a hundred hardships, three running fights, as many desperate rides with riflery behind—all these Talky Peters dismissed with five words. "Well, then we rode some." That covered it as far as Talky was concerned.

"Which way?" Jake asked.

"All different ways. Mostly circlin' an' cuttin' back. Well, they finally come on us as we lay up in the Chicawaukee Hills. Ever'body was helpin' 'em, looks like. We should 'a' made a straight run out of it in the first place; Slide had money for fresh horses, an' we could 'a' beat the news. But Slide didn't want to. Always thought it would blow over; couldn't tell him different. This Cade is the luckiest at follerin' anybody I ever see. I never see such a feller. He's twice worser'n the bleed hounds in Uncle Tom's Shanty. You shore are a rotten cook. This steer is bad hurt but still alive an' strugglin'. You out o' wood?"

"Speakin' o' the Chicawaukee Hills—?" Jake insisted.

“Well; when it come to the shoot we kind o’ separated. We figgered to mebbe discomfuddle ’em, by shootin’ in on ’em from both sides as they come up.

“Well, that held ’em off some, an’ it was gettin’ dark; they rode circle on us, but come dark we busted through an’ got loose. Only we busted through in two different directions. Well, next day they sashayed me good an’ plenty, after I thought I was plumb clear. Course, I could ’a’ shot it out with ’em; but I was on’y tryin’ to help Slide out, I wasn’t mad at myself, or nothin’. So I didn’t. An’ bimeby they quit me, an’ I ain’t seen ’em since. Nor Slide neither, look for him high or low.”

There was a long silence, while Talky hungrily crammed down food.

“So I come back here,” he concluded at last.

“So I seen,” Jake commented. Presently he asked, “Where’s Ironhead?”

“Well, Ironhead, he was with Slide, last I seen. An’ ” (gulp) “he was goin’ strong, too. Soon as Slide found Ironhead could spraddle out good he saved him up. He rode the gray mostly. There’s a tough horse—that gray. Slide had to buy me new horses to keep up. Course he bought ’em oats wherever he could.

“They cer’nly held up great. ’Specially Ironhead. In a pinch Slide would change off o’ the gray an’ ride Ironhead bareback. They was a sight. I never see such a fancy horse. He’d step out with them big pacin’ strides faster’n a plain horse could gallop, almost.”

“This trip sure must ’a’ been a revelation to you,” Jake commented. “Pretty near everythin’ you seen was somethin’ yuh never see the like of before.”

There was more silence. Jake Downey ran a thoughtful hand over his square, muscular face, then sat fingering his cleft chin while Peters ate. He noticed that Talky’s wide-open, confident blue eyes were a shade soberer than before his ride; yet his thin face on the whole seemed less mournful. “Averagin’ up,” Jake said to himself.

“Talky,” he suddenly demanded aloud, “what did Slide ever tell yuh about how he come to kill Lew Cade?”

“Well—” Talky crammed his mouth, but struggled on—“ ’bout the same as he told the both of us together. Seems he rode up to Old John Chase’s place. An’ there was Lew Cade. Seems Slide was plumb astonished to see him there, somehow. Well, one thing led to another, an’ pretty quick—”

“I know; but *what* one thing led to another?”

"I'm tellin' yuh ex-zactly what Slide said."

"They got arguin'?"

"Nope, that's the funny thing. They didn't say nothin' to each other, nothin' at all."

"Then where did the row come in?"

"I tell yuh, Slide jest said one thing led to another. I guess you wasn't listenin' the first two times I told yuh."

"Oh, all right. Then what?"

"Pretty quick Lew throws down on him, and begins squirtin' hot lead all over Slide's clo'es. That made Slide pretty mad, and what with them pushin' back'ards and for'ards, an' it bein' dark, an' him feelin' hasty, he hauls off an'—"

"Slide never told you no such pack o' rubbish!"

"Well, mebbe," Talky admitted, reaching for the coffee, "them weren't his ex-zact words. But they was right along them lines. An' if you can make head or tail of the way he tells it you're a good one. Sometimes I think he never done it at all. Because to do it he would have to've been there; and no man that had been there would come away knowin' so cussed little about it."

"He knows more'n he's tellin', mister."

"You'll cetch up with me yet," Talky returned.

"I'm way ahead of yuh," Jake affirmed. "What I want to know is, which o' them two is Nancy mournin' over—*Lew or Slide!*"

Talky stared at him over his tin cup, his eyes questioning in blank surprise.

"Women don't hone after fellers that shoves corpses right into the house with 'em," said Talky at last.

"Can't always figger it so easy," Jake demurred. "They don't keep askin' about a feller that's plumb poison to 'em, neither. Mebbe they might ask once, to see had he got his yet. But not three an' four times."

"She askin' about Slide?"

" 'Most every time I go there," Jake answered. "After the first time I on purpose didn't bring the question up, jest to see. An' sure enough, she always asked did I know what become of him."

"Might not mean nothin'," Talky offered. "When a killin' happens 'long side o' me, *I* like to know how it comes out, too."

"Then when it got around that Slide was a breed, an' they begun callin' him Cheyenne Morgan, I told her there wasn't nothin' to it, he was white. An' she allowed she thought he was to begin with."

"That's somethin'," Talky admitted.

The conversation lapsed; but presently Jake Downey offered a final idea on the subject.

"If you see her, I'd jest take a chance, an' not tell her how close pushed Slide is. Because it jest may be the wind *is* blowin' that way. An' she looks plenty down in the mouth now. Real peaked, I'd say."

"Shore."

There was a long pause while Talky finished his meal.

Then, as the slim cowboy lowered his cup for the last time, he became suddenly motionless.

"Listen!" he commanded sharply as Jake moved to clear the table.

Jake listened, but his senses were less keenly trained by recent strain than those of the slender cowboy, and for the moment he made out nothing.

"Two riders comin' in," said Talky, "along the Roarin' River trail."

And in a moment or two Jake also could hear the jumbled patter of trotting hoofs. Perhaps Jake himself felt it odd that riders should be coming to his out-of-the-way cabin on a Saturday night that was also a pay day; perhaps he only drew a certain sense of evil omen from Talky Peters' whipped and jaded nerves. However it may have been, both sat motionless, the man with the ruddy, muscular face and the man with the yellow stubble on his leanly angled jaw. And as they listened they stared into each other's eyes unseeing, more like hypnotized men than like cowboys listening to the familiar sound of approaching hoofs.

In a moment the older man came out of it, and laughed.

"It's only a couple o' the boys, Talky. You look like you seen a ghost or somethin'!"

"What do they want here? It's pay day, Jake."

"How should I know? Nothin' much prob'ly, an' what of it?"

"Jake—" Peters' voice was harsh and unfamiliar—"if it's me they want they got to shoot it out!"

"Nobody wants yore hide, Talky."

"Me an' Slide is of one piece, Jake, far's the Vigilantes are concerned. An' there's a pile o' money on that waddie's head!"

"But—"

Talky suddenly came to his feet. "Gimme my gun!"

The gun belt was on a bunk, where Talky had laid it off with his chaps. With a movement at once quiet and smoothly swift, Jake Downey reached out and gripped Talky's wrist.

"Wait, Talky! You're a sight too nervous to be throwin' guns round!"

Talky suddenly stood ominously still. "You look out!" he warned in a grating snarl.

Through the thick dusk that now shrouded all within the cabin Downey grinned into Talky's face. "Now you be sensible. Rest easy. I'll put on that smoke sling myself."

He picked up the gun belt with his free hand, then dropped Peters' wrist and buckled the belt about his waist. He slung it loosely, the heavily weighted holster dragging low.

Talky's pleading words burst forth in a strained whisper, for now the hoof-beats were very close. "Fer God's sake, Jake! Yuh want me buckin' guns with a *chair*?"

"Well, I can shoot all right myself, can't I?"

The calm of the older man won the brief clash of wills, and Talky Peters sank back into his chair. Once more they sat listening, Jake absently studying some trivial object that he turned over and over between his hands; Talky waiting with the stoic resignation of the unarmed.

As the horses approached they could hear one of them drop from the trot into a shambling walk; it was close at hand, so close that they could hear its slowly blowing breath. They heard the other horse pass close behind the cabin, directly to the watering trough by the corral. And they knew that this horse must have been easily ridden, for it was being let to drink.

The walking horse, moving slowly and more slowly, plodded up to the very door. There was a brief pause; then a deep "whoof" of outblown breath, and a great low-swung black head moved into the doorway itself. For a moment both men sat paralyzed by what they saw.

"Good God! It's Ironhead!" Jake Downey burst out.

"It sure is!" confirmed Talky Peters in a daze.

Jake Downey sprang to his feet to go to the horse; then he checked himself and sank back upon the edge of his chair, his face troubled.

Suddenly Talky Peters' hand flashed across the table through the thickness of the dusk and gripped Downey's arm. "Jake! Slide Morgan's out

there!”

“Sh! Shut up!” said Jake in a fierce whisper. “I ain’t so sure.”

For several more long moments they waited in silence, listening, their bodies tense.

The horse disappeared. Then a tall figure stepped into the doorway, black against the fading sky; a figure with shoulders of a weary droop, that yet gave the impression of permanence that granite bears.

It was Abner Cade.

2

The man hunched his head forward to peer uncertainly into the cabin, now quite dark, striving to accustom his eyes to the gloom.

“I’m here, Ab,” said Jake.

The heavy figure did not relax, nor did the man give any sign such as an ordinary man might give at the assuring words.

“Jake,” said Abner Cade—and his voice more than ever seemed weighted down with rock, “I’ve brought yore horse back. I turned him loose just outside. I picked him up quite a ways south.”

“Thanks,” Jake said.

“I come here to ask you a question,” said Cade. “*Was that horse stole?*”

There was an electric silence, a silence that seemed charged with thunderbolts that lay in wait. Then Jake Downey spoke swiftly.

“That’s my business, Ab!”

There was another pause; and when Cade spoke his voice was infinitely weary, yet infinitely hard.

“I ain’t goin’ to kill you, Jake—not here.”

“No,” said Jake, his voice as hard and cold as frozen ground, “you ain’t.”

“But next time we meet up,” said Cade, the bitter anger surging into his voice in spite of him, “draw an’ fire! Because I’m goin’ to throw you in yore tracks!”

“Good!” said Jake.

Abner Cade moved as if to turn away; but at the last instant he seemed to become aware of the third man’s presence, as if for the first time. By the position of his body, dark against the sky, they could see that he was again peering into the dark.

"Who's that there?" he demanded.

A casual answer might have turned him away; but now the blood was mounting to the former express rider's head.

"You leave hyar!" he commanded.

Cade's big body snapped tense. "That's Peters," he said, his voice malignant.

As Talky Peters drew in his breath to speak, Jake Downey silenced him with a heavy boot in the shin.

"Well," he demanded, rising swiftly to his feet, "what if it is?"

"That man goes with me," said Cade.

Jake marveled at the cold, hard guts of this man who stood against two, yet disdained to move his body from the doorway's silhouetting light.

"He does like hell!" said Downey. His right arm hung straight and limp at his side, the hand relaxed, but close to the butt of the heavy gun. He noticed that Cade's arm, too, hung close to his side.

"I'm head of the Vigilantes," said Cade. "An' the Vigilantes are the only law we got. When I say he goes, he goes!"

"Law?" spat Downey. "Law says you? Law that threatens to shoot a man on sight on a personal grudge! Think *you're* the law, do yuh? Well then I'm a couple o' bylaws an' a resolution!"

"He's gotta go with me!" said Cade again.

"Take him!" Jake Downey jerked out furiously. "I'll call that hand as it lays! Draw, damn yuh! Draw, if yuh ain't afeared!"

Cade made no move, and for a long time they stood thus, while no one spoke any more. The tin clock on the shelf drudged on through its task of counting off the seconds of interminable time, wearily clipping them away, one by one: "Click-tack—click-tack—click-tack—"

And at last Cade lifted his right hand from his side and rested it heavily against the door jamb beside the brim of his Stetson hat.

Downey laughed harshly. "Don't want any, huh?"

"Mebbe I spoke hasty," Cade admitted; but in his voice was no trace of fear nor conciliation, only weariness and the weight of ballasting rocks. "I ain't ready to shoot it out with the two of yuh; not yet."

"No?"

"But I tell yuh this," Cade went on; "if the man that killed Lew was dead, an' I knowed it, there'd be powder smoke driftin' out o' this doorway

right now!"

"Mebbe he *is* dead," Jake taunted him; for the battle drums were beating hard in the veins upon his forehead, and his hand yearned for the feel of a kicking gun.

"He's goin' to be," said Abner Cade, "if I live."

With that he turned from the doorway and disappeared. They heard his measured, heavy step receding toward the corral. After him Downey sent a single mocking word.

"If!"

3

"The trouble is," Jake Downey said after a long time, as he trimmed the wick of the lantern they had lit, "he's got so cussed many folks back of him."

"That's what comes with pilin' up a lot o' jack," said Talky bitterly, "then always hornin' in with somethin' to say."

"An' sayin' it square an' backin' it up," Jake Downey added. "You got to allow him that, Talky."

They were silent and thoughtful for a while.

"Slide shore picked the wrong feller," said Talky at last. "The wrong feller fer all concerned."

"I don't know as he did," replied Jake wearily. "Things had to come to a pass sometime, Talky. It's just a question is Abner Cade goin' to run this range. I don't like one feller runnin' things. Unless," he added with a faint grin, "that feller is on my side o' the crick."

"What yuh goin' to do?"

"What *you* goin' to do?"

"Jake," said Talky Peters with resolution, "it's come time fer you an' me to pull out o' this place. There's plenty o' room in this country fer a feller to work along, fightin' jest one feller at a time to keep things smooth. No call fer any one or two men to shoot it out with two-three whole outfits, jest to make a place where he'll be let to live."

"No?" Jake drawled.

"We got room in this country, Jake—lots of it. Places wuth lookin' into, too. F'rinstance, take the Powder River country. I ain't been there, but—"

"You been listenin' to Slide Morgan," Jake adjudged. "He ain't been there either."

"I was jest sayin' f'rinstance. Pick yore own place."

"All right," said Jake, "I will. I pick right here!"

"Jake, there's no sense in bein' bull headed! I ain't afeared o' no man, an' well you know it. But—"

"Talky," said Jake Downey, "I ain't stuck on this place, specially. But I come here o' my own free will, an' I picked this place to stop. I got a few calves an' yearlin's runnin' on this range under my own brand. They ain't much, but they cost me hard work, an' I ain't goin' to be run off of 'em by no man, not if he's a whole army hisself. Even not countin' them few critters I wouldn't. Because I ain't built that way.

"I'd like to move on. Tired o' here. I think yore Powder River is full o' Injuns, an' I bet stock can't climb it hardly anywhere. But I'm willin' to give it a go, or any other old place. But this thing has got to be scrapped out first. Afterwards, when everything is all settled an' peaceful, then I'll move out open, with nobody proddin' me. But they ain't goin' to push me no place, Talky, not by a whole damn sight."

"Aw, what's the diff, Jake? No sense in—"

"It's jest the way I'm built, Talky," he said with finality; and they fell silent. Presently Jake spoke again.

"I guess you better move along, though, Talky. You an' me can get together some other place, sometime, an' we'll try out Slide's old Powder River."

"Who move along? Me?"

"Sure—they'll be comin' after yuh to-morrow or next day."

But Talky had changed his tune.

"*Me* hyper out of it, with a bother comin' on? I should say not!"

A twinkle came into Downey's eyes.

"Now, Talky, there ain't no sense in bein' bull headed!"

"Hmph," said Talky, digging his gun-cleaning materials out of a pocket of his chaps. "Leave 'em all come. I hope this here range boils up solid. I hope it splits itself wide open! Let 'er buck!"

"Whatcha aim to do?"

"Clean my gun. Let's see it once."

Jake passed it over. "Mebbe we can get around this shootin'," he offered.

"How? An' what for?"

"Talky, a little while ago I was jest prayin' fer Ab to draw; I'd 'a' put daylight through him quicker'n a wink, an' been dee-lighted. But that wouldn't 'a' settled nothin'. Since then I been thinkin' up another plan. Yuh know, no man is as bad beat as when he's beat at his own game. Come mornin' we'll ride over an' talk to Seth Russell."

"I don't hold with no plans that leaves Ab Cade with a come-back," objected Talky. "Fer one thing, Slide Morgan ain't worth the socks he stands in until Abner is six feet under."

"He'll get there," Jake assured him. "Give him rope. But first I want him busted, so's he'll cash in his checks as a plain, private cowman, an' not leave a whole darned hornet's nest stirred up behind him fer us to settle with!"

"How?"

"Don't know, Talky. Wait'll we see Seth Russell. We got to see what cards we got, before we go figgerin' out much."

He fell silent. Then presently his thought turned suddenly to Ironhead, and he hurried out.

Alone in the hot lantern light in which a myriad of moths and insects swirled, Talky Peters methodically continued the careful cleaning of his gun.

CHAPTER XIII

Drums of War

1

ALL afternoon they had rested at the foot of a great butte that stood in an endless plain, blazing white in the sun. Prone on the craggy edge of the butte the lookout lay, his back almost smoking in the dry heat. There was no slow resignation in the movements of the men sent to relieve the watcher now; at Hunting Dog's word the scouts rose as one, each eager to be the one chosen to scale his way a hundred feet upward, out of the shade into the blazing heat of the upper level.

Unquestionably the Indians were waiting for something. Ordinarily they would have slept like dogs, whatever the discomforts; to-day Morgan was the only one who dozed. They sat alert, their eyes keenly questioning the plain. None lay down; yet even in their alert attitudes there was a certain suggestion of fatality, of habit. It made Morgan feel that they had often sat thus in this place before, only to go away again without the answer to the question that they never spoke.

Between painfully squinting lids Morgan studied the background of savage, living rock against which the Indians sat; and his eyes, sharpened already by association with the scouts, found the signs that he sought. Here behind him was a darkened place where the exposed rock of the butte had been touched with the breath of smoke; there, above, a broken stone had been a little loosened by climbing feet. . . .

He speculated on how long these wandering homeless scouts had been coming here. For months—years? What vision turned their eyes so steadily southward? What was it they half hoped, half dreaded would sometime keep the tryst—man, or god, or devil?

Of one thing he was certain: In the steady southward gaze of these Cheyennes was none of the light of sadness with which men of all races look toward a distant home.

Pondering futilely, Morgan presently sank into a heavy sleep.

2

He must have slept a long while, for when he next sat up he saw that there remained only that pellucid gentle light which lies coolly upon the barren country long after the sun has set. There was a smooth silence, yet he knew that the air had become electric; and now he saw that the Indians were on their feet. Hunting Dog stood with folded arms where he had sat, facing the south. His face was controlled, but the pinched quiver of a nostril told Morgan of the man's nervous strain.

Strong Neck, Feather, Blanket, and Laughing Coyote stood farther out upon the plain at irregular intervals, as if drawn there from where they had sat by an irresistible hypnotic force; they, too, faced southward. From time to time one or another turned to speak to a comrade excitedly; but for long moments they stood more motionless than the sage itself, which the hot wind breathed upon and moved as it breathed.

Morgan stood up and swept the plain with his eyes; and presently he made out in the distance a wisp of dust, obscured by the dim haze of evening. At first it seemed motionless; but after a time it could be perceived to drift and break, then rise to drift again.

Now the Otter came scrambling down the face of the butte, his eyes glittering. Hunting Dog looked at him questioningly, and the Otter answered with a swift jerk of his head that emphasized his resemblance to a great hawk. Then the Otter, pulled by that irresistible force, joined the four others that stood out on the plain.

The long minutes passed; the motionless watching Indians reminded Morgan of people who watch some strange phenomenon of the skies, so intently interested were they, yet so quiet and stoically resigned in the hands of fate. Long afterward Morgan remembered this, recalling how intently he himself, without comprehension, had watched the approach of one whose message bore the destiny of a people.

A speck became visible beneath the thin, dimming drift of dust, a speck that grew to a dot; and so furiously rode the man who approached that in a few minutes more even Morgan could make out the horse itself.

Blanket, ever calm and cynically wise beyond his years, was the first to turn away.

"It will be a long time yet," he said; "he still has far to come. Let's build a little fire, and get ready to cook our meat."

One by one they reluctantly turned and followed Blanket back to the shadow of the butte. With many a long glance toward the distant rider, the scouts gathered dried buffalo chips and thick stems of sage, their hands

made quick by their suppressed excitement. In a few moments they had a little conical fire going; it burned with a small, bright flame that gave almost no smoke at all. Feather began to cut the evening's supply of meat.

Almost half an hour later, just as the last twilight was giving way to the little light of the prairie stars, the rider came up.

The scouts held back until they could restrain themselves no more, then dashed out to meet the messenger. The high-feathered flare of a war bonnet shone above the pony's outstretched neck. The horse itself was in bad case, so drenched with sweat and lather that his original color was indistinguishable. Blood streaked the slathering foam that dripped from the animal's mouth, his eyes showed bloodshot whites, and through nostrils strained to great blood red cavities the breath heaved in painful surges.

The swift Otter, ahead of the others, seized the bridle of the running horse, dragging down its great laboring bounds; and as the pony strove to answer the dragging bridle its knees suddenly buckled under it, and it crumpled headlong. Blanket had already pulled the rider into his arms from the animal's back, joyously holding him close, supporting the Indian's stiff, uncertain step as they moved toward the fire and Hunting Dog.

Twice the ruined pony threw up his head, struggling with his forelegs to rise; then his legs trembled and stiffened, and his head flailed to the ground.

Hunting Dog, the last of them all to move, now came running up, flinging his arms about this man whose horse had died to bring him, and with Blanket helped the exhausted man to the fire.

The rider looked back over his shoulder to his fallen pony.

"He is the fourth," the Indian said.

He laid down his Winchester carbine, and for a moment stood wearily. Hunting Dog now flung aside a saddle blanket, revealing a gun—the Sharps carbine owned by the Otter—and beside it a long-stemmed pipe. All except the rider now sat down cross-legged in a semi-circle about the pipe and gun, to one side of the fire. The rider stooped stiffly to touch the pipe, straightened up, and spoke.

"They are coming," he said in a strong, vibrant voice. "Morning Star, Little Wolf, and all that are left of our people are on the march. We fought hard with the soldiers near the agency just before I came here. On the way I have learned that there is a great deal of cavalry moving to attack the people. Morning Star has many horses, many guns; he is moving fast, and can fight hard.

“But every man is needed. Twenty-seven warriors died of fever since you left, and women, children, and old men without count.”

“Ahoya!” exclaimed Hunting Dog. “Twenty-seven!” And Blanket sucked in his breath.

“The people are very lean,” said the rider with the war bonnet. “Many are sick. But the warriors fought without fear of the soldiers’ guns. And now that we are moving northward there will be plenty of food.”

“White Shield,” said Hunting Dog, addressing the messenger, “are we to meet them with many horses, or go to them at once?”

“You are to come at once,” said White Shield. “Little Wolf expects fighting almost every day for a while. Neither he nor Morning Star wish to fight any more than they have to. But now every gun is needed.”

His eyes rested on Morgan’s in a long stare, but he questioned neither by word nor by expression.

“Give him a blanket to sit on,” said Hunting Dog. “Give him the first and the best of the meat. Where is there water?”

Morgan passed the bonneted Cheyenne his own canteen, and the man drank greedily before he sat down on the blanket spread for him by Feather.

The cowboy looked about into the faces of the Cheyennes, faces beginning to show the seams that hard weather leaves, even in their youth. A day before they had been relaxed, careless; often gay, always alert, yet primarily passive, bespeaking the rigor of lives which had taught them to steal rest where rest could be found. Now all that was gone. Their quick eyes gleamed with a hard, joyous light; their faces were at once illuminated and grimly stern.

And as he looked at the change in these familiar bronze faces, the realization of what the message of White Shield meant came upon Morgan with a great surging thrill. Here was war, bringing hate and bloodlust and death. The old bitter hatred between red and white had once more burst into fierce ravaging flames. Again the cabins of lonely settlers would lie in smoking ruins, and night and day tired cowboys would guard the remudas and the stock. . . .

A deep doubt stirred within him, filling him with dread. Who was Slide Morgan, he asked himself: White or red? If it were in any wise the latter, then it was both, and this Morgan was a wind-tossed thing without name or people. He stared into the bronze faces again, half dreading to see that his own face was mirrored there, and that they were blood of his blood. Instead, he found that never had he been farther removed from them. Here, in the test

of war, it suddenly came to Morgan with its full force that he and these men with whom he had ridden were of utterly different breeds.

Yet they had been his friends, though they were red; and his own people now sought his life for the sake of the cash offer of Abner Cade. And even as he knew the Cheyenne people could never be his, he realized that the end had not come between them, that he must still ride a while with these primitive warriors, though it meant making their battle his own. It was with a free mind that he acknowledged this, a mind in which there was no thought of restraint. Put to the test, Morgan would blithely have taken a chance with the death that threatened his first effort to escape.

While these vague snap shots at reason were racing through Morgan's mind, the circle about the gun and the pipe had fallen silent. For a moment there was not a move nor a whisper among the seven Cheyenne scouts.

Then Hunting Dog began a low chant, a wailing song in a rhythmic beat, sung without words; the other scouts joined in. The song rose and fell, an eerie, pleading dirge that seemed to ask mercy of the gods of the plain, begging for yet another brief postponement of the stark death that meant outer darkness, and the end of earth.

Then the chant quickened into an angry war dance beat; against the background of the wind that whispered over the sage the chant rose stronger, snarling and threatening. It was as if these weird human voices embodied the spirit of wolves that set long noses into the bitter winds and struggle savagely against destiny, answering the merciless plain with the merciless will to endure.

The wild chant rose and rose, until one terrible war cry burst from Blanket, a snarling eagle scream of wrath and battle. Then the chant fell away to the mournful, droning repetition of a single off-key note, and ceased.

For some moments after the medicine song had died away the Indians sat motionless and silent. Each seemed to stare at the man opposite him with unseeing eyes. Only Hunting Dog looked from one to another of the proud harsh faces; and he seemed pleased with what he saw there. The scout chief now turned his eyes to Morgan, and with a slight movement of one finger pointed to the fire and the meat.

Morgan immediately began to cook slabs of beef, propping them over the dying fire with sticks of tough sage. Presently Feather left the circle and came to help him.

Hunting Dog said, "Who are among the dead?"

"At the agency there died Good Wolf," said White Shield.

"Ahoya!" exclaimed several, for this man had been a chief.

"The day before he died he asked for food. He was wasted and gaunt with his sickness. The beef ration was late. There was nothing to give him, for all had starved for three days. The next day his shadow left him, and he lay dead, though his heart beat for one day more.

"Others that have died are Beaver River, Bear Claws, Gun, Crooked Finger, Rearing Horse, Crazy Bear, Sand, Spotted Elk, and Four Wings. Panther took his own life. He was sick for a long time; some thought that his shadow was already gone. Long Head died; and Powder, Red Moon, Blind Mule, Bird Walker, Rib, Snow, Bull Trail. The wife of Black Robe is dead, and the wife of Tall Man. Light Behind the Cloud has lost his three sons. There are many more."

"Ahoya," ran the murmur about the circle, for White Shield had named friends, relatives, brothers, and men whose every deed of war was known to all of them.

"All by the fever?" Hunting Dog asked.

"Every one. Of those I have named not one died in battle, nor in any other way. Red Thunder and the medicine men saved many. But more have died than you could believe. I will tell you more names as I think of them."

"We can believe well enough," Hunting Dog answered. "We saw two winters there, with the death chant in every lodge. Yet the summers were worse. Ha! I remember that more than sixty people were sick before we had been there two moons."

"They wished to kill us when they sent us there," said the Otter bitterly. "Never a war path cost us as heavily as living in that land. We should have fought our way out before."

"We may all be killed yet," said Hunting Dog soberly. "It is a long trail to our hills."

"We would all die anyway," said White Shield.

"Good," said Blanket. "It will cost them something to kill Cheyennes!"

The Indians fell upon the fresh meat, bolting it hungrily.

Presently, after he had eaten, Blanket produced a small drum, scarcely more than a little hoop with hide stretched over it, and began to beat upon it with his thumbs.

Slowly the rhythm of the drum throb began to work its way into the souls of the Cheyennes, stimulating the exultant war mood that was upon

them. Strong Neck, the man with the powerful shoulders and the flat face, sang a few notes of a high-pitched chant. Thereafter, for a time, as they continued to eat, one or another of them repeated the high, eerie sequence of notes to the rhythm of the drum. And at last Blanket began to chant in a lower, harsher key. The tempo of the drum increased, and the Otter and Laughing Coyote began to chant with Blanket.

Suddenly Feather sprang to his feet and began to dance, shifting his weight heavily in a jogging, short-stepped trot, his head so low that the bound tails of his thick hair trailed upon the ground before him. It was night now; the faint radiance of the stars took the harsh edge off the dark, but the flickering orange glow of the fire supplied the only light by which a man could see. It glinted upon the greased black braids of Feather's hair, and played over the writhing, clean-carved muscles of his naked back.

Soon the Otter sprang up and followed Feather; then Strong Neck, and Blanket, who gave his drum to Laughing Coyote. Lastly White Shield joined the ring that circled the fire, his weariness forgotten.

The war bonneted White Shield, sleek and clean cut, presented a figure in strong contrast to those of the travel frayed scouts. A breech clout and hip leggings were all the clothing he wore; but the leggings were of finely tanned deerskin of a light grayish buff, brilliantly embroidered in quills of blue and yellow, with here and there a bit of deep red like drying blood. The bright quills were worked into a simple geometric pattern of primitive beauty, accurately symmetrical and regular. A light fringe ran down the outer seam of each legging.

His moccasins were new, well beaded, and with three-inch double tails of deerskin thongs trailing from each heel. As he danced the long white eagle feathers of his war bonnet, black tipped, and ending each in a tiny tuft of red dyed down, swayed and tossed in a dance of their own. From the back of the tall head-dress a long tail of other eagle feathers trailed over the satiny smooth bronze skin of his shoulders and naked back.

The heat was heavy upon them, and the other Indians cast off the oddments of white men's clothing that they wore. Feather flung aside the broad Stetson rim, Strong Neck his hat, Blanket his ragged blue shirt and overalls.

Naked, now, save for breech clouts and moccasins, Hunting Dog's scouts danced to the rhythm of the pulsating drum in the shadow of the looming butte. Against the towering rock wall the shadows leaped, many times larger than men. The sweat rolled from the muscle-rippled skin of their backs, and still they danced, intoxicated by the driving song of the drum, the wailing

chant, and their dreams of war. On and on, sometimes swiftly, until the dance was like the whirling of wind-caught leaves; sometimes slowly, ploddingly, like trail weary ponies, or buffaloes on a long trek; on and on. . . .

Here was the sort of thing Morgan had heard of, but never seen. This was the sort of savage ceremony with which they worked themselves into a frenzy of wrath and hate, preparing themselves to raid and burn, to torture and pillage and kill.

As the drum throbbed on, something began to stir within the man who watched, some ancient forgotten emotion that turned in its sleep in answer to the persistent fluttering rumble of the drum, singing like thunder far away. The harsh, wailing chant raised his hair; yet it irresistibly turned his thought to his wrongs. There was a hypnotic element in the weird ceremony in its rough setting of vast plains, looming butte, and the far-off watching stars. The shifting figures against the firelight were but partly seen, and beyond them, half veiled—something else.

He shook his head like a dog coming out of the water, but there was no escaping the muffled murmuring thunder of the drum. One at a time the Indians flung themselves to the ground to rest; but as the second dropped the first was up again. Only Hunting Dog sat apart, as though husbanding his strength, his face a mask.

There was no flicker of pain in Slide's stiffened right hand, yet he could feel again the savage tearing shock as the ricocheting bullet streaked across his wrist. Once more he could see his own blood, drawn by his people that had turned against him; it ran from his fingers in drops that quickened to a pulsing stream. He could hear the bark of the searching guns, see the silhouetted, closing riders, and among them, weary but implacable, the solid figure of Abner Cade.

He saw again the pale cynical eyes of Abner's brother, the man whom in that swift, fated instant he had struck to his death. He saw the serene face of Nancy Chase, a memory momentarily so poignant that Slide almost cried aloud. He saw her in Lew Cade's arms, and the world surged red. . . .

Perhaps Laughing Coyote saw the savage light in Morgan's eyes. In any case, when Morgan could see the Cheyennes again, the Coyote's eyes were boring into him.

"Dance! Dance!" the Indian yelled across the small space between them. "Up, Red Talker!"

In the madness of the war drum's spell, Morgan all but sprang to his feet. An almost irresistible urge rose within him to dance contorted about the dying embers with the rest, chanting out his anger, hate, and sorrow to the age-old rhythm of the drum. Laughing Coyote suddenly made the drum pulse swell to a wild flurry, a thundering tattoo. The energy of the dancing redoubled, and at the height of the chant savage war cries split the air from Blanket, White Shield, Strong Neck, and the Otter.

Morgan half raised, as if drawn by a force beyond himself; almost he flung himself among the naked figures. . . .

The chant was subsiding now; the drum's tattoo sunk to a dull throbbing, and the dance to a wearied jog. One by one the dancers dropped aside and stretched upon the ground. Feather heaped the sulking embers of the fire, and smothered them with fresh meat.

3

Having heavily gorged again the Indians slept, motionless, huskily breathing forms which the dying glow of the little fire no longer touched.

But Slide Morgan could not sleep; and after a long time spent in tight-eyed struggle with the memories that swarmed over his mind he raised upon his elbow and looked about.

Hunting Dog sat and smoked; Slide could see the glowing coal of the Indian's short tube of a pipe as the scout chief inhaled. It seemed that this man who had been too weary to dance was not yet tired enough to sleep. Indeed, in almost six weeks with the Cheyenne scouts Morgan had seldom seen Hunting Dog more than doze fitfully. In a safe place there might be no guards, and few other precautions; but the scout chief himself slept only in light snatches—or smoked through the watches of the night.

On a sudden impulse Morgan got up, and went to lounge beside Hunting Dog.

It was an odd indication of the aloof friendship that Morgan had grown to feel for this man that when he spoke it was in the words he would have used in addressing Jake Downey or Talky Peters.

"Bucks jumped the reservation, eh?" he said.

He could see Hunting Dog's head turn slowly toward him in the dark, but there was no answer. Then Morgan suddenly realized that he had spoken in his own language; and in view of the way he had put the question, he was glad.

"Why are the Tsis-tsis-tas leaving home?" he asked presently.

Hunting Dog did not answer for so long that Morgan thought the Indian meant to ignore him.

"Not leaving home," Hunting Dog answered at last. "Going home." There was a long pause, then the scout chief repeated the words: "Going home."

"Where is that?" Morgan asked simply.

"You have never heard of Morning Star?"

"No."

Hunting Dog appeared to think, then spoke a word so foreign to Morgan's knowledge of Cheyenne that he believed it must be of another tongue. Then, after many moments, Hunting Dog unexpectedly wrenched out two words in English:

"Dull Knife!"

"Dull Knife? Morning Star is Dull Knife?"

"Morning Star is his real name. Dull Knife is the name the Sioux use."

"Do you speak English?" Morgan demanded suddenly.

"No. I only happened to get the name 'Dull Knife' at the agency."

The name was one that Morgan knew; and after a moment's thought the story came back to him.

Dull Knife was the chief who had waged a bitter war in the Black Hills, harassing the miners that had flooded this old Indian range in response to word of gold. He had seized wagon trains, it was said, burned cabins, raided, robbed, and killed. Some said that this half-legendary figure had taken a hand in the destruction of Custer's command on the Little Big Horn. A thousand atrocities were credited to his name.

When his village had been captured the whole northern border had breathed deeply with relief. The common white opinion from the Platte north—and south—was that "the whole kit an' b'ilin' of 'em orter be shot first-off!"

That had been two years ago. At the time Morgan had agreed with general opinion. Now—he looked at things differently these days.

In one of the treaties which the government never kept, the Indians had been promised the Black Hills. Conceivably a man had a right to fight for his land.

Even Custer, come to think of it, when he was "massacred in cold blood," was in the act of attacking a Sioux village that had been hiding away!

After his own experience with the persistent malice of his breed, many things looked different in Morgan's eyes.

Then a new curiosity occurred to him.

"But Dull Knife belonged in the Black Hills and thereabouts. How did he ever get way down south o' *here*?"

"We wanted to stay north. The soldiers wanted us to come south. They argued a long time. None of us would give in. Tall Bull was speaking for us. Suddenly Tall Bull said we would let them take us south. We were astonished. But he had said we would go south with them. So we went."

"It's no good down there?"

Hunting Dog held his silence for a long time; but when he answered his voice was bleakly calm.

"For us it is a land of death. Of six hundred who went there two summers ago, almost three hundred are dead. A hundred and twenty died the first year. . . ."

His voice trailed off, as if his eyes were upon distant, indescribable things.

"When they saw you were dying, wouldn't they let you move?"

"We have begged, over and over again. Little Wolf has been to Washington; he knows about the way the soldiers are run. The Indian agent said he sent word to his Great Father in Washington. I don't know. But if he did, then the Great Father refused."

There was such bitter irony in the scout chief's voice as he spoke of the "Great Father" that the most savage denunciations could have added nothing more. When Hunting Dog spoke again, after a long time, his voice quivered with an intensity of wrath.

"My wife is dead. Two baby daughters and one little son so high—" he indicated the height of a child of three or four—"died in these arms. They wish us all to die! They hem us in with rifles in a place where none of us can survive!"

Behind his voice was the wrath of desperation, the desperation of a cornered people, beaten, baffled, dying, shorn of all hope; yet still a people that would not give up.

“Well, we will die, perhaps! But we will die with our weapons in our hands!”

CHAPTER XIV

Dull Knife's Cheyennes

1

IT was almost a week before Hunting Dog's party met the traveling village of Morning Star, the chief who to the world was Dull Knife.

They came unexpectedly (to Morgan, at least) out of a cool gray dawn, a loose, long-trailing column, followed by a remuda of nearly five hundred head of horse. The scouts had ridden since shortly after midnight, perhaps informed by some far sign of the nearness of the village. Certainly Hunting Dog's party evinced no surprise at the ghostly gray cavalcade that came on with daybreak.

Morgan's first appraisal of their presence came with a faint murmur, a bare moaning whisper along the ground. The far sound swelled into a distant mutter, like a deep-voiced wind in far-away pines; then to a steady muffled thunder, the beat of thousands of hoofs upon the prairie turf.

Then over a far ridge appeared a narrow dark shape, that grew and lengthened toward them down the long sag of ground, and Morgan could make out the shuffling bob of galloping horses, though it was yet too dim to see the drifting dust clouds from the hoofs.

Now a short, joyous shout went up from the scouts, and suddenly lashing their horses they charged toward the head of the column on the dead run. As they neared, Morgan watched the lengthening of the column that poured over the ridge with perhaps the deepest thrill he had ever known. He had expected numbers, but as he watched the long file pour and pour and pour over that low ridge the full sweep of the thing took him for the first time. Here was a whole tribe, a fighting people in the saddle, riding out of a land of death through a gauntlet of United States troops—fighting their way home!

They were traveling at a steady hand-gallop, just beyond a canter; here and there a horse would drop into a hard trot for a few rods, then be forced into the gallop again to keep up. Morgan, accustomed to the trot as the regular gait for distance covering, could not understand how the Cheyennes expected to hold such a pace in a long march; later he learned that the Indians found means. In all the world there were no finer horsemen than the northern Cheyennes of Morning Star.

The last of the long column and its big, close-running remuda crossed the ridge, and Morgan could make out a dozen outriders behind the last horses and to the sides. As they drew closer the cowboy could see the dim individual shapes in the trailing file, and see the dust that purled in misty clouds from the horse's feet, drifting off to the side like smoke puffs in the breeze.

An old man, dressed in war bonnet, buckskin shirt and leggings, and riding a tall bay horse of splendid stride, led the column. This, Morgan believed, would be Morning Star, and in this he was right. The scouts charged full at this man, right arms raised high, and he welcomed them by the same sign. Then at the last instant they whirled their horses and rode abreast.

As they came close to the chief the Indian's eyes ran quickly over them, and for an instant rested on the face of Morgan. The cowboy's horse was at this moment pressed close to the horse of Morning Star, so that for a fleeting second red rider and white looked full into each other's faces. And here Morgan felt a shock of surprise, for the keen, weather-seamed old face was —kind. Perhaps it seemed more so because of the harshness of the faces to which he had become accustomed.

Then they had pivoted and were sweeping along with the head of the column. Hunting Dog was talking to Morning Star, leaning close as they rode, in order to be heard above the thunder of the hoofs behind. A few minutes later Hunting Dog, followed by the scouts, turned again and rode toward the rear of the column. With right hands raised high and faces beaming with exultation the scouts raced toward the remuda; and as they drove past the Indians of the column a suppressed clamor of welcome and applause followed them along. Here and there a hand or a quirt flicked out to strike at one of the returning scouts in an exuberance of welcome.

Morgan was astounded by the composition of the column. He had pictured to himself a band of warriors, encumbered only by the gear of war. In this conception he had been utterly wrong. This was no war party which Morning Star led, but a tribe of families, carrying with them all the few earthly things that they possessed. The tribe numbered perhaps three hundred, all told. But of these scarcely seventy were men who bore arms.

Of the rest, many were women, some young and lithe, more old and dumpy of form. They rode with the accustomed, centaur-like ease of the men. Behind many of them rode young children, their little arms clinging about their mothers' waists. These were little ones of four and five years old. Still littler ones, scarcely more than babies, rode before their mothers on the

withers of the ponies, their mothers balancing them in their seats. Here and there a tiny baby was carried on its mother's back on a cradle board or in the slack of a blanket.

Little boys and girls of six or seven were riding ponies like men, many of them sitting their mounts bareback with the ease of children who rode before they ever walked.

The rough count of seventy armed warriors included stripling boys, some of them scarcely more than twelve years, slim, beautiful, graceful figures, naked but for moccasins and breech clouts. They were jaunty and confident, thoroughly at ease on their ponies. But the littlest ones were in deadly earnest, as if terribly eager to prove their worthiness to carry weapons with their sires.

Here and there, too, were aged men, their arms shrunken, their faces like great oak leaves, withered and sere; yet they bore themselves proudly, their weapons light in their hands.

Scattered through the column was a scrofulitic rag-tag and bobtail of white men's clothing; but most of the fighting men wore nothing above the waist. Their smooth shoulders and backs yielded to the movement of their mounts with the grace of cimarrons.

Throughout the column were many travois, drawn for the most part by horses which little children rode. The long, burdened poles were fastened to the ponies like elongated wagon shafts, and dragged upon the ground behind. To them were lashed great bundles, or sometimes baskets in which groups of little children rode. They sprung and bounded with the irregularities of the ground and the heave of the galloping ponies.

A few had bandaged wounds. Occasionally there loomed a great war bonnet of snowy eagle feathers, tipped with black. . . .

The scouts circled the remuda, and far in the rear, the last of all, they found a gaunt, high-shouldered warrior who was Little Wolf.

The great war chief of the Cheyennes appeared to be of middle age, tall, soldierly of carriage, and toughly lean. His gaunt face was wide of cheekbone and wide of mouth, with eyes pinched narrow by long squinting into the sun. It was drawn into stern lines by an expression so resolutely grim, yet so thoughtfully calm that Morgan was instantly struck with the man's visible strength.

After a swift, unreadable inspection, Little Wolf seemed to notice Morgan no more. Hunting Dog and the war chief consulted for a few minutes without slackening pace; then Little Wolf left the rear of the column

in charge of another man, and with Hunting Dog and the Otter whipped up his fast pinto pony and raced for the head of the traveling village.

2

"What do you want to do?" Blanket asked Morgan, riding alongside.

The Indian had found the travels of his own lodge, and no longer wore shirt nor leggings. Instead he now displayed a war bonnet, a distinguishing decoration, since they were worn by few. Its tall eagle feathers enhanced his fine, light carriage.

"If you want to leave us now," Blanket continued, "maybe Little Wolf will give you a horse of some sort."

"How about my gun?" Morgan asked.

"We can't give you that. It would be like giving you a man's life."

Slide considered hastily. This was plainly an offer from Blanket to intercede for his liberty. But he knew that the chances were ten to one that the horse he got would be one picked up by the Indians along the way. To be captured on it would mark him a horse thief—and probably there would be a neck-tie party on that score alone, with no questions asked. He sparred for time.

"Why should you let me go now," he asked, "when you were afraid to before?"

"It's fight and run, now," said Blanket. "We're only trying to get through here. Cavalry can't bother us—once it's behind. Even with our families and travois, we can outrun them any day. They don't change horses often enough, and they don't know how to live off the country. What harm can *you* do?"

Slide came to his decision. Here and there in the West there must be men who remained his friends; but which they were and where, he was uncertain. He conceived that his one best bet was to get back to Jake Downey at Hickory Lookout, above the North Platte; and from there, freshly horsed and armed, push west over the divide.

He could make it alone, if he needed to, with one worn-out horse. But every day that he could safely stay with the Indians and their constantly freshened remuda would carry him a distance equal to three days' travel alone with one horse. Also the Cheyennes knew how to gather food without loss of time nor additional risk.

To stay with Morning Star's band was a bold, reckless move. Slide did not realize that at that very time fully 13,000 United States troops were on the move to cut off the galloping Cheyenne village. But he did know that there was going to be "hell poppin' aplenty." There had been already, and the worst was ahead without end in sight. With eyes open he made his play.

"I'll stay with you, if you'd just as soon."

"There'll be fighting with the whites—lots of it," Blanket warned him.

"I'm used to that."

"They'll kill you—they're sure to—if they catch you with us."

"They sure aim to," Morgan agreed.

"Well," grinned Blanket, "if that's what you want, that's your lookout. Little Wolf will probably hand you over to me, if I ask him."

Blanket quirted his horse, and drifted forward toward the head of the column; and for a long time Slide rode near Strong Neck, who now rode at the tail.

When Blanket at last returned he bore his pony close against Morgan's, and spoke with a peculiar grin that showed his strong yellow teeth.

"You're turned over to me," he told the cowboy. "Most will leave you alone on that account. But stay near me. There is danger on every side of you, and all the time. If you make one false move, nothing can save you!"

CHAPTER XV

Talky Stands Pat

1

THREE men—Jake Downey, Talky Peters, and Seth Russell—lounged in a small cubicle on the second floor of the Happy Chance Hotel and Bar, waiting with an impatience that was almost, but not quite, concealed. It was not the same room from which Slide Morgan had made his getaway a few months before, for this room faced the street; but in all other respects it was the same—short, narrow, and furnished with a cheap bed and a crude chair.

From the bar and from the street below the window there rose a steady hum of many voices, representing in its volume the greater part of the population of the Roaring River range. The brilliant heat of midsummer noon beat upon the dry, powdered dust of the street, and with the hum of voices there drifted up slow-rolling puffs of this dust, gradually powdering their clothes and stiffening their eyelashes with its faint weight. The hot air was heavy with the odor of sweating horse flesh and lather-wet leather.

"I ain't wild an' crazy about this," said Seth Russell stolidly.

He was lean and tall, very angular, with shoulders as hard and cornered as broken stone; his sharp-corded wrists and the coarsened, cross-hatched skin of his neck spoke of long activity in all weathers. His long face was twisted and lined into an aspect of hostility from years of scowling into the sun, suggesting a harshness of temperament that was belied by his civil manner. Even his mustache and scant sandy hair seemed burnt and bleached by the tireless sun of the plains.

"Am I?" Jake Downey asked.

"Such a damn fool rumpus I never heard tell of," Seth went on. "Plumb humany, all the way. Just the same, I think we got Cade on the run, Jake. We made him overplay his hand so far he's goin' to look awful silly."

Downey chuckled. "Betcha the boys are goin' to laugh fit to kill when they hear what's this Talky's bein' tried for. This miner's court business is a real laughable proposition in the first place. Worse'n the Vigilante idee—an' that's all miner foolishness too. Ger-reat jumpin' Jehosaphat, Mister Russell! How come yuh stood fer all this miner monkey-business comin' up in yore cow country?"

“Well,” said Seth Russell, “we sure needed somethin’! Abner had the main say, an’ that’s what he rigged up. There was the Injuns first. The Vigilante rig-up give us somethin’ to work with, an’ tell who was pullin’ their weight an’ who was layin’ back. Then it helped clean up the two big rustlin’ messes pretty good. An’ it’s put a kibosh on the worst o’ the perfessional gun throwers, an’ such.”

“When I think o’ how Abner Cade runs things around here I’m astonished,” said Jake. “He owns these boards under us. He sold us the stuff we et to-day, an’ the liquor we drunk. He runs the Vigilantes, an’ the town, an’ most o’ the range. I’ve come damn close to thinkin’ he runs us.”

“He don’t run me, Jake,” Russell said. Then, after a moment, “Yuh got to make allowances for him. The railroad not comin’ through here was a pretty stiff wallop to Ab. He’d be terrible rich to-day, Jake, if things had worked out like he built for.”

Jake Downey started to spit out of the window, but viewed the milling men below, and spit on the floor instead.

“They’re hazin’ ’em all out o’ the bar,” he reported. “Gosh, look at ’em come! How’d all them get in there?”

“Guess they figger to make ’em all leave their guns outside,” said Seth Russell.

“Well,” said the old express rider, “what’s the sum an’ substance of our play?”

“Let them all spiel their spiel. Anybody can talk as wants, in this show, an’ when everybody’s through, then everybody votes what to do. One man’s say is as good as another’s, or a damn sight better. It won’t last long; the boys’ll get hot an’ restless, an’ shout the long-winded fellers down.

“After everybody has talked against Peters that’s goin’ to, you get up an’ lay down the law. Give ’em hell! Everybody knows yuh, by hearsay, anyway, an’ we got enough boys of our own to whoop it up when yuh quit. Then all our boys start yellin’ for the vote. An’ nobody else can talk against a row like that, so we’ll vote. Talky will be awarded a medal or somethin’, an’ prob’ly all the boys, bein’ half lit anyway, will laugh fit to die.”

“Where do you come in?” Jake demanded. “All this comical stuff jest to give the boys a show?”

“After they clear Talky of whatever they got rigged up against him, why —then I’ll speak my piece. An’ when I get done this miner’s court business is goin’ to be a thing of the past. An’ the Vigilantes is maybe goin’ to mind their own business some!”

“How ’bout me?” Talky Peters put in for the first time. “Do I get to answer ’em back, or do I jest sit an’ take it?”

“Answer ’em when yuh feel like it. But make it short.”

“He couldn’t make it anythin’ else,” Jake assured him.

There was a long silence while they sat in the heavy heat. Seth Russell sat motionless on the cheap bed, his long limbs idle; but his eyes were alive, and in them showed a quiet, tenuous sort of strength that suggested not granite but steel. If there was a man in the Roaring River country who could match hands with Abner Cade and win, Seth Russell was the one.

Talky shifted restlessly, now and then, his face almost cheerful. If any man had a right to be nervous it was he; for the men of four great cattle outfits had swarmed into Roaring River to decide what next would happen to Talky Peters, and for the first time in his life he held the center of the stage.

“They’re pretty near all inside,” Jake reported at last. “Guess all is in that’s goin’ to get in. She’s runnin’ over some.”

“Let’s go down.”

They got up and clumped out, their spurs jingling at their heels.

2

A low, narrow platform of boxes and planks had been rigged at the rear of the Happy Chance Bar. On this crude platform, a little to one side of the middle, a deal table stood, with two chairs, one behind it and one at the side. In the former sat Abner Cade, massive and wearily inert, yet conveying an impression of that dominant strength that was in truth his. In the other chair sat Marve Conklin, constable by appointment of the Vigilantes; his round, firm-crusted face with its bracketing flat sideboards shone wetly crimson in the heat.

Filling the square bar room, roosting upon the long bars and jamming behind them, standing on tables and chairs, sprawling on the edge of the platform before Cade’s table, crowding up onto ends of the platform itself, was packed the humming, sweating mob of cowmen. Russell himself, owner of the Box R, who had brought forty men of his own to this gathering, had not realized the extent of the population which the Roaring River range had attained. There were probably less than three hundred men there; but the dense crowding in the usually spacious bar gave the effect of a vast assemblage.

"Ger-reat Cripe!" burst out Jake Downey. "Look at the fellers!"

He suddenly broke into chuckles. "Such a wonderful fuss over nothin' I never see! Never happened in the world before—couldn't happen no place else but Roarin' River! Gorry! I wouldn't a-missed it, if it was my own hangin'!"

"Gosh," said Talky, looking somewhat appalled.

"Ab never expected nothin' like this," exulted Downey in high glee. He had to shout to be heard over the rumble of the voices.

"Yo're damn tootin' he didn't!" Seth Russell answered. "He figured to hold this quiet in some room upstairs. Now see why I wanted miner's court, 'stead of a jury?"

"Man! Man! Man!" Beads of sweat were breaking out upon Jake Downey's forehead with the stupendous heat of the packed bar, but he looked as if he were going to dance up and down.

They jammed and elbowed their way from the crowded stairway to the platform, mounted it, and struggled to the front rank. Here Seth Russell and the former express rider halted, pressing back against the wall; but Talky Peters stepped forward two paces more, and stood dazedly before the third chair upon the platform, which had been preserved for him.

"There he is!" yelled somebody.

For a moment the dense mass of cowmen subsided to a minor buzz. Then some Box R man bawled at the top of his lungs.

"Hoo-RAY fer Talky!"

Fifty voices took up the yell in the high-pitched whoops of cattle hazers. Men who were prejudiced against the Box R in all things were swept into the wild riot of noise by sheer contagion, and the old building trembled with an ear-piercing roar.

As the tumult subsided, Abner Cade slowly swung his big face toward Talky Peters; from a poker-face mask his light eyes, to which the sagging lower lids gave an expression of implacable malevolence, looked stolidly at Talky.

Talky met the gaze; and as he returned it he slowly grinned with such mocking insolence that a ripple of laughter started and swelled to a roar. The wild whooping and cheering broke forth anew.

As this second spasm died a slight flurry occurred in about the middle of the barroom. Questions were shot from mouth to mouth, and some tried to press toward the disturbance, but without avail. In a moment the relaxed

form of a hatless cowboy was resurrected from the middle of the milling mass, and held aloft by a dozen hands. A rider who had drunk incautiously but with ambition had been overcome by biliousness and the heat. The effect, however, was as if he had been overcome by the emotion of the minute.

Somebody recognized the collapsed tipster.

"Too much fer Indianny Jones!" he bellowed.

Laughter again rumbled as the slumbering cowboy began to move feet first, passed from hand to hand above the heads of the mob, toward the outer air.

"Hooray fer Indianny!" yelled somebody.

And again the wild cheering broke forth, intermingled with whoops and guffaws of laughter. When this tumult had died away the crowd mopped foreheads, panting and gasping for air, but chuckling yet.

Before Abner Cade lay two guns: One an oily blue forty-five, the other a rusty flintlock. Except for the gun in Marve Conklin's holster, the blue gun was supposed to be the only shootable iron within the bulging walls of the Happy Chance. Cade now rose, picked up the rusty flintlock pistol, and hammered mightily on the table with the butt. The drone of voices began to quiet.

With Indianny Jones out of the way, the cowmen again turned their attention to Talky Peters. Only a few knew Talky Peters personally; even fewer knew what his trial was about.

He was being tried as a result of the almost fanatic insistence of the embittered Abner Cade; he was being tried by miners' court, with the range invited to take part, because of the efforts of Seth Russell. Not a man in the Roaring River territory was unapprised of his urgent invitation—Russell had seen to that. Nor were any absent who could possibly make it to the Happy Chance.

Yet the nature of Talky's crime against the peace of the range was unknown. The cowmen, conceived, however, that it must be an outrageous one, unparalleled in the annals of the range. There had never been a mass trial at Roaring River before; they had never seen the like. Hence they reasoned that the cause of the huge demonstration must also be something monstrous and unheard of. For the love of action they endured the airless heat of the barroom seven times stuffier than a circus tent in August; and presently a hushed expectancy responded to Cade's insistent hammerings.

Seth Russell's face was a blank; only the intensity of his shrewd eyes and the locked stillness of jaws that were usually chewing, revealed his internal elation. Cade was in poor position and Russell knew it.

As for Cade, if he were cursing the moment in which he consented to hold miners' court, he did not show it. There was the same weary droop in his massive shoulders, the same weight of the ages in his voice as he spoke. At his best, Cade was a pillar of strength in the range; at his worst he was still a man who fought with whatever weapons came into his hands, nor asked odds of any.

"Men," said Abner Cade, and paused. The word was not a common form of address; but uttered slowly in Cade's heavy voice it brought no mirth.

"Men," he said again. "We've met here about a very serious thing. What this man has done may not seem much. Truth is, it don't matter none. What we're here to see about is a whole damn sight more important than any one thing any one man does. We're goin' to decide to-day whether we're goin' to have law on this range, or whether men from outside can ride in here killin' who they please, an' then ride out o' here untouched."

Cade knew his men. He could not talk long, he knew; he must make every word count. Here in truth he was face to face with a test of his strength, in circumstances not of his own choosing. He knew, now, better than any perhaps, how pitifully weak the case against Talky was. Yet if he lost his point he would be made ridiculous, a laughing stock among the men who had accepted him as leader.

Here was no loaded jury, but a mass of men most of whom gave allegiance to themselves alone. And they were as quick to laugh as to fight or to drink.

Swiftly, with picked words, Cade spoke of the law and what it meant; and he spoke of it in cattle terms, linking it closely to the lives of the men to whom he spoke. He missed few opportunities, in the brief moments he dared take, to play upon local prejudice, pride of independence, sense of fairness, nor love of battle. There was hardly a mainspring in the cowboy character that Cade did not in some way try to release in the men before him. And his words were chosen well.

Even so, those farthest away, tired of standing in the heat, and plagued by thirst and the flies, grew restless before he was done.

"Old boy's wound up fer all day," grumbled somebody near the door.

"Dry up," warned a friend. "There's a snap in the old dog yet!"

"Didja say snap, or yap?"

A mumble and snicker of suppressed laughter ran across the neighboring jam, and Cade saw that he must work fast.

"Now a man named Morgan comes in here, on our own range. Some call him Cheyenne Morgan. Whatever else he was, I guess everybody is pretty well sure that Morgan was a half-breed Injun. He—"

A harsh old voice cut into the monologue like the lash of a rope.

"Now you hold on!"

All eyes turned to where a scrawny old arm and fist shot up from the mass against the left hand bar, one bony finger pointing commandingly at Cade.

"I don't wanna butt in here," the voice went on, "but I know a sight better than that last remark!"

"Throw him out!" yelled somebody.

"He's got a right t'talk if he wants tuh!"

"Who the hell is he?"

"Well, one man's good as 'nother, an' I'll—"

"Chuck him out!"

"Leave him talk!"

The scattering shouts increased to a bedlam. There was no discipline here, only reckless spirit, midday liquor, and a craze for action. Cade hammered the table unheard. Hands reached down from those standing on the bar, and hoisted the trouble maker to a precarious perch on the counter's edge; and as the strident voice began to speak again the crowd hushed to hear what it said.

"I knowed Ben Morgan ten years back!" the old man yelled.

The speaker was as bald as a canned tomato, and about as red and wet. The lower third of his short face was concealed by a curtaining gray mustache, through which he bawled. He was scraggly and old, but from beneath his bushy brows an angry light blazed. None of the Box R men had seen him before.

"Morgan's as full-blooded white as any man here, an' a damn sight whiter'n some. He's white, an' he's squar, an' any man 'at knows what he's talkin' about will say same as me!"

"That man speaks God's truth," said Jake Downey loudly.

The Box R punchers knew nothing of Slide Morgan, but they were backing their outfit's play.

“You’re damn tootin’ he does!” yelled one, and a score of voices were lifted in support.

Disorganized by the unexpected sally, the planted punchers of the Flying B rallied slowly.

“Throw him out!” yelled several at last.

But the old man was in the midst of his own outfit, a neutral one. Shouts went up all about him.

“Try an’ do it!”

“What’s holdin’ yuh back?”

The mass began to weave and seethe ominously, but for the moment no blow could be struck in the density of the jam. Abner Cade was hammering the table again; and presently the mob quieted.

“I won’t say about that,” said Cade, “because I don’t know. I’m tellin’ yuh what’s said. It don’t make no difference either way.”

He passed on quickly.

“You all know my brother was the finest man that ever stood up.”

Cade paused to let this soak in for a moment, and this time there was a dead silence.

“Cheyenne Morgan killed him,” said Cade, his voice cold and level.

At this Jake Downey would have spoken, but Seth Russell hissed savagely in his ear, and Jake withheld. But Cade paused a trifle too long for his effect. Again unexpected opposition was interposed. A deep voice boomed in the silence.

“In self-defense!”

The speaker was a black-bearded Box R man as stalwart as a moose.

For a fraction of a moment Cade seemed to gather himself. Then his voice exploded into a roar.

“That’s a lie!”

The big, bearded man surged forward, but the press of the crowd held him helpless. A rumbling mutter rolled over the room, then silence again, the silence of suspense.

“Let’s hear witnesses,” demanded Seth Russell in a cold voice.

“There was no witnesses,” said Cade, purpling with wrath.

“Answer me one question,” said Seth Russell, pointing an impaling finger at Abner Cade. “Who was the first man got there after the fight?”

“It don’t make—” Cade began.

“*Who was it?*”

Before the massed cowmen Cade did not dare evade.

“Happy Bent!” he spat out.

“Where’s Happy?”

Several voices sounded. “Here he is!” “Git up here, Happy!”

Ready volunteers hauled the reluctant youngster up onto the edge of a packed bar top, so that he half stood on the bar, and half hung suspended over the crowd.

“We ain’t tryin’ Morgan or Happy Bent!” Cade roared.

But the crowd was anxious to hear the first-hand story of this killing that had rocked the Roaring River country as no other had. Necks craned to see Happy, and Cade was momentarily forgotten, dynamic force that he was.

“Let’s hear it, Happy!”

“Give us the straight of it!”

“Leave Happy talk!”

Seth Russell stepped forward to the edge of the platform, ignoring the furious Cade, and took command.

“What was the first you seen o’ this fight, Happy?” he asked, his voice clear above all the others; and the din ceased.

“Well,” Happy faltered, “I hea’d a shot an’ I rushed out. Lew Cade was lyin’ theah, an’ somebody was ridin’ off on a dahk-cullud hawse. Didn’t see who or what hawse.”

“What ailed Lew Cade, Happy?”

“He had a knock on the head, like with a gun bar’l.”

“Did he look like he’d been fightin’?”

“He looked like somebody tied into *him*, all right.”

At this a macabre chuckle ran over the cowmen. Russell’s voice cut through it.

“Was his gun out, Happy?”

“Yes, suh, it was so. It was jest kind o’ fallin’ out o’ his hand as he lay.”

“Did yuh look at it?”

“I did by an’ by. He’d fiuhed it oncet. It blowed a hole in the ground right in front of him.”

A surprised rumbling hum ran over the massed men, dying away as Cade spoke. The surviving Cade did not thunder now, but his voice was strained and tense.

"How'd you know that was Lew's gun fired? Maybe Cheyenne Morgan murdered Lew, fired, and traded guns!"

It was a desperate expedient, poorly hit upon; but the crowd did not laugh yet.

"Had his 'nitials on."

Abner Cade pressed savagely on. "How'd you know he didn't pull Lew's gun, fire it, then stick it in his hand?"

The answer had no hesitation in it; here Cade was on Happy Bent's own ground.

"I c'd tell by the way the bullet sunk in the ground."

This was the sort of explanation the cowmen could understand, and there were grunts of approval at the stripling's ready replies.

"You know very well Morgan could have fired that gun, no matter which way the bullet went," Cade thundered. "*How d'yuh know?* The long an' the short of it is you don't know nothin' about *what* happened, do you?"

Abner Cade was striving desperately to beat down Happy Bent by sheer force; but these were not men to be daunted by thunderings. The latest offering of Cade was too much for the crowd to swallow, and it shifted restlessly as it waited for Bent's reply. It came quickly.

"Say!" said the youngster with some heat. "You don't think I know *nothin'*, do yuh?"

It was all they were waiting for. They roared with laughter.

Cade now made the mistake of looking around at Talky Peters, and when Talky grinned in reply the mass rocked with laughter anew. After a few drinks men are made to laugh easily, as easily as they can be made to fight.

As the laughter calmed, the bull-like roar of the black-bearded man rose once more.

"Self-defense!" he boomed. "Now yuh've got the straight o' this damned persecution of a Box R man!"

Angry shouts rose from among the Box R punchers, for they were ripe for turmoil. Abner Cade gave over pounding on the table with the butt of the flintlock, and went to the front of the platform, raising both hands in an appeal for silence. Yet there was no peace until Seth Russell also stepped

forward and raised his hands. The Box R's old man was not ready for his climactic reduction of Abner Cade.

At Seth Russell's command the Box R men, too, became gradually quiet. When Cade spoke his voice was calm.

"Boys," he said—and he was not oratorical now—"we've got off the trail here. We're not tryin' Morgan, but Peters."

"What's *he* done in self-defense?" demanded the black-bearded man, and the crowd laughed.

"It's the old question of law an' order," Cade said wearily. He had been outwitted by Seth Russell, and he was beaten. But he must press on.

"Are we goin' to decide who can kill here an' go free, or is each killer goin' to decide that for himself? That's the whole question. This man Peters connived in the escape of Morgan. He rode with him when he run away from the results of his act. He fired on the lawful posse that went to bring Morgan back. He shot Jess Carroll an' smashed his leg. He did everything he could possibly do to prevent that runaway murderer from coming to justice.

"It ain't a question of whether Morgan should hang or not. It's a question of who should decide if he's to hang. I say you men should decide, you men that live on this range. Peters thinks he can decide that himself, an' shoot the men that stand up for your rights. It's law an order standin' against plain, common six-gun murder, that's all. Who wins? In any country in the world but here, Peters would get his, fast an' sudden. Here—it's up to you! All I ask is a jail sentence for this man!"

Cade had driven every word home, and there was a pause as he sat down behind his table. The planted men of Cade's own outfit had lost track of their instructions, but in a moment one of them decided that this was the time to call for the vote.

"Question!" he shouted.

Others of his fellows took up the cry. "Question! Question!"

"Well," boomed a deep voice from a corner, "what *is* your question?"

Laughter again.

Then Seth Russell nudged Jake Downey hard, and Jake jumped forward as if a spring had been released. His strong voice battered down the random shouters, and there was quiet. Jake Downey pointed to Talky Peters, and his square red face was furious as he yelled.

“This man helped out a friend! He’s guilty o’ stickin’ by his pal! He went through hell an’ high-water to do it. If there’s a waddie here so damned low an’ stinkin’ mean that he wouldn’t do the same, pervidin’ he had the guts, let him holler to send Talky Peters to jail. I say give him a vote of thanks!”

A burst of cheering and whooping that started in the Box R crowd rose to a brief tumult. But heat and the denatured air, combined with throat-rasping thirst, had taken some of the noise out of the crowd, and the unholy racket was short lived. As it died the Box R section took up the cry for an end to the farce.

“Vote! Vote! Vote!”

Cade rose and lifted a hand for silence, and got it. He temporized no more.

“All those in favor of a jail sentence for Peters, answer ‘Aye!’ ”

A lusty, solid shout went up from the Flying B section.

“Pin a medal on him!” yelled some one, and laughter rumbled.

“Buy him a bar’l o’ gin!”

“Pass the hat!”

“All those against the jail sentence, answer ‘No.’ ”

Jake Downey sprang forward yelling, as if to yank the answer out of them with his upthrust fists.

“NO!” roared the mob. “NO, NO!”

Abner Cade leaned forward over the table, his face gone oyster white with wrath. Savagely he raised his arms for silence.

“Siddown!” yelled some one.

But Seth Russell was on the edge of the platform, his arms raised, and in the popular approval he drew silence where Cade could not. The crowd became still.

“Fellas,” said Russell; and his eyes gleamed, for this was the moment he had planned for.

But Cade’s voice bludgeoned through, filling the bar room until the dense atmosphere quivered.

“I’ll say one more thing,” he roared, his great voice edged with rage. He flung out an arm to point at Talky Peters.

“You have just now set free one of the sneakin’est cowardly criminals that ever dirtied the Platte!”

There was a gasping silence. Talky lurched forward half a step, then checked, his face white. Confronting him, steady as rock, was Cade's blue forty-five.

"You damned cheap coyote!" cried Talky, his voice breaking with rage.

The crowd was surging in about them, and the buzzing of voices was once more rising to a din. Jake Downey remembered afterward that from the corner of his eye he had seen a snaggle-toothed man with a tobacco-stained mustache thrust into the circle behind Talky, then swiftly drop to hands and knees.

Now a six-gun, long and heavy, flashed up in Talky's hand, apparently from no where.

"For God's sake, Talky!" yelled Jake, yet knowing it was too late.

Abner Cade's face showed blank astonishment, too swift and real to be feigned. The blued gun wavered and dropped an inch as if Cade was incapacitated by the surprise. In that instant the gun in Talky's hand clicked twice on empty cylinders.

A mad smother of men were tumbling off the platform, sprawling, scrambling frantically to get below danger level. Then Cade's gun crashed once.

Talky Peters was jolted backward as if hit with a sledge. For a moment he kept his feet, and the gun in his hand clicked once more. Then his left hand clutched his chest, and he pitched forward onto his face.

CHAPTER XVI

Lodges of the Coals

1

THE prairie lay deep under the night, and once more the fighting Cheyennes of Morning Star were going into bivouac. But now many a day's hard ride had been pounded away since Slide Morgan's first night with the swift-marching village, and the atmosphere had changed.

There was little talking now, and no jokes nor laughter; only a terrible weight of weariness, and an undercurrent of slow, plodding movement of a people for whom there could be little rest, but only an endless, unmarked trail stretching beyond. The Solomon River was far behind. There had been a brush with plainsmen there, cowboys and buffalo hunters, costing three wounded. On Frenchman Creek, close by Wauneta, the Cheyennes had fought a hard, bitter skirmish with troops; a warrior named Whooping Crane had been killed, and another, badly wounded, was unaccounted for.

Now the broad yellow waters of the South Platte were only a few miles ahead. Westward, on the river, lay a town, which Morgan judged to be Ogallala; at dusk Hunting Dog had made it out by its smoke, though the cowboy could see nothing. Most had believed that the Platte would be crossed before the stop; but evidently the chiefs had decided otherwise. The camp was therefore made on a tiny creek, just out of sight of the light timber fringing the river itself.

No Dog Soldiers walked among the people enforcing quiet; in all the camp hardly a voice was raised. Even the little children were silent, weary to utter exhaustion, sleeping almost where they had dismounted. At the stream the horses drank deep until driven from the dangerously satisfying water by the braves. Then they stood close-huddled not far off, heads low, backs humped, too tired to graze. Range horses had been scarce in their path for the past week.

In the dimness of the starlight Morgan observed these things as he walked, weary but restless, through the trailing camp. Now that the most punishing part of the journey so far had been reached he was standing the pace better than he would have believed possible. There were no horsemen like the Cheyennes; yet, often riding saddleless, they had never been prone to long trotting. They had now trotted steadily, in a hard, extended gait for

the great part of four days and nights; for with many weary horses the gallop no longer could be sustained.

The trot had always been the habitual gait of the cowboy, and the steady racking pound took less effect upon him, perhaps, than upon the Indian riders. His improvised grass-pad saddle formed an ill-fitting seat, but at least it could be kept soft; and the strap stirrups were adjusted to his habit. Even in the half-dazed weariness resulting from the long hammering he could find clarity of judgment enough to feel pity for the children, the women, and the old men who endured all stoically, because they must.

He wandered on toward the crest of a rise, seeking nothing, unless it were to be for a little while alone. As he looked back toward the camp he could hardly make it out at all; though he was but a few rods away the tiny coals of the cooking fires were so well concealed by careful choosing of the ground that hardly a seeping radiance was visible in the night. Here and there, against a faint glow, dark figures moved; that was all.

Then fifty paces ahead of him, outlined against the stars, a black form loomed darker than the star-set sky. It might have been the ragged ruin of a tree, lifting withered, broken branches to the sky; but as Morgan's eye checked upon it he saw it slowly move.

An old man was standing on the crest of the rise, a man so old that a ragged blanket was tied over his shoulders in spite of the warmth of the September night. He wore no feathers; his scanty, ungreased hair hung in stiff tangled strands. His arms were extended to the north, the hands outstretched and pleading. For a long time he held the pose, and so clearly could Morgan see him against the stars that he could discern the tremble of the claw-like old hands.

After a few moments the old man turned to the west, and after a little while more, to the south. Then with a gesture fraught with supplication he dropped his head forward upon his chest and extended his begging hands toward the ground.

Lastly the old man raised his face and arms to the sky. For a long moment he stood thus before Morgan heard him speak. Then the cracked old voice, very low and quiet but desperately pleading, spoke a single phrase twice:

"Heamawihio! Heamawihio!" The words came out with a shuddering wrench, almost a sob. "Wise One! Wise One Above!"

Slide recognized the voice. The old man was Red Thunder, the medicine man of wars and hunting. And now Morgan realized why the aged Indian

had walked away from the camp, bearing with him his weariness, to be alone. Ahead Red Thunder saw the inevitable end of the long march. His ceremonies, his sweet-smoked medicine fires, were to fail as were the sacred Arrows, the nine Indomitable Ones that were entrusted with the fortunes of the tribe. And his wordless medicine songs, the dream-gifts of his six Gods, were lost upon the wind.

In the presence of the tribe Red Thunder would not have dared to do what he did now. To supplicate with his naked heart while his vaunted drums and rattles lay silent would have been to admit his defeat. Yet this was all that remained to him now. Baffled, beaten, pitifully at a loss to understand why the spirits had turned their faces from him, the old man had come onto the prairie alone and old, stripped of his ceremonies, to offer the prayer for which he no longer had any words.

Suddenly the old man tottered, overcome by fatigue and his great emotional effort; his knees buckled, and he crumpled sideways to the ground, supporting himself with his hands.

Morgan turned and went away.

2

A pinto horse magically materialized before him. He had almost walked into it before descrying it, and once more he swiftly wondered at the low visibility of the noisy pinto blazes. The horse was watching him, ears cocked. Then it snorted and swiftly lowered its head to tear hungrily at the buffalo grass. Here Slide had stumbled upon what was now a rare thing in the Cheyenne remuda: a fresh horse.

He now recognized it as the horse that Little Wolf had ridden that day. He had noticed its powerful, free stride, the bright carriage of its head, and the half-tamed, glass-like glare of its pale eyes. It was deep of shoulder, short-coupled—everything; the pick of a hundred head of horse, lifted at random on the plain in the last ten days.

With a swift exultation Morgan realized his opportunity. The South Platte was just ahead, and beyond it, not incomprehensibly far at this point, the North Platte, the river for which he had waited. Beyond that and to the west lay Hickory Lookout, the one place on all the plains where he could rely upon finding loyalty and every aid that a man could give.

Now surely was the time to leave the jaded, harassed Indians, who could not now have so much farther to go to the battle that they could not win. An easy flight into the starlight on the best horse the Cheyennes had been able

to lift, and he would be clear. The fingers of his right hand still extended stiffly crooked, useless. He could not shoot, nor help himself in any way if a gun were raised against him. Yet the agitation started by Abner Cade was probably quieter now; and he had learned much about concealment from the Cheyennes. A knifed beef here and there would supply his food.

Yet he hesitated. There was one thing he had been meaning to do, and he was reluctant to leave these people of another race, who had helped him, with it undone.

Morgan strode back to the stretch by the winding creek where lay the scattered cooking fires of the Cheyennes, shelterless lodges of the coals. In and out among them he walked until he found the one he sought.

A slender woman, hardly more than a girl, was broiling beef over sputtering coals. Three withered, aged women and a toothless old man sat in a circle about the fire, waiting for the food which she prepared. They sat apathetic, their rheumy eyes fixed on the ground, not on the fire, but a little apart. Morgan wondered that the life had not been battered out of those aged forms long ago; yet somehow they hung on.

Blanket, still head-dressed and naked to the waist, stood beside the little fire, watching the girl, who was his sister; his eyes were deep with some nameless emotion, but his face was a mask. He could not speak to his sister, for according to Cheyenne tradition this would have been a disgrace. But he spoke to a tiny, almost naked little boy who sat near the coals, and thus conveyed his thoughts.

"Little Frog," said Blanket, "Little pot-bellied Frog, say to your mother that one scout has come in where three went out."

The baby turned serious wide eyes to its mother. "One came in, three went out," he lisped. This satisfied the Cheyenne etiquette; it would have done as well had Little Frog been a baby in arms, with no words in him.

"But the others were not seen to be killed, and may come in yet," Blanket went on.

"Ask your uncle what the word is," said Antelope Woman, bending over the meat.

"Tell her that the way is closed to the northeast also," said Blanket. "But in the sandhills beyond the second river there will be a rest. Say, Little Frog, that I am going out to-morrow. If I am a long time away, I will try to make medicine so that the little pot-bellied Frog will not get ridden all to pieces."

The child lost the thread of this, and sat gazing at Blanket with wide, sober dark eyes. For a moment Antelope Woman stood up and she and

Blanket looked at each other. Between the two there existed a strong, deep affection which the formal estrangement between grown sisters and brothers had enhanced, rather than diminished. Antelope Woman realized that the point had been reached where the scouts must run close risk of death, for there seemed to be soldiers everywhere ahead; but her face showed no anxiety nor grief. Those things she had put behind her when her brave had died of fever in the south.

In a moment Blanket turned and strode off into the fire-spotted dark.

Slide Morgan went and squatted by Little Frog. The baby looked so pitifully peaked and tired that Morgan's heart went out to him, as it had done more than once in the long ride.

"Why don't you lie down, Little Frog?"

The child curled upon the ground, as obediently as if an old chief had uttered a command.

Gently Morgan took the moccasin from one diminutive foot. It was worn to scarcely more than a skeleton, this baby's far traveled footgear; the sole was almost gone, and only a few broken threads of the stitching remained.

Slide's knife snicked through the remaining threads, and he pressed the warped leather as flat as he could. From his belt he took a slender roll of leather, its outer surface covered with goat hair. By some scheming Morgan had been able to pare this much leather from the improvised saddle he had made of his chaps.

Slowly, holding the leather down with his foot since his right hand was worthless, he haggled out new moccasin pieces for Little Frog.

When he had finished he looked up to find Antelope Woman regarding him curiously.

"I have no thread," he said, the deficiency dawning upon him for the first time.

"I will finish them," said the young woman softly. She took the leather pieces from him.

Her voice made Morgan look at her with curiosity; he suspected from her tone that had she been of his own race there would have been tears in her eyes, though for what cause he could not imagine. But he saw that there were not; that though her eyes showed a queer light, her face was the same thin, strong mask that it had been before. Slide got up wearily, and started in search of the fires of the Dog Soldiers and the scouts, where aged crones cooked for the warriors whose women were dead.

“Wait!” the girl called after him. “Here is meat.”

She gave him a tremendous chunk of beef, and he thanked her. It was nearly raw, but it was hot to his lips, and he tore at it ravenously as he walked toward the place where he had left his saddlebags and makeshift rig.

A drum suddenly began to rumble in a dull, muffled beat, and instantly warriors rose up from the fires all about him. The low, almost whispering throb of the drum died as quickly as it had begun, and Slide realized that Morning Star had called his men to council. And now he saw that his departure must be delayed for a little more.

He had done the trivial thing that he wished to do, when he had cut out the moccasins for Little Frog. It had been a foolish thing for him to risk his chances over; he would not have had his cowboy companions learn of it for five hundred dollars. But he had wanted to do it. He had noticed the Frog many times; usually riding behind his mother, but sometimes alone on one of the quiet travois horses. He was the littlest of the children who were deemed fit to ride alone.

Often during the past few days, when the weight that each horse carried meant much, Slide had noticed Little Frog riding alone, bumping hard on the horse’s pumping withers and clinging to the mane. Yet he never forgot to clutch the halter rope; and at dismounting the child dragged his precious horse away from the too seductive water like a man.

In his small way the child, too, was doing all he could to help the braves fight through the inexhaustible lines of United States troops which stood between them and the homeland which they must regain if they were to live. Reluctantly, perhaps; unavoidably, probably, but truly, nevertheless, the United States uniform was riding forth to confirm the destruction of women and children, just as surely as they were raising their rifles against Dull Knife’s braves.

By an unlucky chance Morgan’s saddle had been dropped near the place where Morning Star chose to hold council. A lean-ribbed Cheyenne was already sitting cross-legged upon it when Slide arrived. He dared not ask for it, lest he draw the ready suspicion of the braves; nor, in his weary and battered condition was he desirous of undertaking the trip bareback, without even his rope. He decided to wait until the council was over and the Cheyennes slept.

One of the tiny fires was allowed to burn a bit more brightly, since it would be masked by encircling bodies; the rest began to wink out one by one, until only the council fire of Morning Star remained.

The old chief now sat down to the south of the fire, and Little Wolf took a seat immediately upon his left. For a time a group of three scouts, gaunt and travel-weary in spite of the leathery toughness of their bodies, squatted close about Little Wolf, conferring with him. Then, as the chiefs came up to take their places the scouts rose stiffly and retired into the background.

When the other leaders had seated themselves in a circle about the fire, the warriors, as well as a great many of the women, packed closely about the circle, squatting or sitting on the ground. At a sign from Morning Star, Red Thunder placed a buffalo skull before the old chief, the skull facing the fire, and over it shook certain rattles. Then he dropped several powders and a handful of dry sweet-grass into the fire, which presently emitted a pleasant, thin-smoked fragrance, between that of pine needles and that of mellowed hay.

At last, when all these things had been done properly, Morning Star rose slowly and stood looking about the circle. Morgan noticed again the sadness and kindness of the wrinkled old face.

Among the Cheyennes each chief was elected to serve ten years, and then was perhaps elected for ten years more. Sometimes, after years of service and constant thought for the welfare of his people, the face of a good chief became benevolent and kindly, though perhaps saddened by the infinite folly that he had seen. Such a chief was Dull Knife, who to his own people was Morning Star.

The scattering murmurs of voices here and there about the circle became silent, and at last Morning Star spoke. And now all the gabbling excitability seemed to have gone out of the tribe, as if they had all grown as old as this old man who was talking to them in slow, measured speech.

“My people,” he said, “the time has come when we must decide what we are going to do. Little Wolf and I are as one man who sees two ways. Both of us want one thing above all else: To take you to freedom in our northern hills, where we may live happily and become strong once more. Great difficulties are in our way. Sometimes it seems that there is no way to succeed. But we will find a way, because we must.

“We have come a long way. With us are many old people, your old fathers, and your mothers. And there are little children, who are not used to long riding. But they must live to carry on the tribe when we are gone, else there will soon be no more Cheyennes.

“So far we have left none behind because they could ride no more; but in the last few days we have lifted many onto their horses who could hardly stand of their own strength. The strongest warriors are gaunt with weariness.

Pity the old, and the little, and the sick! But I don't wish to speak of pity; I'm talking about what we are able to do.

"Our horses are leg-weary and exhausted. In a little while those we have now won't be able to trot any more. The horse doctors will tell you that many of the ponies grazing here to-night cannot go on. Soon we will leave not only horses but people behind.

"But we are in our own country now. It is cooler here, there is no fever in the air. The black horses, and the gray horses, and the others are a long way behind. When we have crossed this river we will soon smell clean water again, water from our hills. The country of pines is not far away. Yet, if we keep running, like animals with the madness upon them, only a few, the young and strong, will ever see the pines in the hills again.

"This is our country. Our gods see us here. Our medicine is very strong. Let us move slowly now and rest. Let us wrap our guns in our blankets and fight no more. Then no one will bother us. We will go slowly, keeping out of sight. There will be plenty of food, for there is game up here. Our horses will grow strong, so that when we need to run we can.

"That way we can reach the hills, and all of us will be there. This is our country. Nothing bad ever happened to us here. Nothing bad will happen now. To-morrow let us rest here. Then move on slowly, as villages used to move when they went to a good place. Let no one fear."

As Morning Star sat down Little Wolf rose. He was much younger than Morning Star; younger indeed than some of the chiefs over whom he took precedence. Yet he was regarded with respect, for this man was the greatest war leader the Cheyennes had ever known. Where other fighting chiefs were often only single fighters of great courage, Little Wolf was an organizer and a strategist.

Some of the braves leaned forward as Little Wolf began to speak; for there was not one present who did not know what was at hand. The inevitable disagreement of the chiefs had come at last.

"It is all true," said Little Wolf, speaking quickly. "What Morning Star tells you of our plight, I tell you too. But there are other things to be told.

"Ahead of us is the river. Along it runs the path of the iron horse. Along this path there are more soldiers than you have ever seen before!"

He paused, and the dead, unwhispering silence itself told the force of what he had said.

"We'll get through these soldiers, and lose them in the sandhills; but I tell you that it will be the hardest thing we have done yet, when we do that.

“Now let me tell you something more. I have told it to you before, but you never believe me. You must believe me now.

“Every white soldier in the country, from the Big Dry in the north to the Canadian far in the south, knows what every other soldier is doing. When we fought the Sioux we used to fight one tribe or village, and the other Sioux knew nothing about it for a long time. When we fight white soldiers, they all know it right away. And they help each other, because one man is chief of them all. That is why Indians can never beat the soldiers.

“You think because we are away from the soldiers that we fought in the south we are all right. But when the soldiers in the south are at war, the soldiers everywhere are on the war path too. You know there are soldiers at Fort Robinson on the Niobrara, because you saw them. I tell you they will be looking for us when we get there, and trying to hem us in; and there will be ten there for every one you saw.

“Now the soldiers do not know where we are. But I tell you, by this time they know where we were yesterday. To-morrow they will know where we are to-day, and from every place soldiers will be coming here.

“You know I’m not afraid of fighting. But if we fight much more we will all be killed. The soldiers have endless bullets, we have but few. We must try to get through here as fast as we can. I think that when we get to the Big Horn mountains we will be safe. We have come half way.

“I love you all. I wish to leave none behind. But to stay here is to fight soon, and keep on fighting until we are all dead. Let’s move as fast as we can with the horses we have, and try to get more. Let those who can no longer ride be put in travois. I can show you the way through yet. But I can’t if there is ever any talk of resting when we can still ride one mile more!”

He sat down, and an old chief, little junior to Morning Star in years of service, rose slowly in the inner circle and spoke gravely, choosing his words. Later other chiefs spoke, one after another, and many warriors, adding the weight of their opinions to one side or the other; and thus the council lasted for a long time.

Among the old, and among those whose families could travel but little more, Morning Star had many supporters. But the mass of opinion was swinging in favor of Little Wolf’s plan, punishing though it might be. As warrior after warrior added his counsel to that of the younger war chief, Morning Star gave no sign. Yet Morgan could sense with what a terrible weight the passing of his people’s faith was bearing down upon the soul of the old chief.

At last, when all appeared to have spoken that cared to, Morning Star rose once more.

"We have sat in many councils together," he said slowly, "and always we have agreed upon some plan. Well, we will agree now. Perhaps it is true that there is no longer any safety in this part of the world. Perhaps all that can must push on.

"But there are many who are not fit to travel any more. It is not in my heart to leave them behind. I will stay here with them."

It was said so simply, so undramatically, that it did not register as a refusal on the part of the old chief to accompany his tribe where they wished to go. It lay before them merely as an offered plan.

"Let us cross this river together," said Morning Star. "Then let Little Wolf take all who are strong, and the best of the horses, and go on in the way he thinks best. I will keep the rest with me, the weary, the sick, the little children, and I'll hide them the best I can. Maybe, after a while, we will be together again. I will come as I can, and in the northern hills I will find you, and we'll live as we used to live."

At this several spoke vehemently, pleadingly, against the splitting of the village; but presently, after more talking, the division was confirmed.

There was stark tragedy in the faces of some when this decision had been reached; for the clannish suspicion that divided them from every one else, even from other villages of their own tribe, had also served to bring these people close together. The father of Strong Neck, withered and toothless, suddenly broke into tears and drew his blanket across his face; for it was in his mind that he never would see his son again, and he was old.

The apportionment of the people between Little Wolf and Morning Star was effected only after long wrangling in which the chiefs themselves took practically no part. When it was finished, some of the family groups remained together; but most were divided.

Morning Star's party for the most part presented the sorriest appearance imaginable. But with it were a few of the best, including Blanket, Standing Alone, the Otter, and, oddly enough, Hunting Dog himself. Of the scouts with whom Morgan had ridden only Strong Neck, Laughing Coyote, and Feather remained with Little Wolf.

When the council at last broke up, Morgan would have recovered his makeshift saddle and departed; but the lean brave who had sat upon it now slept, curled up where he had sat; and Slide did not dare disturb him. So he, too, found himself a place to sleep and stretched himself upon the ground.

The last sound that came to his ears was the dry whispering tremolo of a medicine rattle on the far edge of the encampment, where Red Thunder, sleepless, worked over war medicines by the light of the stars. Then he slept.

CHAPTER XVII

Red or White

1

THEY had crossed the river; the close-forked Plattes lay behind. There had been sharp skirmishing at Ogallala, but they had won free without loss. Then, just beyond the North Platte, hardly out of view of their pursuers, the column had half-dissolved. Morning Star's party had dropped behind, spreading fanwise as it fell away, scattering like tired leaves before the wind; and the compact band under Little Wolf had pressed steadily on.

The strength of Morning Star's village, embodied in the party under Little Wolf, slowly pulled away from the others, until they were lost in the haze of dust from their own ponies' feet. The old swinging gallop was a memory now; where here and there a horse had once trotted a little way the condition was now reversed, and here and there a tired horse sometimes broke into a lope to keep up with the hard, prevailing trot. The faces of the old people who had elected to stay with the war chief were drawn and twisted with the strain of perpetual pounding.

There was no longer any remuda. Many of the people led extra horses; and here and there a travel-fogged cayuse stumbled after the others, worn out, but herd-bound to the last. These were the only mounts in reserve. And in Morning Star's band there was hardly a pony who could sustain a steady trot.

Slide Morgan followed Little Wolf, almost unnoticed. Among the few who had remembered him at all the assumption had been that he would stay with Blanket, to whom, in a sense, he had belonged. But now Hickory Lookout could not be far away. Little Wolf, still pursuing his course of travel where he would be least expected, was swinging to the west northwest, paralleling Red Creek, and narrowly skirting the partly populated range that lay along that little trickle of water. Thus Little Wolf's course was Morgan's; riding with the Cheyennes, Slide would in a matter of hours be near Jake Downey once more.

Laboring between his knees was an emaciated pinto horse, once the favorite of Little Wolf himself. A brand for which Morgan had once ridden showed on a shoulder that had been a seal brown, but was now overlaid by sweat-bound dust. Many a long, weary mile lay between that horse and the

place where the Cheyennes had picked him up. His head swung low, and as his heavy hoofs trotted on he lurched in his trot, more like a tired pacer than like himself.

Under the urge of Slide's moccasined heels the pinto horse strove hard, trying gamely to keep up with the hard-striding mounts of Little Wolf's Cheyennes. The horse, like the man, was reluctant to fall behind the rest. Sometimes his weary head lifted to gaze after the other horses that were slowly, steadily pulling away. Once a half strangled whinny came from him like a pleading appeal to those of his kind that were leaving him behind. He could not understand why they could now pull away from him who had always been in the fore-front before.

Yet slowly the Cheyennes did pull away, a trailing, dust-marked column on the plain. Farther and farther they receded as the hours passed, the gap ever-widening between the stragglers and the stumbling pinto horse. Then presently there were times when the hard-riding band could not be seen, as they dropped behind a low ridge. An hour later they were reduced to a dark dot, clouded with a half-seen mist of dust, appearing now and then on a ridge of the horizon. And at last they were seen no more.

Morgan was alone. The long ride with the fugitive people was over. Morning Star's broken band was far behind, scattered, hidden; by now probably nothing more than a far-strewn scattering of shattered remnants. Here and there a family of them might be captured; perhaps none would be able to win through to their hills. But the soldiers could not now fight nor surround them any more than they could wage battle with the coyotes, the high-chattering, tragic little clowns of the prairies.

Little Wolf, with all the strength that was left to the Cheyennes, continued the hopelessly long ride for freedom. He was gone, now, over the horizon's rim, the steady trotting of his tired horses covering the miles, slowly now, yet putting them one by one behind. With the passing of the Cheyennes a sense of the strangeness of this weird dream that he had been living came upon Morgan, pressing in upon him with its full force now that the Indians were gone.

He looked at his ragged clothing, the worn moccasins that he had been given by Nugget Sam. The peculiar makeshift contraption that he was using for a saddle suddenly felt unaccustomed to him, as it had felt when first he had ridden it. The tie of habit snapped, and nothing any longer bound him to the people of another race who had left him behind. He was free again, to ride where he wanted to ride, and the horsemen of Abner Cade must be far away. More swiftly than he had adapted himself to the life of the traveling

village, Morgan found that he had become himself again, a white man, alone on the plain, with strange memories, like a dream, behind him, and a cautious struggle ahead. Yet something remained within him, the legacy of the Indians to the man who they had happened to save; nor was it ever quite rooted out.

Presently he came to a tiny trickling stream, a feeder probably to Red Creek itself. For a long way the moist sands of its narrow bed were thickly pocked with tracks of ponies, where Little Wolf's band had paused to drink, then pushed on. Here and there were dozens of shallow holes the size of a man's hat, where the Cheyennes, swiftly exhausting the tiny dribble of water, had scooped sand basins to gather a few drops of wetness for their mounts. But now the scanty water had flowed in to fill them all, and even the roiled silt had settled again.

Morgan let the pinto pony drink, though less than the animal desired. And he wished that he could stop and rest in a little copse of willows that he found; but because there might be cavalry or cowboys riding hard after the marauding Cheyennes, he dared not stop. Instead he went on slowly, scanning the horizon, and following the little stream. This took him at an angle from the course of Little Wolf, farther and farther from the path of whatever pursuit there might be. Yet he knew that beyond every ridge there might lie danger greater than any he had yet seen.

At high noon he reached Red Creek; and, unsaddling the pinto, he let the horse stand alone while he found a hiding place in which to rest. Then, as he lay down beneath low-hanging branches among a company of tall reeds, distant sounds came to him, telling a story that he could only half make out.

Faint in the far distance as the tick of a watch he heard the report of a gun, then another, and another; then a rattling volley, like wind in dry grasses, coming in a small whisper over the plain. What fortunes shifted and flared to the north where the rifles were cracking he could not know. But he knew surely that Little Wolf was engaged.

For a long half hour, a half hour that seemed like three, the rifles spoke and answered, far away. Slide tried to read the story from the bursts and pauses in the fire, but he could not. Toward the last the shots sounded farther and farther off, until they were mere suggestions of echoes; and at last he could hear nothing more.

So closely hidden were the Cheyennes that Morgan almost walked among them before he realized that they were there.

It had been perhaps three o'clock in the afternoon when Morgan had left his resting place by Red Creek, forded the shallow, lazy water, and moved west by north on the tired pinto horse. He did not immediately recognize the country that he was in, though he knew that he could not be far from familiar landmarks. Later he learned that he was much farther north than he had supposed. He had never before approached Red Creek from the east, and had taken the head of the little Red Creek tributary, near Hickory Lookout, as the head of the creek itself. Now that he was far up the main stream of the creek he found nothing that he knew.

Little Wolf, he believed, must be far away, if indeed he had not been overcome in the fighting that Morgan had heard. Yet Slide had traveled scarcely an hour when he came upon the hidden Indians. He was riding at a plodding walk up a slow rise when a bullet whistled past his head, followed instantly by the crashing report of a carbine. The tired pinto horse snorted and stood trembling on wide-braced legs.

Instantly Morgan dismounted and half crouched behind his pony, as he had learned to do while with Hunting Dog's scouts. The shot had come from far to one side, so Morgan proceeded in the way that he was going, hurrying the horse along at his side by means of his left hand upon the hackamore. Far to his right, as he peered under the horse's neck, he could now make out a straggling gully, from which rose the faintest suggestion of a breath of dust.

For the moment he could not understand what sort of difficulty he had walked into. Here were soldiers, perhaps; hostile rifles certainly. Slide sought to gain the crest of the rise.

There was a sickening chunk close beside him, almost at the same instant as the second report of a rifle. The lean pinto started violently, then pitched forward on his knees, his dusty nose jamming into the sod. For a moment, dazed, Morgan stood upright beside his fallen horse.

Up from the grass at the crest of the rise sprang a bloody bronze figure, wearing only breech clout and moccasins. Apparently a bullet had struck through the flesh at the side of the man's mouth in a grazing wound, for the left side of his face was a bloody pulp, through which the teeth gleamed in an unnatural leer. Only the Indian's stiff limp as he ran enabled Morgan to recognize Laughing Coyote.

The worn, sliver-like butcher knife was in Laughing Coyote's hand, and Slide realized in a swift flash that the man who had been his friend was

charging down the grassy hill to kill him. For a moment the cowboy hesitated; and in the next instant the Coyote was on him.

Morgan's left hand snatched desperately, and managed to grip the wrist of the Cheyenne's knife hand. Fingers clawed into his throat, the nails breaking the skin. Slide jammed his right elbow into that hideous torn face, then struck upward with one knee. The Indian doubled up and collapsed.

A bullet hummed past him as he turned to run. Over the rise came a mad galloping horse. Feather, with his face contorted as Slide had never seen it, leaned over the horse's neck, one hand quirting savagely, the other bearing a seven-foot, sharp-pointed lance.

Close pressed and harried, boxed in and badly horsed, the Cheyennes had gone battle-mad. Perhaps Little Wolf was roaring to his braves, forbidding them to waste lead upon this horseless, weaponless man. But the long struggle for freedom, bitterly contested all the way, had now brought them to the most hopeless predicament they had yet known.

Riding hard and steadily, Little Wolf's scouts had found the way cut off to the north. Even as they turned there had been an attack upon their flank by a strong party of horsemen whom the scouts had for once failed to discover. Few Cheyennes but many horses were down. By a savage attack, followed by a twisting flight, Little Wolf had wrenched his band free, doubled back, and hid.

But now the war panic was upon the Cheyennes. Hurt, harried, fighting for their very lives, they no longer distinguished between friend and foe. It was Cheyennes against all—and Morgan was white.

In the next few moments two factors controlled Slide Morgan. One was panic, the sure knowledge that he was without arms, afoot, and trapped among war-savage reds who had forgotten everything but the craze to kill. The other was a hard coldness, giving him an infinite swiftness of plan, and guiding his almost superhuman efforts without restraining them.

As Feather thundered upon him Morgan stepped close, struck aside the lance so narrowly that it scratched his flesh as it missed; then in the fraction of an instant in which the thing was possible he seized the Indian's belt and vaulted onto the horse behind him. For a moment he struggled to regain his balance, while the Indian writhed and fought to strike him off. Then Slide smashed his left fist into the Indian's face, and Feather went down.

When the gray horse he had taken from Feather had borne him a long way to the westward, Slide dragged the cayuse down to a walk, and tried to pull himself together. The wild fighting wrath had passed. It had been followed by a bitterness even greater than that he had heretofore fostered. For up to now he had been one outcast among many, a single fugitive among a people against whom the world at large was pitted. Now even his companions in desolation had turned upon him. For the moment he had forgotten Jake Downey and Talky Peters, who were his friends; and everywhere he looked it seemed that nothing awaited him but hopeless odds.

Now even this had passed, leaving a dull lethargy, an infinite weariness in which there was no ray of light.

It seemed that for hours he plodded on and on, the tired gray beneath him moving with the same aimless persistence as himself. He almost slept on the back of the saddleless horse, but the dull weight upon him denied him even this. The sun sank slowly to the edge of the earth, its light becoming cool and mellowly clear. It caressed the still gray grass with a light suggestion of gold powder, and across the airy western cloud puffs it flung a vast blaze of colors, burnt orange, the brilliant purple of irises, and lemon gold.

Through the stillness of the sunset a single crystal-clear voice sang, a meadow lark singing in a time outside of her habit; the sweet, silvery song sounded its four notes over and over, as if a spirit that was all beauty was hidden somewhere in the rough reaches of the prairie.

But Slide Morgan, with his eyes resting on the pony's crest, neither saw the sunset nor heard the song. He and the horse moved as one, two plodding things without thought, without desire, and without hope.

The sunset faded into a dimming afterglow; the twilight thickened, and the gold-touched grass became silvery, then dull and lifeless again. Slide Morgan could smell smoke, and realized without caring that he was nearing some place where men were, or had been.

Then as they topped a brush-clothed knoll he raised his eyes and came to himself as from a deep sleep. Beyond the knoll he could see the tops of cottonwoods, and through these the waters of a reedy-margined lake. He swiftly knew what place he had stumbled upon, and instinctively drew up his horse.

The cottonwoods whose tops he saw were ones under which he had often dismounted; the water beyond was Moccasin Lake. If he rode a few yards more his eyes would rest upon the little cabins, the horse shelter, and the frugally husbanded mound of weathered hay, in the edge of which plump

hens liked to chuckle and scratch. A pale mist of wood smoke floated and hung in the boughs of the cottonwoods; that would be from the cooking fire over which Nancy Chase would be preparing such food as he had not tasted since John Chase handed him his walking papers.

It came to him that he should turn his horse and move on without risk of being seen. But a strong desire was on him to look at the place where this girl lived just once more. He listened keenly, but heard no sound. Then impulsively he pressed the horse forward to the crest of the brushy rise.

Below him lay the gutted timbers of the cabins, charred roofless skeletons that still smoked faintly. The burnt out windows gaped blackly, and charred sticks mingled with white ashes where a door had been. Out on the Hickory Lookout trail Slide made out the carcass of a horse, the thick hips tapering to the head, like an upset cone.

CHAPTER XVIII

Hickory Lookout

1

IT was twilight as the three from Moccasin Lake flung off of their horses at the door of the Hickory Lookout cabin. There was no light within, but the door swung open for them, and in the dusk they could make out Partridge Geer.

"Git in!" the old man ordered.

Happy Bent, excited but efficient, herded old John Chase and Nancy into the little cabin ahead of him. He seized the reins of their horses and kept hold of them, catching them in the door as he slammed it shut behind him.

Talky Peters, terribly gaunt, and with his thin shoulders hunched stiffly over his flat chest, leaned against the opposite wall. His face was white and drawn, but his features showed a quizzical relief.

"Horses all lost?" he asked in a faint, husky voice. He did not move from his position against the wall.

"Every one," Chase told him. "But they wasn't ve'y many, anyway."

"Where's Jake Downey?"

"He's comin'. He held back some to disconfute 'em. Some give us a run, but now they've stopped to wait up fo' the rest. We sho' outrun 'em."

"Their horses is done up," said Partridge Geer. "Well, whatcha goin' to do? Leave 'em have the horses, or try to hold the corral?"

"Rest o' yuh best stay in," said Talky. "But they's sixty-four best saddle stock in the corral. Me an' Cork Walters is goin' to be there."

"Then we all are. Best place anyway, with dark comin' on. Then we ain't boxed in, an' can shoot all sides. Most likely they'll fire this shanty, first thing, anyway. *I* know 'em."

"You look like you ought to be layin' down," said Nancy to Talky Peters. The lean man flashed a smile at her, but did not reply.

"How long's Terry Shaw been gone?" Partridge Geer asked.

"Near two hours," said Talky. Then to John Chase, "Terry rode after the Box R riders, soon's we learned what was up."

“Can’t get here for two-three hours more, prob’ly,” Partridge Geer decided. “We got to stand ’em off good’s we can.”

“S’pose you take Nancy an’ cut for it!” said Talky. “It’s the horses they’re after, not you!”

“No good,” said John Chase. “Some of ’em has circled round behind, ’bout a mile out.”

“Well, sweet cats!” broke out Geer. “Why’ncha say somepin’? Here! Grab yore guns an’ every round yuh got an’ git out o’ here! Wait now! All to oncet, not one at a time. Got yore stuff?”

“Shore,” said Talky. He moved forward a pace with a soft, careful step.

“All together, now,” ordered Geer, his hand on the hasp. “Wait! Who’s that?”

A flogged horse, running full stretch, was approaching; the seven stood looking at each other with solemn faces. Happy Bent rushed to the tiny parchment pane, already slit in a criss-cross by Geer’s knife, and peered out. The pounding hoofs trampled to a stop outside.

“It’s Abneh Cade!” cried Happy.

A heavy hand banged against the door, and Geer opened. Cade stumbled in; and even in the failing light they could see that his face was white, tight-lipped.

“They’re comin’!” he burst out. “They’re circlin’ all sides!” Then to Talky, whose hand gripped his gun, “Not now, you fool!”

“Come on—the corral!” Geer urged.

They jammed out the door, and raced for the rail enclosure three rods away.

“Wheah’s the Vigilantes?” Chase demanded of Cade.

“They’ve rode out to the Lazy S on that alarm, those that was in town. But I had a hunch an’ come here. Figgered to see how you was makin’ out at Moccasin Lake, but I had a brush with ’em near the head o’ Red Crick, an’ see I couldn’t make it through.”

They crawled through the widespread bars of the corral gate, and Cade gasped as he bent.

“Cade,” said Chase, “yo’ hurt!”

“Jest barely touched. Ne’mind me! How’ll we do it, Geer?”

“John Chase with me in the middle,” snapped Geer, “supportin’ all sides. Nancy here, too. One man on each side! Now move!”

“They’s one extry,” said Talky instantly. “Cork, up on the roof o’ the bunkhouse! See they don’t fire that!”

“Leave it burn!” raged Geer.

“Cork, you go!” Talky rasped. “I’m goin’ to take keer o’ this proputty!”

Cork Walters silently crawled through the bars and raced for the shanty, and Talky went into a fit of hard, strangling coughing that doubled him up. About them the sixty-four head of saddle stock milled and trampled, excited by the hurrying men.

“Here they come!” yelled Cork Walters from the roof of the shack. “Look out west over the rise!”

“Sa-a-ave yore powder!” yelled Geer. “Git back thar! Every man stay on his own side! Hold yore fire!”

Through the thickness of the dusk to the west, rising suddenly over a ridge three hundred yards beyond the corral, came a slender stream of Cheyenne riders, perhaps twenty in all. Though they outnumbered the defenders of the corral three to one, they were yet at the disadvantage of mounted attackers against close-shooting men behind cover. Only utter desperation, their extreme need of horses, could have driven them to attack under such conditions.

Little Wolf himself and the main body were far away, hiding close, without enough horses left to travel. This party of warriors was at the moment riding almost every travel-worthy pony that was left to the Cheyennes. Three men were at this time riding to Little Wolf with the handful of mounts captured at Moccasin Lake. Two others had found as many again in a small herd upon the Arrow C range. The herd at Hickory Lookout would enable them to push on at the old gallop; they must be had at whatever cost in lives.

The Cheyennes were only a tiny handful of struggling people, with thirteen thousand troops on the move against them, and every cowman in the west prepared to fight on sight. Yet these few, a mere speck in the vastness of the prairies, were like a drop of vicious acid running across a man’s hand; until struck out of existence they had the power to destroy all that lay in their path, for these were men fighting for their lives.

“Save yore powder!” roared Geer again, as the horsemen charged down upon the corral.

The screaming Cheyenne war cries now sounded, and the column suddenly split to circle the corral in either direction.

“Let ’em have!”

The west side of the corral was Cade's station, and his six-gun spoke three times. Over the corral hummed a single bullet from Cork Walter's rifle on the roof of the shack.

Two Cheyenne cayuses went down. Behind them scrambled the unhorsed Indians, and in a moment a slow, steady fire began to splinter the rails close to where Cade stood, coming from behind the fallen Indian mounts.

As the circling file passed Talky Peter's side of the corral, firing into the stronghold as they rode, an Indian went down, and a third horse. It was hard shooting in the fast going light, with the marks whirling past as hard as ponies could gallop, but Talky knew his gun. A horse screamed in the corral, and tumbled heavily.

At the smell of blood the whole herd went crazy with fear, and thundered milling about the quarter acre, plunging against the heavy timbers. In the jam they lashed out with their heels, and some went down as others cannoned into them.

Partridge Geer was shouting some order, but he could not be heard above the squeals of the horses and the thundering trample of their hoofs.

"Let out the stock!" yelled Talky Peters, and Happy Bent, on the gate side, heard him.

Happy hurriedly threw down the bars of the gate, barely stumbling out of the way as a dozen panic-stricken horses blundered into the opening and thrashed their way out.

Now the attack changed; the riding Cheyennes drew off, and for a short space it seemed that they had been beaten off. Happy Bent got three bars up again, and in the temporary quiet the main body of the horses calmed somewhat. It was so dark now that good shooting was impossible. No one could see any distance with certainty, and the continued milling of the horses inside drowned all the small sounds that might have brought them word of the Cheyennes.

"Put down them bars!" yelled Geer. "Yuh wanta die?"

Bent's gun began to speak again.

"They're firin' the cabin!" he yelled.

"Put down them bars!"

An acrid smell of smoke drifted through the corral, increasing the nervousness of the partially quieted ponies. A ragged fire began to open upon the defenders from three sides.

On the side of the cabin Cork's rifle still made approach more difficult, though a brisk crackling and the smell of smoke told them that a brush fire was probably blazing against the cabin's eastern wall.

Partridge Geer had been forced to take a stand on the northern side when Cork left the corral for the cabin roof. From there they could hear him shouting commands and cautions.

"Ho-old yore fire! Can't shoot nothin' yuh can't see! Wait fer the rush!"

"They's a Injun on yer left, Talky!" yelled Walters from the cabin. "I see him plain!"

Talky's gun didn't answer.

Cade was firing slowly, deliberately, in spite of all Geer could say. He was standing bolt upright against the timbers, his braced arm thrust through the poles.

"Git down, yuh old fool! Git down, damn yuh!"

"They're comin' in!" yelled Talky. "Gawd almighty, what's that in the corner?"

In the darkness, with the confused smother of sounds telling contradictory stories, and the haunting odor of smoke, the fight became a jumbled nightmare, in which the separated men could not make out what their friends were doing, nor what was going on. Thick dust clouds rolled up from the feet of the unquiet horses, turning near forms to hazy ghosts.

"They're in! They're in!"

"Cork, for Gawd's sake come 'ere!"

Talky, unhit, but with his broken chest torn anew by the shouting, was on hands and knees, coughing blood, his pistol useless in his clenched hand.

"Where are yuh? Talky, where are yuh? Damn these cayuses!"

"Abner! Lay into 'em thar!"

"Cade's down!"

"Nance, stay here! Leave him lie!"

The corral seemed peopled with shadows, dim crouching forms that ran among the plunging horses. The gate was open again, and some of the Cheyennes were trying to bar it lest the horses scatter and be lost to them after all, in the dark. A mad war cry rang in their midst.

"With me, in the middle!" yelled Geer. "Talky! Bent!"

"They've got Talky!"

“Happy! Where’s that fool boy?”

Cork Walters, Geer, Nancy, and John Chase now lay or knelt in the middle of the corral. Evidently the Indians dared not let the horses run wild in the dark, for they had barred the gate. Those in the middle, now embuttressed behind fallen horses, knew that this meant death to them all, unless help came. John Chase alone stood up in the middle of the group, pivoting upon his flat heels, the flame from his long forty-fives lashing out this way and that into the murk.

“Pa, git down!” Nancy Chase, with Cade’s pistol belt in one hand and his gun in the other, was firing spasmodically from behind the carcass of a horse. A Cheyenne loomed over her, then crumpled into a heap.

Geer was yelling something over and over in the Cheyenne tongue, and from somewhere near at hand an unseen warrior answered and laughed.

“Sa-ave yore powder! Jack Chase, git down!”

“Let ’em have!”

“Steady, steady! Make it count! Easy now!”

“Give ’em hell!”

War cries, mad trampling thunder, crashing explosions of guns, smell of powder, a seepage of red light from the shanty, blazing pistol-stabs into the dark. . . .

A single voice rose above the uproar in a mad piercing yell, jabbering something in Cheyenne. Only Partridge Geer and the Indians themselves knew what it said.

“The troops! The troops! I am a Cheyenne! To your horses! The troops are on us!”

The shadowy figures that had rushed the corral fell away. Some clear head had thrown down the corral gate again, and horses were rushing out, close hazed by yelling warriors.

“The troops! The troops!”

Into the strangle of horses at the corral gate a crazy gray catapulted from the outside, mouth wide, slathering foam, blind with running. By force of shock the crazily ridden horse jammed through the mill at the gate, knocking down a pony in its path. A shadowy form cried out as it went down under the insane hoofs. The gray horse wheeled rearing, until its pawing fore hoofs struck at the sky; then it plunged through the smother in the corral.

“To your horses! Mount, in the name of Little Wolf! A hundred are on us! Run! Run!”

The wild yell cut through the smother of sound, the Cheyenne words ringing in the tumult.

A Cheyenne hesitated, dodging the hoofs of the gray horse, and a snapping rope-end laid open his face. In a moment the pressure eased, and the war cries ceased. The corral emptied save for a residue of panicky horses which floundered in each other's way as they funneled themselves out into the open in a trickling stream. The roof of the cabin broke into flame, and by the sudden orange light the people in the center saw that the Cheyennes were gone.

Near the gate the gray horse was down, trying to rise. The man who had ridden it had disappeared.

2

Without a moment's relaxation Partridge Geer began his check. He sent Chase to where Cade lay, and Cork to look for Happy Bent. He himself ran to where Talky had been.

He found the lean cowboy trying to get up.

"You hurt, Talky?"

Peters tried to speak, but choked; he shook his head.

"You lay down," Geer ordered. He caught the cowboy in his arms, and gently laid him on his face. "You'll feel purty good in a minute."

He went to the place near the corral gate where Cork Walters and Nancy were bending over Happy Bent.

Happy grinned painfully. "Laig hurts. Hawse made a misstep."

"Busted," said Corky. "Gimme knife!"

Old John Chase came up now, and Geer turned to him.

"Jack Chase," said Geer, "d'yuh know who 'twas shouted them Injuns off?"

"Don't know no Injuns by name," Chase growled.

"D'yuh know how he done it?"

Chase shrugged.

"He yelled at 'em that there was troops comin'. That man, on that gray, was an old hand o' yourn. That was Ben Morgan, or I'm a Injun myself!"

"Good gosh," exclaimed Happy Bent, "gone plumb red!"

“Mebbe,” said Geer, “mebbe he’s gone red, an’ mebbe he jest happened to have an idee in the right place.”

“But he warned ’em that the troops was comin’!” said Happy.

“Well,” Geer answered, “an’ where are they?”

“There ain’t any?”

“See any?”

They looked at each other.

“I tried somethin’ o’ the sort myself, to drive ’em off,” said Geer. “Mebbe yuh heard me shoutin’ at ’em. But they knowed I was agin ’em, I guess. But on the spur o’ the moment that way, I guess they must o’ believed *him*, partly, anyway.”

“It’s onnatural to go livin’ with Injuns,” said Chase dourly, “if he’s white like you said.”

“Mebbe so,” Geer snorted, “but it shore come in handy fer you, old feller! That’s the thanks a man gits in this life, mark me!”

“Ain’t criticizin’,” Chase mumbled, his mind away.

There was a silence.

“How’s Cade?” Geer asked suddenly.

“Abneh?” said Chase softly. “He’s through.”

3

Out on the prairie to the north, mounted on an indifferent Box R horse that he had mounted in the confusion after the gray was down, Slide Morgan plodded aimlessly. The Cheyennes were gone, carrying with them a score of stolen horses, and the bodies of their dead.

Utter exhaustion was upon him; once more the dregs of excitement found him without purpose nor destination, weary, and incredibly old. The rich, maize-colored harvest moon was riding high, and on the prairie was a mellow peace. In the distance a coyote cried, as it had cried last night, and last year, and always, a song that was ages old. Morgan plodded on and on. . . .

His horse shied, nearly unseating him. On the ground lay a dark shape, which the horse did not wish to go near. Slide dismounted and led the horse toward it, a reassuring hand upon the hackamore. The dark shape was the body of a man, a cowboy, by the clothes.

Morgan bent over it and turned the limp form that he might see the face. Then suddenly the horse was forgotten as Slide dropped to his knees, calling the man's name.

"Jake! Jake!"

Swiftly, with a trembling hand, he groped upon Downey's chest for some sign of life; but the flesh was cold, and the blood there was already almost dry.

"Jake, fer God's sake! Jake!"

The hot tears burst forth and ran down his face, and for a moment the prairie swam sickeningly. When the dizziness had passed he took Jake's handkerchief from his neck and with his shaking left hand drew it crookedly across the still face. Incoherently a fragment of the letter Jake had put in his saddlebags came to him:

". . . you take Ironhead . . . best horse there is . . ."

Stumbling, with blind eyes, body racked and shaken, Slide reached his grazing horse, and somehow managed to get up.

"Jake's dead—Jake's dead—Jake's dead," he said over and over.

His moccasined heels rammed into the horse's belly, and at last the animal sensed something wrong about this man on his back, and ran. The cool wind whispered through Slide's tangled hair as he rode and rode and rode. . . .

CHAPTER XIX

The Song of the Empty Bar

1

SLIDE MORGAN raised his fogged head from his arms and stared into the dark. At first he could not remember where he was, nor who; then memory slowly returned to him, as cold and cheerless as the deserted barroom in which he sat. He was at a table in the rear of Slim's Place, the beaten competitor of the Happy Chance in Roaring River. Up in front, seeming a long way off, he could make out the bleared windows of the bar, dimly gray with the light of the moon upon the first snow. When last he had looked up, there had been visible through the dirty panes the lights of the Happy Chance. But now the prosperous saloon was as dark as the one that had fallen upon poverty and evil days.

There had been a dance in the Happy Chance that night, a big one, with many ponies in the streets, and the sound of extra violins, an accordion, and an improvised drum. Sometimes the shouting of the dance caller had penetrated into the back of Slim's grimy bar, bringing news of gayety and the lights of companionship into which Morgan felt no desire to enter.

> "Left hand ladies, right hand gents,
> Swing yer gal, swing yer gal,
> Right hand ladies, left hand gents,
> Swing yer gal, why doncha?"

That was over now, and it was just as well. Better the quiet and the gloom, and the bottle before him that was not going to run dry.

Morgan's clothes were new and warm, yet he was cold; the fire in the pot-bellied stove had long since gone out, but how late it was he had no means of judging.

How long he had haunted Slim's Place he did not know. Many days certainly; more likely weeks, but it seemed even longer than that. Sometimes during the day he stepped outside, to sniff the air and stretch his legs; but he soon turned into the bar again, to sit at the rearmost table that was now recognized as his, to sit and sit, and speak to none.

He must have been there a long time, he knew, for the store of gold pieces in his pocket was running low. Perhaps he should have hunted out all

of the gold that he had once left under the bunkhouse floor at Moccasin Lake, instead of stopping to dig out only a handful. But what he had would have to suffice.

His food had been stale sandwiches, given him without charge with his drink. He didn't need much to eat. Only the bottle was important; it must never be allowed to go empty. It stood between himself and something else, something that he feared to face; though what that thing was he could not have said.

He had half expected to be fired upon in Roaring River, but it was as if no one had known him. He had hardly been the subject of a curious glance. Perhaps after all the world had moved on, and Cheyenne Morgan was no longer of any consequence. It didn't matter either way.

Slim's bar was a good place for him. The dust of the prairie wind lay thick in the corners, and the air was laden with stale fumes of liquors and antedated tobacco. An old place, a dead place, old and stale like himself.

No shuffling rats disturbed the night in Slim's Place, for the pickings there were lean. Yet the empty bar was not without its voice. A tin clock, on the shelf where the bottles stood, spoke steadily through the small hours of the night, its metallic voice uncommonly loud in the abnormal quiet. It was a monotonous song the clock sang, yet it was not always the same. Lately, when his drink had failed to bring him sleep, he had learned that it was a varying clock, whose ticks were seldom twice alike. He listened to it now.

"Click clack, click clack, click clack,
Kung ting, chunga, chunga,
Whackaroo, whackaroo, whee jack,
Tinkatoo, kickapoo, tongue gag,
Click clack, click clack, chunga—"

It was a foolish jargon that the clock spoke, meaningless, frivolous; but its everlasting regularity throughout the stillness of the long hours gave it a sinister importance, drawing his mind back to it again and again. He strained his ears to make out what it was the clock said.

"Click tuck, chung ting, chunga,
Talkalong, talkalong, wing see,
Click kuh, click kuh, snap back,
Ratatan, cat luck, snickersnee,
Kung tung, flickatoo, rick rack—"

There was no stopping place in that song; it droned on forever, with no place to quit, just as his life went on without aim, with no decent stopping place nor fitting close. It was tolling off the slow beats of his heart. When the senseless song of the clock stopped, he would stop too, and there would be an end to disorder and searching, an end to something as senseless as the clock itself. He half hoped for the hour that the clock would stop. He listened to see if it were not slowing down.

"Chunga, click kuh, snap back,
Hawkwing, chuckatuck, sing song,
Stingeree, snap it off, stop that,
Keep it up, click tack, click tack—"

It was reading the story of his life. Meaninglessly, cryptically, it was naming the innumerable episodes of his days, incidents that were meaningless and cryptic too. Presently, after a long time, the clock would catch up with him; then there would be nothing more for it to tell, and it must stop. He hated the song of that clock in the empty bar, but even while he half hoped for its end, he dreaded the hour that it would stop with an unreasonable dread.

"Click tack, shuckalong, caulk stick,
Bum chuck, ratatoo, hit that,
Jogalong, jogalong, click tack,
Chunga, chunga, chunga—"

With a trembling hand he groped for the bottle, cautiously feeling for it in the dark lest it be upset; then drank in sparing swallows. The liquor burned his throat, but it was a harsh burn, ungrateful. As he set the bottle down the clock song pressed itself upon him again. There was no escaping it in this empty bar, yet the world held no other place for him to go.

That Talky Peters had been shot he had heard; but the story had stopped there, and he had not known that the man was still alive until Peters himself one day walked into Slim's Place.

Talky had ridden into Roaring River on a buckboard, and he coughed as he walked unsteadily into the bar. But it was evident that he still clung to his old time way of buying one round in Slim's Place, before invading the more popular Happy Chance.

Slide Morgan had sat motionless staring, too astonished to rise or speak. Then when he started to call to Talky, the liquor that was in him had muffled

his tongue, and he had waited a moment for his head to clear.

In that moment Talky had turned and stared at him, down the length of the long bar; then turned away, no shade of recognition having crossed his face. Behind his bottle Slide sat motionless, stunned. After that, except when he called to Slim for a fresh bottle, he made no further effort to speak to any man.

Slide wondered what the tedious song of the clock would say when it came to the time when Talky had passed him by. But the clock had not come to that yet; it still had a long way to go.

"Ratatan, jog trot, pot luck,
Chunga, click tack, chunga—"

There were shapes moving before him in the dark, things that he knew were not there, yet were more real than the bar itself, or the nagging clock. They were dim and half-formed; he could not yet make out what they were. Presently he would know, and another mile stone would have been passed. He drank again, but even more sparingly than before; those unliving, moving shapes must so overwhelm him before the clock had finished the song. He did not know what was at the end, and he little cared; but he knew that he must wait for it, long though it might be.

"Shuckasee, hawk top, lock wing.
Dragalong, click tack, click tack—"

The story was not yet complete. The clock could name every meaningless thing that he had done, every empty place that he had been, yet the story would not be done. Something else was ahead, a last thing, that must take place before he was through; until it was done the tireless droning clock could not finish its tale. He must wait for this thing that was not done yet, the thing that must come at the end of the song. Wait, drink, and wait; but the drink must be sparing now, lest those dim shapes come too close. If that happened there could be no end to the song of the clock, nor end of waiting, nor end of sitting in the coldness of the empty bar . . .

"Click tack, click tack, click tack,
Chunga, chunga, chunga . . ."

It was noontime again. Slim had opened up the bar, but no customers came; the dour fat man droused sourly over an ancient newspaper, and chewed tobacco. He had laid a couple of dry cheese sandwiches before

Slide, along with his fresh bottle, but Morgan left them untouched. The sun was bright on the snow outside, but the dirty panes dimmed it; and in the rear where Morgan sat, stiff and inert, the place was still full of dusty gloom.

In the quiet the song of the tin clock went on. It had raced and rasped loudly when Slim had rewound it, renewing its strength. But now it had returned to its old pace again, the pace that it had held throughout the long days of Slide's sojourn, and the empty nights when he had sometimes slept on the floor against the wall, and sometimes sat, drowsily staring into the dark.

Some one was at the door. The old wood stuck, shuddered, and then gave open, as if scandalized that any one should force an entrance so early in the day.

The man that came in was broad-faced and pink of skin. Silvery bristle covered his face almost to the eyes, and under his bony nose was a short gray mustache. Slide noted him dully, but could not remember having seen the man before.

"Have a drink," the man said, almost fiercely. "Rye!"

Slim said "Thanks," and set glasses and a bottle on the bar.

When they had tossed the liquor from the little glasses, the stranger slapped his briskly on the bar, and spoke.

"I'm lookin' for a man named Benjamin Morgan," he stated, his strong voice desecrating the winter silence.

"Never heard of him," said Slim.

Morgan suddenly spoke. He had no reason for doing so, but the words came out of him without his coming to any sort of a decision.

"I'm him." His voice was thick, unfamiliar to himself.

The two looked at him in some surprise, the stranger peering into the gloom.

"Who's that?" he asked of Slim.

"Steady customer," Slim answered.

The man leaned over the bar toward Slim, and conferred in an undertone. The barkeeper shook his head.

Morgan's mind wandered. Above the low voices, perceivable through them as icicles can be seen through smoke, he heard the persistent song of the clock. And now as he listened it seemed to him that he could make out what the clock said for the first time, and his hair stirred.

"Jake's dead, Jake's dead, Jake's dead,
Chunga, chunga, chunga—"

He strained his ears to see if he could read the same words in the clock rhythm again, but the refrain did not recur. The song of the clock was nearing its close.

The stranger was coming to his table.

"You Benjamin Morgan?"

"Yes."

"You know Partridge Geer?"

"Who?"

"Partridge Geer!"

Morgan's fogged mind groped.

"Geer, Geer!" repeated the impatient stranger. "Yuh dumb?"

"He's drunk," Slim explained fatuously.

"Geer," repeated Morgan. "Seems like—I dunno; I guess so."

"Well, he says he's a friend o' yourn, anyway," said the broad-faced old man.

"Ain't got any," said Morgan dazedly. "Crazy."

"Wait around till he gets sober," suggested Slim. "Yo're talkin' to nothin' at all but about seven gallon o' whisky."

"Can't wait," said the stranger. "I gotta git south. Either I'll git this idee over to him, or I won't, an' there's the sum an' total of it."

"I'm sober," said Morgan, a little more clearly.

"This Partridge Geer is in a bad way," the man went on. "Wouldn't beat me if he passed in his chips, this time. He's alone in a tumblin' shanty, forty miles from nothin'. All the neighborin' ranchers has been burned out, seems. He needs somebody to go up there an' take keer of him. I got a loaded mule, outside here, bought with money he give me. Got anythin' to ride?"

"No."

"No saddle nor nothin'?"

"No."

"Well, I'll get them things for yuh. Yuh don't seem to have much gumption yerself. He asks fer you to come an' see him through."

"Through what?"

“Holy Moses! I’m tellin’ yuh the man’s sick! If you won’t go I’ll git somebody else. He asked for you, an’ I’m passin’ the word. That clears me. Now will yuh go, or won’tcha?”

Slide’s fuddled mind grappled feebly with this question, only half understood. He was slipping back into the fog again. Instinctively he listened for the voice of the clock, as a drunken man gropes for a familiar object against which to rest.

Then he realized that the bar was completely silent at last. The clock had stopped.

“I’ll go.”

2

By a slender, crooked driblet of a stream the sandhills rose in rounded humps, held against the wind by the short buffalo grass. Their crests were bare to the roaring sweep of the incessant wind; but at their feet, where the brown-tangled brush huddled by the frozen water, the snow was drifted several feet deep.

Set into one of these hills was a tiny weathered dugout, low-faced, half buried by the crumbling hill and the snow. No smoke came from its broken mud chimney; it seemed a part of the ancient hill.

Slide Morgan dropped off the horse, waded through the moist early snow, and struggled with the rough door. It jammed; then cracked, twisted, and gave inward. There were no windows, and the rider at first could see nothing in the cold gloom within. Then he made out a bunk in the corner. An emaciated figure was laid out upon it, scarcely seeming to form a perceptible ridge in the blankets under which it lay. Slide stumbled forward.

Pale as frosted buckskin, yet with his face unfamiliarly rounded by the gray beard that had grown upon it, lay Partridge Geer.

At first Morgan thought the old man was dead; but a hurried examination proved that he was not. The cowboy snatched up an ax and whaled into a meager pile of wood that lay in the corner. In a few minutes he had a bright little fire going in the mud-walled cavity that served as a fireplace. He brought oatmeal from the pack of the mule, and water from a hole that he broke in the ice.

A terrible thirst was upon him; within him burned a fire which water would not quench, and his head reeled. But with his one good hand, which he had learned to make serve for two, he worked rapidly, preparing to do what he could for the old man whom he had left Slim’s Place to save. . . .

CHAPTER XX

Partridge Geer

THE door of the dugout stood open, for the fire had outdone itself, and filled the little hole with stifling heat. Through the door the winter sunshine came in a steep slant; it shot through the icicles that hung from the low sod roof, turning them to live silver, with burning edges of gold.

Partridge Geer sat in the sunlight, rebandaging Slide Morgan's wrist. The old man was practically himself again, now. There had been a bad ten days after Slide had first come to the little cabin; then a slow, dragging three weeks' recuperation. But for the past two weeks Geer had been moving about a bit. Lately he had managed to hunt a little, piecing out the last of their third mule-load of supplies with a jack rabbit, three grouse, and a yearling steer of the Arrow C brand.

He now finished tying Slide's bandage, and turned to wiping off the scalpel with which he had been probing the wounded wrist. The instrument was efficient looking; it had been a razor, broken off to give it a sharp point, and whetted on stone and leather. With this weapon he had begun tampering with Slide's useless hand several weeks before, as soon as his own hand had begun to regain its steadiness.

"Them cords is sheared in two," Geer had decided. "That's why yore hand flops backward that way, an' yuh can't move yore fingers."

"That means it won't ever come right, I s'pose," said Slide.

Geer pondered. "Not by itself it won't," he adjudged. "But mebbe we can fix it."

Slide was skeptical. "How?"

"I'll bet," said the old man, "that if we got ahold o' the ends o' them cords, an' spliced them together with horse hair, it would work out all right. I never did jest exactly that thing before, but I've sewed some on different men that didn't have no one else to help 'em; an' if you say the word I'll take a swing at it."

Geer's eyes twinkled, as if he were quite keen to put his ideas to the test; and Slide was willing that he should. Those men, grounded in self-sufficiency and independence of thought, would always try anything once.

The operations had been painful in the extreme; their immediate result was to hook his wrist sharply inward, where it became stiffer than ever. As the days passed, however, the experiment began to promise success. He could now move some of his fingers slightly, at the cost of great pain. This elated Geer, who confidently declared that in the course of time the full use of his hand would be regained.

They sat staring out across the prairie, blazing white in sun-struck snow. A gentle breeze, chill with the breath of ice, moved Slide's dark hair, hair now as long as Geer's.

Below them zigzagged the crooked stream, its ice black where the wind had swept it clean. Beyond, to the southeast, stretched the flats, a vast expanse of dazzling white, framed in low sandhills that gleamed in the sun. Beyond these, beyond the horizon, hung a dark haze, spiting the sunlight; when the men looked in that direction it made the air seem dark against the bright land. In all that limitless brilliance of white not a living thing was seen to move.

There was a sinister aspect to the white of the prairie, a blank ruthlessness that was intensified by the eye-stunning glare of the sun. It forced in upon the mind the fact that the prairie was living out hidden purposes of its own, in which the desires and needs of men had no part. The vast barren stretches seemed illimitably increased in extent by the snowfall; the deep, muffling snow tired out the horses men rode, hid the grass, and made all food rare and hard to get at. The cattle and horses that men had brought here were somewhere out of sight, lost in the majestic reaches of sheer glaring emptiness.

Morgan's face hardened unconsciously as he stared out over the scintillant crust, his eyes reaching two days' journey away without passing a living shape. He had lived in the prairie all his life; it was the only home he knew. Yet now for a moment, as if a smoke veil had parted so that he might see through, he sensed the harshness of the plain, the cruelty of the vast space in which uncontrolled forces moved, oblivious to the lives of men. The dugout in which they sat was less than a speck of dust in that vastness, a speck that to-morrow might be blurred out and lost without affecting the scene in any way.

The men of the prairie seldom thought of that; they lived their lives absorbed in the perpetual difficulties at hand. Yet the moods of the prairie carved their faces with deep leathery lines, twisted their backs, and did for them in the end. The faces of the Indians were molded by the prairie, sharp, hard faces, at once whetted and blunted by privation. The whites who

scraped a living out of the prairie came to look like Indians, and the Indians looked like hunted hunters, men who had always fought for their lives. . . .

Slide Morgan turned his head to look at Partridge Geer. Here was the type of man that had learned to beat the prairie at its own game. Geer looked older than Morgan had ever seen him look. His hair was as gray as winter-wrung buffalo grass, the skin of his face as carved and hardened as the bark of a tree. Yet somehow his eyes had remained young. They were quick, pert, as unwearied as a child's. His body might be old and bent by hardships, but whatever was inside Partridge Geer seemed to have missed all that.

Here was the sort of man who could conquer the prairie, given time, and others like himself. The whole weight of the prairie's strength, its brooding, crushing force, had missed him. It could sear his face, break his body, lay him out; but the spirit of the man slipped through it all unscathed, not by indomitable strength, but by sheer immunity to the results of misfortune.

Morgan's eye wandered from the old man, out onto the prairie again, and he stirred restlessly. An uneasiness was upon him, a craving for action that had been accumulating during the long days with Partridge Geer. He was still thirsty with an overpowering thirst, and he was tired of the food they had had; but his unrest went beyond these things.

He knew that in the tiny dugout, lost in the endless reaches of the snow, there was absolute safety, yet he was aware of a persistent sense of danger. It was as if he were urgently needed some place far away, yet he had no idea whence the call could come. He felt as though something were waiting ahead of him, some happening to which all his adventures had led since the night when he had struck down the brother of Abner Cade.

It was in no sense a feeling of fear. Fear, together with much of his bitterness, was behind him. The maudlin weakness of his prolonged debauch in Slim's Place had passed off with labor and clean air. A new, hard courage, a solidity of character had come into him as the tremors of his hands had passed away.

He had been practicing with his new gun, and his left hand was becoming quick on the draw and accurate in the throw of the heavy iron. His left-handed skill was nothing to brag about yet, but in ordinary circumstances it might be made to serve.

"Wonder how Abner Cade come out," he said aloud.

"Oh, he's dead by now," Geer hazarded. "Course, he wasn't ab-so-lutely dead when I left, but he was so goldarned close to it that I don't believe he

ever could 'a' pulled hisself back. Nope. I reckon you're middlin' safe in jest crossin' him off o' yore slate."

Curiously, Abner Cade seemed to have little to do with Slide's mood of unrest. Some other battle was ahead of him; he could sense the struggle out there somewhere in the distance, almost smell the reek of powder. Yet for the moment he could not make out what the premonition referred to.

"What's eatin' yuh?" Geer demanded suddenly. "Yuh look like yuh was expectin' bad news from home. This Cade business has plumb passed off, *I* say. Leave lie. Fergit it!"

"I'm doin' purty good," said Slide idly.

"Fair. I've seen a darned sight better. Somepin' chawin' on yuh though."

"Say!" said Slide, suddenly resentful. "Who the devil are you, anyway?"

"Geer's my name," droned the old man.

"I ain't so sure," Morgan grumbled. His cross examination had stirred up old curiosities in his mind. Well, Geer had sent for him, and he had wasted better than a month on the old man. He could afford to take liberties.

"I never heard o' nobody o' that name," he said with conviction, "an' I don't believe anybody o' that name ever knew nothin' about me. You do. Yuh might as well say yore name is Jones, or Hackberry Dewdinkle, or somethin'."

Geer was silent, apparently willing to let the outburst pass. But Morgan forged ahead.

"I remember back to Moccasin Lake. How come yuh knew I could talk Cheyenne? Why, I hardly knew it myself. It was a plumb surprise to me. How'd *you* know?"

"Well—I ought to."

"Why?"

"Because I learned yuh," said Geer.

"*You learned me?*"

"Yup."

"When?"

"When I was yore paw's pardner," Geer told him. "You was about as big as a real tall boot."

"Well, for gosh sake," said Morgan.

"Mebbe you remember a feller named Parr."

It seemed to Morgan that he did remember a name of the sort, dimly. He could half hear his black-bearded father shouting that name—"Parr! Parr! Whar's Parr?"

Here then was the explanation of the note that Geer had left with Jake Downey, of Morgan's own mysterious knowledge of Cheyenne, and of many things. The identity of the clean-shaved man of the shadow wagons stood revealed at last.

There fell a faintly embarrassed silence, neither of them thinking anything further to say.

"How'd yuh come to do it?" Morgan said presently.

"What?" demanded Geer fiercely.

"Learn me to talk Cheyenne?"

"Oh," said Geer, subsiding with a slight smile. "Why, I seen plain enough what the first problem was in this country—it was to smooth things out with the Injuns afore they smoothed us out plumb even with the ground. Sometimes seems like nobody ever give it any thought but me. Them fools in Washington—

"Well, all by myself I been tryin' to do what I could. I got on to how to get the confidence of the Injuns in the first place. Simple, too. So simple nearly everybody missed it but me. Treat 'em squar. That's the deep secret they've all missed.

"I kin talk five Injun languages purty good. First I thought I'd teach yuh Sioux. But lots o' folks know Sioux, hardly anybody Cheyenne. An' lots o' Sioux an' Pawnee understand Cheyenne. So I learned yuh that. I learned another young fella Pawnee. I was tryin' to oil up the sitchation some, that way. An' sometimes it comes right handy."

"Pulled me out o' the soup," declared Slide.

"If I told yuh how many Injuns' rows I've saved people from, on my own hook an' at my own expense, why, you'd say I was a lyin' old pelican."

They sat silent, Geer apparently pondering the magnificent extent of the things he had accomplished—at his own expense.

Morgan's face was bleak and hard, but behind his eyes there was a smouldering light. He tore off a ragged thumb nail with his teeth. Suddenly he thought that he knew what had been troubling him.

"I can't stand it no longer!" he burst out.

"What?"

“What’s become o’ them pore damn Cheyennes, fightin’ their way through every regiment the government can throw in front of ’em? Where are they?”

“I dunno.”

“Them filthy bucks,” said Morgan incongruously, his sympathies switching around, “they killed the best friend a man ever had. They killed Jake Downey, Partridge!”

“Which side you on?” Geer inquired.

“I dunno,” mumbled Morgan uncertainly. “But there’s fightin’ somewhere, if it ain’t all over. I’m goin’ there. I dunno who I’m fightin’ with. But I shore feel like fightin’. I’m goin’ there!”

“Prob’ly all over an’ done with by now,” said Geer. “Where yuh headin’?”

“I’ll pick up word some place,” said Morgan. “I dunno what’s right an’ what’s wrong, an’ mebbe I’m plumb set against both sides. But I got mixed up in it, an’ I’m goin’ to see it through!”

Geer seemed to consider the inexplicable confusion of Morgan’s ideas.

“You best stay here until you figger out which is heads an’ which tails,” he recommended. “Yuh don’t even know which way yo’re goin’.”

“I’m goin’, anyway.”

There was a long silence, while Slide stood in the doorway, staring out over the blazing silver-dust of the plain.

“Well,” said Geer at last, “so’m I. Cetch up yore horse an’ mule! I’ll pack up our stuff.”

“You comin’?”

“Shore! I can’t stay on the shelf any more’n you. Let’s git movin’, an’ be shet o’ holler talk! We’ll hook south to Moccasin Lake first, an’ get the news. Then we’ll know where we’re goin’.”

Without further parley Slide caught up his coat and a rope and went out.

“Crazy fool,” muttered Geer. “Pore crazy damn fool! He don’t know which way he’s ridin’, or where to step down.” He rose, and with slow efficiency began to gather their scant belongings.

“Somethin’ like me,” he concluded. “The more a man learns, the less he finds out!”

CHAPTER XXI

Nancy Chase

1

IT was sundown as the two nondescript figures, one on a raw-boned mule and the other astride an indifferent shaggy horse, plodded through the snow to the edge of Moccasin Lake. No smoke rose from beneath the gaunt-limbed cottonwoods. Contrary to Partridge Geer's expectations, John Chase's Arrow C camp had not been rebuilt. The charred skeleton of the cabin and the tumbled ruins of the low bunkhouse lay silent and deserted, clothed in the bleak snow.

A coyote whisked out of sight behind the wreckage like a flitting shadow.

"Well, consarn!" said Partridge Geer.

"Out o' business," said Slide gruffly, to conceal from himself the sinking feeling that undermined him at the sight of the dead ruins.

"That ain't like Roarin' Jack," said Geer. "One o' two things: Either Roarin' Jack has ab-so-lutely changed from what he used to be, or else somethin's all-fired wrong!"

"Who's Roarin' Jack?" Slide wanted to know.

"I guess you didn't know much about Jack Chase," Geer replied.

"Nothin'."

"I knowed him oncet," Geer went on. "He's forgot me, though. Most men forget everything they know, if it ain't drummed at 'em continual. In the good old days Chase wasn't known as 'Old John.' 'Roarin' Jack' was the handle they used fer *him*, an' he shore earned it. Sech a fire-headed young un yuh never see. He made three fortunes before he was thirty, two in cattle, one at the wheel. Lost 'em the opposite way—two at the wheel, one at cattle.

"Always ready to bet his shirt with any man, an' he'd drink quicker'n he'd bet, an' fight quicker'n he'd drink. Old fashioned sooner type. Rush in sooner than he oughter, an' sooner fight than eat. Didja see much when yuh rode into the Hickory Lookout scrap on that gray horse?"

"Darn little," said Slide.

“Well, if you’d looked you’d ’a’ seen old Roarin’ Jack standin’ in the middle, straight up, with a six-gun half as long as yore arm in each hand, layin’ lead right an’ left regardless. That was like him in the old days. One o’ the wild fellers yuh hear tell about, like they don’t have no more. Shoot out the lights, shoot out the lookin’ glass, shoot off the heels o’ the bouncer’s boots. An’ if every danged citizen an’ his brother started shootin’ at him in the dark, that tickled him most to pieces.

“That was Roarin’ Jack. Crazy feller. ‘Cle-e-ear the bar!’ he yells, ‘I’m goin’ to take a drink!’ Bang-bang-bang, both guns. Absolute nuisance. Shot a marshal, two faro dealers, an’ a bartender that had a shotgun, them to my positive knowledge.”

Slide remembered the broad, genial old face of John Chase, mild, peaceful, kindly, and was forced to lay heavy discounts on Geer’s description.

“But he married some girl he got hold of in Frisco,” Geer went on. “I guess that sobered him some. She didn’t last it out very long. An’ after she died, an’ he was left with this Nancy kid, I guess he must ’a’ slowed up a whole heap. No little thing like a fight an’ a fire would ’a’ made him abandon camp like this, not in the old days. Well, old times move along an’ pass out. New days, new ways. Or mebbe it’s only us fellers that pass on out o’ the pitcher. . . . We better prod along to Hickory Lookout.”

“Jest a minute,” urged Slide. “I got to see about somethin’ over here.”

He spurred the shaggy pony to the ruins of the bunkhouse and dismounted. The runty horse stood where he stopped, stretching his thin neck to sniff suspiciously at the débris.

Slide hastily calculated the position of the bunk in which he had once slept, and began burrowing into the snow and the fallen rubbish of the roof. Something was wrong with the lay of the half-burnt timbers; the jackstraw havoc was not the sort of tangle that a mere fire would leave, unhelped. As his scuffing boots laid bare the frozen ground Slide realized with a shock that his cache was no more.

The floor slabs had been pried up, and lay tumbled about. Somebody had evidently searched the ruins, and searched them well. There was even a gash-like trench along the base timbers of the wall, where the point of a questing mattock had rooted into the crevices next to the ground. The gold, naturally, was gone.

Beyond a swift flash of anger at the thought of being robbed, Slide did not feel his loss heavily. He cleared his throat harshly and returned to his

horse. Geer had sat watching him sardonically throughout his operations. He did not, however, ask for explanations, and Slide offered none.

Probably the whole performance was perfectly obvious to this keen old man, who had seen nearly everything happen before.

2

It was dark as they reached the point where inconspicuous landmarks told them that Hickory Lookout was not far away. The animals, moving in a steady, persistent jog trot, followed the snow-covered trail without guidance. They were old, these nondescript mounts; perhaps they had traversed this trail before, or maybe their instincts were enough to tell them where they were supposed to go. Mounts who lack all other virtues commonly gain that one by the time they are too old to put it to much use.

"Only about three mile more," guessed Slide.

"Good thing," grunted Geer. "Lyin' round done up shore has took the tuck out o' me. Come mornin' I'll be so consarned stiff that you can use me for a fence rail, an' pry up things. Reckon I better sleep with my legs spread out, bow-legged, so's I'll fit on this mule without havin' to be bent."

"There's a rider yonder," said Slide suddenly.

"I seen him ten minutes ago," said Geer uncharitably.

The sky was darkly overcast, so that there was neither moon nor stars; yet the snow showed with a dull, dim light of its own, as if phosphorus had been rubbed over it by a monstrous hand. Against the rolling reaches of the snow a black form moved, indistinct, sometimes lost in a swale, but moving in a line that presently converged with their own.

"Howdy," called out the rider at last, across the narrowing space that separated them. His voice was thin, husky, even when raised in the hail, yet it was half familiar.

"Howdy, Talky Peters," responded Geer.

Slide started, then restrained himself from speaking at once.

Peters reined his horse closer, and sought to peer through the dark.

"Hoozit?" he asked at last.

"Partridge Geer," the old man answered.

"Well, heck!" exclaimed Talky. "Shore glad to see yuh astraddle! I heerd yuh was like to die, up here somewheres!"

"I did have a kind o' bad cold," admitted Geer disparagingly.

"I was tryin' to get up an' see yuh," Talky apologized, "an' see could I do anythin', but I only been ridin' a little bit, jest the last few days. Don't seem to go so good, some way."

"No call for anybody to bother," said Geer. Then, "You know this young feller?"

Talky leaned sidewise to peer through the dark, but made out nothing. "Can't say as I do, in the dark."

"That's Slide Morgan."

"Well, great sufferin' smoke!" cried Talky. He jammed the spurs into the listless beast he rode, and fairly skittered to Morgan's side.

"Man, man, man!" Talky cheered. "Are yuh all there?" He slammed a gloved hand upon Slide's shoulder, and shook him gleefully.

"Talky," said Slide almost gruffly, "yuh run into me face to face in Roarin' River, an' yuh took one slow look, an' yuh passed me by."

"Yo're crazier'n hell," replied Talky, dumfounded. "I been lookin' fer some word o' you, an' askin', an' inquirin', ever since we got separated, down there where they called our play. But never hide nor hair of yuh do I get trace of, till this mortal minute."

"Talky, yuh mean to set yore horse an' tell me yuh looked right square at me, *an' didn't know me*?"

"Slide, I don't remember no sech a thing. After that Hickory Lookout fight I was kind o' laid up, an' I never got to Roarin' River—"

"Yuh come in on a buckboard," Slide accused him.

"I did get in once on a buckboard, Slide, an' lived to regret it. But—"

"I set in the back o' Slim's Place."

"Well," Talky half laughed, "the joint might 'a' been packed with Shoshone squaws with green faces, 'long about then, an' I dunno as I would 'a' noticed. What with bein' shook up, an' coughin', an' the floor tryin to flop up an' slap me in the face—I wasn't feelin' so very noticin', right then, I guess mebbe."

Morgan understood, and suddenly flung an iron arm over Talky's shoulders, almost lifting him from his seat.

"Ow!" said Talky. "Yuh want to bust me?"

"Talky, I shore am plumb ashamed—"

Talky brushed over this. "There was a feller lookin' fer you in Roarin' River, when I got in there last week fer supplies," he said. "He wanted to

know about you. If I'd known I'd 'a' told him where yuh was, an' it would 'a' served yuh right. He said his name was Nugget Sam."

"Gosh, him!" said Slide. He hadn't thought of the old prospector for many a long moon. "Did he say anythin' about payin' me back a grubstake, or anythin'?"

"Well," Talky chuckled, "he did say he generally got his grubstakes off o' you. He shore seemed to need one. He looked like the place where the cyclone hit. Hat tore, shirt tore, coat tore, shoes tore—He said somethin' about you bein' a regular gold mine of a feller, I think."

"Why, the old billy goat! That jest goes to show. Well, I couldn't do nothin' for him now, even if he caught up with me, some way."

"Slide," said Talky in a serious voice, "that makes me think o' somethin'. I want to ask yuh somethin' before we get to camp."

The glowing window of the Hickory Lookout cabin now showed in the distance, a golden pin point that by contrast gave the dark of the prairie a bluish tinge.

"Spring it," said Slide, anticipating a joke. "I'm laughin' already."

"I hope you ain't, Slide. I'm goin' to ask yuh to do somethin' fer me. It's a purty big thing, a man hasn't got the right to ask it hardly; but, Slide, if ever yuh want anythin' in the world from me it's yores if you'll jest do this one thing."

"Sure I will," Morgan countered instantly. "Write your ticket."

"It's purty big, Slide." He stared at the light in the distance, as if gauging his time. There was plenty of it, even for a man of many words, which Talky was not. It would still be twenty minutes before they reached camp, at the plodding rate they rode.

"I guess you know old John Chase is dead," said Talky solemnly.

"No!"

"Chase dead?" exclaimed Geer. "Old Roarin' Jack!"

"Didn'tcha know?" said Talky. "Well, he is. He died purty quick after that fight. Geer'd left, I guess. He wasn't hit nor nothin'. Jest petered out an' died, after everythin' was all over an' done with."

"Where's Nancy?" Slide asked immediately.

"Nancy's with us, here at Hickory Lookout," said Talky; and Slide suddenly felt a great wave of relief, almost counteracting the shock of the death news.

"What got him?" demanded Geer, persisting, apparently, in horning in.

"Seemed like his lungs filled up or somethin'," Talky told him over his shoulder. "Couldn't seem to get his breath. Sick about three days, then all of a sudden he was dead."

So, thought Slide, here was the end of the old man's slow-built dreams of empire. For a little while at the end of his life Chase had tried gamely to regain the opportunities that his youth had thrown away. Then the sudden grip of winter at an old man's throat, a brief struggle against an ignoble choking death, and the fight was done, the dream vanished, and the laboring hands forever stilled. In a little while other cowmen would put to use the grasslands that Chase had marked for his own, and the brand of the Arrow C would be gone for all time from the range. If it had not been for a pale-eyed gambler, now in his grave, Morgan would now be there to make the dream live, though the dreamer was gone. But ifs didn't count.

"How's Nancy take it?" Slide asked.

"Standin' up," said Talky. "Well, seems like everybody on the range had some idee of what to do to take keer of Nance, but she wouldn't have none of 'em. She figgers to rebuild the camp at Moccasin Lake, an' run her stock. Seth Russell offered to take her holdin's, an' give her a payin' interest in the Box R fer life, an' she could go east, or live where she pleased. An' there was others like that. But she wouldn't take 'em up. She aims to make somethin' out o' what she has, an' not take any charity offers o' them kind, not a-tall."

"Roarin' Jack's daughter," Geer rammed in. "A shore 'nough echo of the old bang!"

"But she fin'ly let us partition her off a place to live in, in our cabin at Hickory Lookout; she let Seth Russell do that much, when we showed how we could. Me and Cork Walters sleeps in a loft, we rigged up, by raisin' the roof when we put it back on, an' she has a room in one end, an' cooks fer us —won't hear different. Seems kind o' funny, but she took a notion to do that way, till her own layout is fixed again, an' there wasn't anybody to say her different. We're as keen to look out fer her as anybody is, I guess.

"But she hasn't any money, an' Happy Bent is laid up with his busted leg —he's at Seth Russell's main camp, now. An' we don't want any o' the fellers to ride for her for nothin', 'less it's us, because we don't want her indebted to nobody like these plug uglies round here. They ain't good enough. An' she won't let us ride fer her fer nothin', an'— Well, yuh see how it is."

Talky realized that he was rambling; and the speck of light was growing nearer. He came to the point.

"Slide, you remember the three-four thousand yuh left under the floor o' Chase's bunkhouse? Yuh told me where 'twas, in case Abner Cade put yuh underneath. I wanta borry that, Slide. I can't pay it back very fast. But I'll get it paid in the course o' time. Reckon yuh know what I want to do with it, Slide."

There was a long silence.

"I reckon," said Slide at last.

"If ever yuh want to do anythin' fer me in yore life, Slide, do this one thing! It's big, I know, but I'll pay yuh back double, if you say the word, or anythin' yuh say. It's the only livin' thing it seems like I can do fer Nance, an' I'd give anythin' in the world, if you'll let me do it."

"Talky," said Morgan, "I'd do it in a minute. Only there wouldn't be no payin' back. Not by a damn sight. But I ain't got any more four thousand dollars than a high-lopin' rabbit. I jest looked fer it, an' it's gone."

"I know it," said Talky.

For a moment Slide was dazed.

"Well," he said at last, somewhat abruptly, "if you've went to work an' went ahead with yore plan, whatcha askin' me for?"

"I ain't went ahead with nothin'," said Talky. "Old John Chase didn't leave hardly a penny. When Happy Bent heard that, he couldn't hardly believe it; so he sent Cork Walters to dig around an' see what he could locate. I was done up, right then, I didn't know nothin' about it. Mebbe I would 'a' put it off, waitin' to find you first. But anyway, Cork made the hunt. He must 'a' been good an' thorough; or mebbe you hid it easy. Anyway, he found the money. Not four thousand, but over three.

"Everybody thought Chase must 'a' left it there. So now Nance thinks it's hers."

"Oh," said Slide, "oh."

"I wouldn't want," Talky drawled, "to tell her different now. Nobody can give her a cent. Here's our one chance to do somethin' for her in the money line. That's the proposition. You let the ready cash go, sayin' nothin'. An' I swear by Gawd I'll pay it back as I can."

"We'll jest ferget I ever had that," said Slide.

"No, I want to—"

"Go to hell," said Morgan.

"Slide, I—"

"I never see so much talk over nothin'," said Slide. "Where'dja get all the loose language at?"

"Gosh," said Talky. For a few minutes he was silent.

"Slide," he said at last, "I'm goin' to run this thing for her, an' make it go. Now's the hard part, this year an' next. When I've got the works on its feet, then somebody she wants can come along an' she can take 'em, an' they'll have a nice layout together, an' I'll drag out o' the landscape. But right now, when she ain't got hardly nothin' but a brand an' a whistle, I'm shore goin' to do what I can."

"Mebbe she'll want you to stick around permanent," Slide offered.

"I couldn't stand it, Slide," Talky mumbled. "She'll marry some one—"

"You," said Slide. He suppressed a certain bitterness that crept upward toward his voice. "Yo're lucky, Talky. I'd give my neck to do jest what yo're plannin'. I think a sight o' Nancy, mister man."

"You an' me," said Talky gently, "and you write it down, it's jest plain, solid, everlastin' hell. . . ."

The light of the cabin was close now.

"Slide," he suddenly burst out, "stay here! It'll be a tough job for one man to swing. But we got to swing it, we got to swing it fer Nance. Before we're through she's got to have the neatest little cow business in forty-leven states, all set up purty, an' runnin' itself. An' it's got to be made to come up out o' jest plain grass. Yo're the only feller in the world I'd ask help of on this, Slide. The only feller I'd be plumb shore wouldn't be lookin' for somethin' out of it in the end. Yo're solid, Slide. Yo're—"

A strangling cough broke out in his chest, but when he had mastered it he went on.

"Le's shoot this out with Abner Cade once an' fer all! We'll blam him because we got to blam him. Then you an' me'll play out this hand."

"Abner Cade? I thought—"

"He ain't dead, Slide. It's gone out that he was dyin' a dozen times. But he hangs on. He's a tough one. They feed him on milk mixed with ice water, to cut down the bleedin' inside. An' now I hear he's up, some. An' he'll be out after yuh when he can—he thinks o' nothin' else in this world. But he ain't boss any more, now; Seth Russell's that. When it comes to blammin' him, we'll blam him. Then you stay. I'm goin' to need a man, Slide, an' it's you."

Morgan studied Talky Peters. In the dark the man was nothing more than a voice and a slender black form; yet certain aspects of these things told Morgan much. The voice was that of a strengthless, bullet-weakened body that was still tenuously tough, refusing to go under. Further, the whole air of the man was different from anything that Morgan had known in Talky before. It seemed to embody many contradictory things, among them an odd, wistful bafflement, and a grim, scheming force.

"It ain't for me, Slide," Talky said. He had forgotten all about Partridge Geer half a mile back, and did not remember him now. "It's for Nance. The cold cuts into my chest somethin' awful. I'm going to make it through all right. But jest in case—. It ain't that though. Oh, you know. She needs an ace in the hole."

"Sure, Talky. I'll take the lookout chair all right."

The cabin was before them; they rode around it and prepared to care for their horses at the shelter within the corral. A new sort of excitement was upon Morgan. The rebuilt cabin of the Hickory Lookout camp had taken on a special significance, such as historic places own. Within, in hailing distance now, was the girl he had hardly known, yet who had entered his thoughts a hundred times since that distant night. . . .

He had killed the man who had been privileged to hold this girl in his arms. How would she look at him now?

Slowly, with cold, fumbling fingers he untied the latigo strap. He had forgotten that side of it somehow. Talky must have—but Talky didn't know about that. Well, he'd see how she acted about him; and if she didn't want him there Talky would understand. He climbed the fence and threw over a little hay to take care of the extra horse and the mule.

"Go ahead in," said Talky. "I got to look at a horse's leg, here."

"I—"

"Git in out o' the cold!"

Stiffly, half dreading what he was about to face, yet curiously calm, Slide obeyed.

3

Morgan hesitated at the cabin door. It was in his mind to wait for Talky Peters; yet, beneath this he knew that he must face this girl alone. If he were to see horror in her eyes, that disaster was his to take, and no one could support him there. A cold perspiration came into the palms of his hands. He

lifted his knuckles to knock, then dropped them again, for he knew well enough that the men of the ranch would be accustomed to walking in without formality. Then he changed his mind again, and rapped upon the door.

He heard Nancy Chase's voice call "Come on in." He was surprised at this, for she could not see who knocked; but then he heard whistling in the corral, and guessed that she must know Talky was there. He thrust open the door and stepped inside.

Nancy was there at the little stove, putting something into a hot skillet, something that sizzled as it hit. She lifted the skillet to shake it, glanced over her shoulder—

The skillet hit the stove top with a bang. The girl stood for a moment staring at Morgan as at a ghost. Her face was surprised, uncertain.

Then "It's—it's Ben Morgan, isn't it?"

The question gave Slide a curious twist. The one thing that had never occurred to him was the possibility that the girl had forgotten him. As he recovered from the surprise he felt as a man does in a poker game when he draws his cards closer to his chest.

"Just about," he answered.

For another moment they stood without moving; the brief pause seemed long, long enough for him to notice that the rounded curves of her face were firmer than he remembered, that her hair looked as soft as the mist from sun-struck rain, that some unknown, disturbing force lived in the depths of her green-gray eyes.

Then a second shock of astonishment came to him as he saw her eyes suddenly glisten with tears. In the next moment they were gone, but they left her eyes gentler than before. She smiled; then she extended her hand to him with a direct movement that suggested the men among whom she had always lived. Slide shook it awkwardly with his left.

"We've been waitin' fo' yuh," she said.

"I didn't know that," he replied, "or I shore would 'a' been here before now."

"Yo' hand hurt?"

"Aw, jest stiff, a little."

"You take that pail theah and wash up."

They were in close quarters, there; the cabin had been tiny to begin with, and now a rough partition cut off nearly half of it, west of the door. One step

took him to the bucket and wash basin on a bench in the corner. As he glanced over his shoulder at her, he saw that she had swiftly turned a small wooden frame, so that it hung face to the wall.

The incident troubled him, and he wondered what it was that she wished to conceal. A picture? Of whom?

He washed slowly, to take up the time. Alone with this girl, he didn't know what he could say. He was glad when Talky and Partridge came in, stamping the snow from their feet.

Talky instantly noticed the position of the wooden frame.

"Yore lookin'-glass's got turned round," he said, as he corrected it. "Ain't that funny now? I got that for her," he told Slide, "so's she could see what she was missin'."

"He's foolin'," said Nancy. "That's fo' him an' Corky to shave with."

Slide straightened up and stared at the cheap mirror, mystified. Why had she turned it to the wall? Then he glimpsed his own face in the glass, and suddenly knew. With an almost hypnotized fixety of gaze he stepped across to the mirror, leaned his hands against the wall on either side of it, and stared into his own reflected face. There had been no mirror in his saddlebags, none behind Slim's wretched bar. . . .

Gaunt, livid, its wind-whipped tan underlaid by a pallor that made it ghastly gray, the face of a stranger looked back at him. The cheeks were dug out into hollows that were bordered by grim creases, so that they were as sharp-carved as with a knife. The tight-skinned cheek bones and bony nose stood out angular and harsh. The mouth was thin-lipped and bitterly drawn, made the harder by the ironic, one-sided suggestion of his old smile which remained there.

But most changed of all were his eyes. Only a trace of bloodshot remained; in dark hollows that made them seem deep-set they shone coldly, hard and clear. They suggested perpetual watchfulness, but behind this was a curious hard calm, as if they looked beyond danger to the fatality of hidden events. They were the eyes of a sensitive man who had looked too often upon suffering and death; there were no wrinkles about them, yet they were old. . . .

This strange, almost unrecognizable shadow of himself gave him a fresh perspective of his fortunes of the past half year. It was curious, looking back on it now that it was over, to think how he had been driven into the path of a swirling force of hopeless destiny, how he had been swept up by that force and carried with it; and how at last it had almost crushed him between itself

and the stronger elements to which it had been opposed. It had left a heavy record upon his face, now that it was over. But was it over?

He put consideration from him with a snort, as he turned away. But that evening his silence melted off, and he talked easily and humorously for the first time since he had ridden from Hickory Lookout on the gray horse upon the night that Lew Cade died.

4

That night was a momentous one in the career of Slide Morgan. There was no flash of guns, no red crush and surge of hand-to-hand fighting, no waiting menace in the quiet outer dark. Yet he always remembered it; for it was at this point that he learned two things.

The first was that he wanted Nancy Chase as he had never wanted anything in his life; that this had been true ever since he had first known her at Moccasin Lake, before the onslaught of Abner Cade. He watched her now as she moved about the tiny room, her slender, tanned hands quick, efficient, but graceful as the movements of a cimarron. There was about her an air of such gentleness as he had never known; yet under that, he knew, there was a bravery surpassing that of her father, for all Roaring Jack's two long guns. A deep, torturing emotion stirred within him, and he looked away.

The second thing that Slide learned was that Talky Peters loved Nancy Chase no less than he.

This thing dawned on him suddenly, as a landscape is revealed in the flicker of heat lightning on a black summer night. But, once realized, the fact was so apparent that it hardly needed verification. He noticed how often Talky's eyes wandered to seek the face of Nancy Chase; and he saw that the man's cocky air of self-assurance was gone. Instead his eyes carried a look at once wistful and baffled, but weighted with some heavier mood that might have been resignation.

When Slide no longer had any doubt on this score, his ideas declared bitter war upon his desires; he relapsed into a tumult of uncertainty. He realized that he could neither stay in this place nor leave it, and that either move meant disaster. Instinctively he sought some compromise, some indecisive way out of the impossible situation. Talky had voluntarily risked his life over and over in behalf of Slide; any effort to wrest Nancy's affections from him, even considering there was any possibility of success, was inconceivable. Equally unthinkable was the bleakness of his own future

if Nancy Chase were to have no place in it. He fell silent, his mind hunting cover.

Thus for a time he lost trace of the conversation that was passing between Talky Peters and Partridge Geer. When his mind came back to it again, after a period of absorption in his own troubles, he found that its tone had changed. Talky still drawled his quiet sentences, with a pause between each two; but Geer's occasional questions had become sharp, and his old eyes had reduced to glinting slits.

"When was this?" Geer demanded.

" 'Bout the twenty-third, twenty-fourth of October, somewhere in there. They got 'em all rounded up on the Chadron, an' counted noses, an' found they had a hunderd an' forty-eight of 'em, not countin' old Dull Knife hisself. Their horses was down pretty low, less than one apiece, so they couldn't get any place, very well. Well, the sojers took the horses an' the guns, an' camped around 'em. That was on Chadron Crick, the way I got it.

"But old Dull Knife had saved out the best o' the guns, some way, and durin' the night they dug rifle pits in the frozen ground. First thing in the mornin' they let wham at the sojers. They didn't have no more chance than a one-legged man at a pants-kickin'. I guess there wasn't no more than thirty bucks in the whole caboodle. But they held 'em off fer two days more, until the troops begin droppin' canister, or somethin', into 'em with a field gun."

"Pore fightin' fools," mumbled Geer. "Pore damn fightin' fools!"

"Well, ever since then they been holdin' these hunderd an' forty-nine Cheyennes up here at Fort Robinson, waitin' to hear what to do with 'em. So it run along—"

"What become o' Little Wolf?" Geer put in.

"Well, Little Wolf an' the rest of 'em snoke through on 'em. Some say he got clean to Canada, an' joined Sittin' Bull; an' some say they got him headed off up in the Big Horns or some place. I dunno.

"Anyway, it run along up till a couple days ago, when a feller come through here, headin' south. Middle-age feller, name o' Pat Trent. He was headin' fer the railroad, an' he said he come from Fort Robinson, direct. Where he was before that I dunno.

"But anyway, accordin' to this Pat Trent, word come from Washington jest the day before he left, to the effect that these Cheyennes was to be moved south, right off. Weather disregardless. Back to where they come from, an' no more delay, says Uncle Sam."

Partridge Geer cursed softly under his breath. “Never learned nothin’,” he swore bitterly, “an’ never will.” It seemed that he was almost ready to break into tears. “What chance we got here to get things sorted out, with a lot o’ humany dudes, that ain’t never been West o’ their dinky little Hudson, runnin’ the whole show? I ask yuh? I ask yuh!” His voice trailed off into mumbles. “I told ’em . . . I told ’em . . . fat ignor’nt fools . . .”

“So by now they’re takin’ the trail back where they started from,” Morgan commented dazedly. The long grueling rides, the repeated desperate encounters against long odds, yet won because they must be, the tortured children and old people . . . all the long, brave struggle for life, defeated at the last by the stroke of a pen, a far-away pen that swung armies to crush a handful of helpless people. . . .

“Not by a damn sight!” said Talky Peters. “Not them!”

A thrill shot through Morgan, that the aged chief in the face of all defeats and all powers, still held to his battling purpose.

“Old Dull Knife made a speech,” he went on. “Well, Pat Trent couldn’t tell what he said, much, though he was right there in the guardhouse buildin’. Nobody there could talk Cheyenne but one Sioux scout, an’ he couldn’t talk American. So they had to have two interpreters, an’ I guess it didn’t come through very good. But the old scrapper got the sum and substance of it over all right.

“The main idee was that he wouldn’t move south—he’d be eternally hanged if he would. He wouldn’t go, an’ nothin’ would move him. The Sioux told him they was sorry he wasn’t let to stay with them, but he’d better do like the sojers said. But not him.

“Dull Knife suggested they kill ’em all an’ take their corpses south in wagons. He said if they wanted to kill ’em all that was the quickest way, they’d rather die quick than by slow fever, if that’s what the whites was set on.

“Well, I always been plumb set against Injuns. They killed pa, an’ they like to got me. But dawgone, yuh got to admit some things, an’ one is that this Dull Knife has got more’n a common man’s share o’ downright guts. I got to admire him. I’d shoot him in a minute if he so much as looked cross-eyed at my horses, but when I’d done it I’d know I’d potted me a real man.”

He paused, and his tongue fondled the slender chew of tobacco in his cheek.

“Then what?” Geer urged.

“Then they decided these fool Injuns needed the tuck taken out of ’em. So they cut off their food an’ water an’ wood. An’ nothin’ do they get, from now on, until they’re ready to go south. Jest as Pat Trent left they was offerin’ to take the women and children out o’ the guardhouse an’ feed ’em. But they wouldn’t come.

“Well, that’s the last I heard. But I guess they’ll be movin’ south now any day. There’s nothin’ like plain, common belly hunger to make a feller change his mind. An’ I guess Dull Knife can get jest as hungry as the next. They’ll move ’em all right.”

“No,” said Slide, “they’ll never do it. I know those Cheyennes. They’ll die there, but they won’t move.”

“They may die,” said Partridge Geer, “but it won’t be starvation. There’s fightin’ goin’ on, Ben! Right now there’s fightin’! Gawd! The pore fightin’ fools!”

“Fightin’ with what?” asked Talky skeptically. “They’ve got no guns.”

“I dunno with what,” said Geer. “An’ I dunno that there’s no guns. But they’ll fight with somethin’, I can tell yuh that, if it’s only the fresh bones o’ their dead. I’ve seen that very thing, I have.”

“What’ll it get ’em? There ain’t even the faintest shade of a chance—”

“No,” said Geer, “they ain’t. There never was, an’ it’s a good thing for us, or we wouldn’t be here now. But there’s one thing Dull Knife’s band knows that a lot o’ white men can’t never learn. An’ that is that there’s things worse than dyin’, pervidin’ yuh die fightin’ with all yuh got, an’ the best yuh can.”

They fell silent for a time.

“What time in the mornin’ do we start, Ben?” Geer asked Morgan at last. “It’s not more’n eighty mile to Fort Robinson as the crow flies northwest. But we ain’t crows. It’s ekal to a hunderd miles by horse or mule, or a hunderd an’ fifty in this snow. We got to take it in two heats. Well, let’s see. This must be the twelth o’ the month, isn’t it?”

“ ’Leventh,” said Talky.

“Of December?” asked Slide. “Well, of all the early winters I ever see —”

“January,” Talky chuckled. “Yo’re livin’ in 1879, young feller. You take the turkey! He’s slippin’ back on us, Partridge.”

“Dawgone!”

“Then they must ’a’ stopped the Cheyenne’s grub about the fifth, or along in there,” Partridge computed.

“Right along in there, some place,” Talky agreed.

“We may have missed the finish,” Geer mused, his eyes smouldering. “I dunno. We’ll go see. Mebbe old Geer can save a lot o’ people some bother yet.”

“How about horses, Talky?” Slide asked absentmindedly. Now that the news of the Cheyennes had sunk in, it had somehow mixed itself with Slide’s own problem. Immeasurably stirred by the news of Dull Knife’s game decision, he yet found that the nearness of Nancy Chase made all other considerations of less importance than they could have been in normal days.

“*Yo’re* not goin’?” Talky demanded. “Are yuh? You an’ me has work to do. Leave this old derringer of a feller ram off on all the wild goose chases he wants to. What’s in it fer you? Looks like it was time you was givin’ over all this monkey-business fer a while. You know what yuh told me.”

Slide looked at Geer.

The old man shrugged. “It’s up to Morgan,” he stated. “I ain’t askin’ him to come as any special favor to me. But if he don’t, he shore is a changeable feller, that’ all *I* got to say.”

Morgan made no answer; he sat staring absently at the floor, as if he heard nothing that was said.

“I—” he started to say once; then fell silent again.

No one spoke; it was as if they had come to a deadlock, with nothing further to be said until Slide’s decision was announced.

Morgan glanced up at Nancy Chase, who sat apart by the stove. He found her looking at him steadily, and instantly dropped his eyes again.

“I’m goin’ to ride up there with Geer,” he said at last.

“Slide, you ain’t—” Talky burst out.

“No,” said Slide, “I ain’t goin’ back on yuh, Talky. But—I reckon I ought to see this through.”

“What can you do?” Talky demanded. “Yo’re no use up there. You can’t even throw a gun.”

“Don’t you believe it,” Geer contradicted. “He’s been practicin’ with his left hand. Course he ain’t as good as a ordinary feller with two good hands, not yet. But he’s comin’; I reckon he’ll do, all right, in a general rumpus.”

"Anyway," Talky insisted, "it shore must be over by now. Them Cheyenne's must o' been in that guardhouse without supplies for six-seven days now. You think they're eatin' logs in there? Either they've give in, or they're dead. Because the sojers *can't* give in, they ain't got any say about it."

"They ain't in the guardhouse by now," said Geer with conviction.

"What's the reason they ain't?" Talky demanded hotly.

"Because they ain't!" Geer snapped back. "They wouldn't stay in there. They got more gumption than that!"

"Then they've been caught again an' put back," said Talky decisively. "There's cavalry there, an' the Injuns haven't any ponies. Anyway, what's *he* goin' to do about it?"

"Ask him," Geer suggested; and again they waited for Slide to break the deadlock.

"It ain't that," said Slide slowly.

"Then what?" Talky demanded instantly. "You old fool," he continued, grumbling, "it's jest like you to go an' get yore head shot off the last minute, after everything's all over."

In the presence of Geer and Nancy, Talky could not say any more plainly what was in his mind; but he looked at Morgan with such appeal that Slide could not avoid the force of the man's insistence. He knew then with what dread of failure Talky must be looking forward to the struggle for the success of Nancy's ranch, and what store he must set upon the assistance of Slide Morgan, the only man in whom he seemed to trust completely.

Morgan longed to see how Nancy was taking all this, but he feared to lift his eyes to hers, lest he waver. He knew that above all things he needed this little time alone with Geer that he might straighten things out in his mind.

"It won't take long, Talky," he said at last. "I got to—I got to figure something out. Won't take so terrible long to ride up there an' back."

Presently Talky spoke two words, very soft and low, though all could hear what he said plainly enough.

"Comin' back?"

Slide started, surprised that Talky had seen deeper into his mind than he had expected. Yet he knew that Talky had missed the point.

"Yeah, I'll be back, Talky."

"That's a promise, then," said Talky casually.

“Check.”

CHAPTER XXII

Hunting Dog's Stand

1

THE dim cold of the narrow barracks in which the 149 Cheyennes were confined became suddenly potent, as though charged by an electric shock. The ceaseless, silent-footed pacing of the gaunt Otter stopped in mid stride. Faces that had shown a gleam of hope went dead, and those that had been passive in resignation became savagely intent. Morning Star, his old limbs trembling, but with eyes wide and hard in the glare of battle, rose swiftly to his feet.

A single war cry, high and terrible, had sounded in one of the huddled log buildings beyond their own. For an instant it had rung in the midday silence; then suddenly ceased, as if choked off by gripping hands.

It was their fifth day of privation. The days without fuel, food, or water had passed with agonizing slowness. The Cheyennes were poorly clad; except for their ragged, thin blankets, they might have been dressed for midsummer. Into their bones perpetually crept the slow frost, striving to numb the starved bodies, while hunger and thirst gnawed incessantly at the very sanity of their minds.

Sometimes the mourning prayer-chants of the women had wailed eerily in the narrow confines of the cabin, or again the wild, monotonous death chants of the warriors had sounded for a little while. Between these interims of sound there could be heard perpetually the thin, still whimpering of the children, inconsolable in the suffering that hourly increased. Now and then a young brave, despairing to the point of madness, had flung himself at Morning Star's feet, begging permission to leap forth and die fighting, at once.

Yet at no time had the United States officers been able to draw from that house of doom a suggestion of surrender, a sign of bending to the will that had ordered them back to the place from which they had come. To march in the zero weather would have meant death to many. To arrive safely in the southern land from which they had fled would have meant slow death to many more, perhaps all, as the past had proved. Morning Star had pledged himself never to return there alive. No surrender! Death might come to them at this place, but it would find them unbending.

An offer to take out the women and children to be fed had been refused.

Behind them lay the endless miles of travel, the battles which they had won against odds, to return to their own land. Here and there their trail was marked by the coyote-stripped bones of their dead. They would not retrace that trail while they lived, though now they were helpless in the cold, remorseless hands of the Great Father, who wanted them all to die.

That morning Captain Wessels had sent for the three chiefs that remained, to confer once more. Of the three, Wild Hog and Crow were permitted to go; nothing could persuade the people to let Morning Star leave them, for it seemed unlikely to them that their beloved old chief would ever return. In this suspicion it was now apparent that they were justified. The single desperate war cry of Wild Hog had brought them word that the end for them all was close at hand.

For a moment after the war cry had sounded across the snow, silence continued as their ears strained for some further sound that did not come. Then the war cry of the Otter answered like an eagle scream. Pandemonium broke forth. The young braves would have burst out of the barracks to fling themselves upon the soldiers in a wild frenzy of hate and despair, but Morning Star himself blocked the door.

Then, as the war cries screamed again and again and the weird wail of the death chants rose and fell, the Cheyennes worked desperately, preparing themselves to fight as best they could. Slabs and planks were wrenched loose by numbed fingers to barricade windows and doors. With their last hope of mercy gone they did not doubt that the malevolent people who encompassed them would soon move to accomplish their end.

Beneath the floor was a cache of a few guns. They had been taken apart just before the Cheyennes were finally disarmed, and the pieces concealed in the clothing of the children and the squaws, and later they had been hidden, reassembled, under the floor. These were brought forth and distributed among the best shots. Riflemen who had knives gave them to others, that none might be without a weapon of a sort. The cold iron of the stove was broken up to make crude weapons for those who had nothing else.

Among the swift smother of the moving people Blanket walked, his face harsh and bleak beneath the great war bonnet of white eagle feathers which he still wore. A pistol, a few rounds of ammunition, were all he had; not so much as a skinning knife was at his belt for defense when those few rounds should be gone. No trace of his old sardonic smile remained to him, but he spoke quietly to the others, making a suggestion here and there, trying to

calm men crazed with hunger, bringing order out of the turmoil as well as he could.

In a dim corner, silent and motionless, sat his sister, Antelope Woman. Close to her body beneath her torn blanket she held Little Frog, trying to keep the cold from the heart of the famished baby for a little while more. For a moment, as his eyes rested upon her, Blanket's face blazed with a savage intensity of wrath; but this was soon past and he went to talk to Morning Star.

"When we break out, we can get a few weapons from the sentries. But we must shoot them from the windows, so that they cannot escape, just before we rush from the windows and doors."

Morning Star nodded.

"There is a ranch," Blanket went on, "with horses, only a few miles away. At dusk, if you will give me only one man, I will try to get out of the camp, go to this ranch and kill the men who guard the horses. Then I will start the herd this way, and meet the people as they come."

"It is impossible," said Morning Star. "No man could succeed in such an attempt."

"For a long time," Blanket pointed out, "nothing that we have done has been possible to men. Yet we have done these things. Nothing possible remains to us now. I can try."

But Morning Star shook his head. "I will do this," he said, "because you are brave and calm. I will give you your choice of place in the fight. Some must fight while others escape. Others must hurry on with the women and children to where the horses are. Not all can get away. You may do either thing, as you choose."

"Then I will fight the troopers here," said Blanket, "and try to hold them back."

Morning Star nodded; then his mind turned away to his plans for the last desperate bid for life of these Cheyennes.

Presently the turmoil subsided. Morning Star called to him certain men, to discuss what they must do. Among these were Hunting Dog, Blanket, Tangle Hair, and Standing Alone. For a long time they talked in low voices, while quiet gradually came back to the narrow room.

At last they separated again, walking here and there to tell the people what they must do when the time came, taking the greatest care that all should know every detail. At last even this movement ceased, and silently in

the bitter cold the Cheyennes waited for their time. Up and down, his moccasins noiseless, the Otter paced and paced.

2

Night came on, savagely cold. There was little wind, yet an occasional breath of merciless winter came through the chinks that had been pried open for the rifles, stirring the frost within to beset the ill-clad bronze bodies anew. There was no moon, and the stars were far away and faint. Only the crust of the all-covering snow glistened faintly, as with a mysterious radiance of its own.

By nine o'clock Fort Robinson's huddle of log buildings was silent. Through the still, frost-locked air a clear-voiced bugle sounded taps, slowly, sadly singing the most beautiful call the army knows:

"When your last . . .
Day is past . . .
From afar some bright star o'er your grave . . .
Watch will keep . . .
While you sleep . . .
With the brave . . ."

An hour passed. . . . Two hours. A deathly silence brooded, over the Cheyenne prison-barracks, over the barracks of the troops; in the officer's quarters a single light burned, but even there the silence was unstirred.

Within the log building of the Cheyennes a quiet figure moved along the walls like a shadow. It paused at each of the riflemen who were stationed near the narrow windows, passing a brief message.

"When Morning Star gives the word, let the first man who can draw bead on a sentry fire."

All knew what must be done the instant that the shot sounded. Braves armed with stove-legs stood by the windows to smash out the frames. The Cheyennes breathed quietly, waiting, not one among them asleep.

A long time passed. Tense, ready, each waited for the expected word. Outside the sentries paced, slowly, sometimes stamping their feet, each man walking alone with his rifle and his thoughts. Their breaths were visible in the gloom, slow-blown mists that rose and lost themselves against the background of the snow.

"Now," came Morning Star's voice at last, low, firm, controlled. "Now!"

In the silence five chosen riflemen rose swiftly, standing to the windows, rifles ready. Another long pause followed, agonizingly tense with waiting as in the gloom all eyes watched the chosen men. There was a swift movement at one of the windows as Little Shield brought up his rifle, dropping his cheek to the stock. Those standing in line with this window saw a slow-pacing figure, rifle on shoulder, clearly blocked out against the snow.

Then the voice of Little Shield's rifle crashed in the stillness, and the motionless silence was gone. The slow-pacing figure stumbled and pitched forward into the snow. There was a splintering smash of shattered windows through which figures instantly leaped, their movements violent, swift as animals, as the pent-up fury of the wild broke forth at last.

Outside dark figures were moving, yelling as they ran through the snow.

"Turn out the guard! The guard! Fer God's sake where's the guard!"

A blanket-wrapped figure sprang after one of these like a catamount, struck the man down, seized rifle and belt and retreated. A scattering riflery spoke for a minute as the sentries fired, then there was a moment of near-quiet as those who remained alive gained the guardhouse. A thin stream of blue-clad men began to run from the guardhouse, as the guard of the day rushed forth. A bugle blared hysterically, ripping out the call "To arms!"

Quickly, yet apparently without haste, a scattering line of warriors formed near the Cheyenne barracks, between the guardhouse and the river. They began to fire into the men from the guardhouse. Blanket, pistol in hand but not firing, walked among these, straight and calm. He fiercely yelled, "Aim well! Aim well! Aim well!" over and over.

Men began to pour out of the troopers' barracks, men without shirts, men without breeches, men clad only in underwear and boots. A swift skirmish line of these formed to the shouting of the noncoms, and the Cheyenne fire was now returned four-fold. A party of half-clad troopers dashed around the buildings to out-flank the thin line of braves, and take them under enfilade. Tangle Hair, chief of the Dog Soldiers, went down, and another, and another. The thin skirmish line of troopers advanced and the warriors slowly gave ground.

Down the slope toward the river poured the women, children, and powderless warriors of the Cheyennes. Blanket watched the dark rabble of them against the snow until they were lost to sight, and he believed that they had gained the ice. "Give back!" he yelled. "Do not run! Face the soldiers, but give back!"

Among the troopers all was confusion, yet the discipline and cool leadership of the noncoms was straightening this out. An officer, fully clothed, was striding about on long legs, bringing order wherever he went. “First platoon to the stables! Get those horses out. You here, stand fast!”

The click of steel on steel rustled in the pauses of the rifle fire. Hoarse commands, stern-voiced, excited, rang among the muddled troopers. Half had no sabers, some had carbines without belts of ammunition; among them was every stage of semi-preparation for combat which is possible among surprised fighting-men. Then out of the confusion came a disordered line on the trot.

“As skirmishers, follow me! Now, charge! Let ’em have it, boys! Club muskets! Club muskets!” Some old timer of Civil War days was in action.

The thin lines of the troopers and the Cheyennes blended, the Indians giving backward, the soldiers flinging upon them as they sought to retreat. The Cheyenne line broke into groups. Fighting desperately, they strove to disengage and break away. At the river’s edge Blanket for a moment reëstablished the fragments of his line, and fought the troopers off. In the temporary pause he took them across the river, preparing to fight again on the farther shore.

Behind them they left the snow blotted with the blood of a dozen wounded and dead.

Morning Star was leading his band on the run in the direction of the ranch, where it was their forlorn hope to capture ponies. Down the trampled snow path of their flight Blanket retreated, holding his men together as well as he could, a hard-fighting rear guard. In a little while the half-clad troopers fell away, and, in the respite that followed, the Blanket’s detachment hastened to overtake the main body of their people.

The respite did not last. Fully clad troopers, mounted now, began coming upon them from the fort, first in small squads and harassing parties, then in platoon force. The carbines spoke incessantly, dropping warrior after warrior of the rear guard, killing and wounding women and old men with Morning Star beyond. All along the trail that they made in the snow dark shapes rested, where Cheyennes fell.

Now and again the cavalry charged the weakening rear guard with sabers. Standing Alone went down, one foot broken and an elbow shattered. Gamely he struggled up and with his remaining arm hurled his rifle to a warrior who rushed toward him to take it. Another saber charge was coming. Weaponless, Standing Alone screamed his war cry, and turned to face the

charging troop; in the next moment he was down under the smashing smother of hoofs, a twisted huddle that the horses tried to overleap.

There was no chance of securing horses now. Many were dead, and hope of escape waned as the troopers' strength increased. Two miles west of the army post rose precipitous bluffs, inaccessible to horsemen. To these Morning Star now led his band, defending themselves as well as they could while they fled.

A long slope led up to the point in these bluffs which Morning Star had chosen for ascent; here Hunting Dog and Blanket drew together their shattered forces for a temporary defense.

From the hard fight at the foot of the bluffs, two men of the shielding party escaped alive, gaining the steep trail after the last of those they defended had gone up. These, by a grim irony, were Hunting Dog and Blanket.

Among the sacrificed rear guard Antelope Woman died, fighting with the men, the riddled body of Little Frog still on her back. . . .

On the plateau above the bluffs those that remained alive found opportunity for unharassed flight.

The light of the stars seemed stronger now; in their pale, thin light the chill snow fields gleamed smoothly, tranquilly. They were in a spirit land of dimly gleaming beauty, a vast world of silver traceries, sprinkled with the dust of countless myriads of jewels. It was a land for the swift spirits of the air to move in, spirits who needed no warmth. But in all the vastness of the prairie's uncanny beauty the inhuman cold had left no place of refuge for the stumbling Cheyennes.

Nor was there hope of food. Across the scintillant crust, eddies of snow powder sometimes fled like wind-whipped ghosts; but there moved there no living thing.

No surrender! On and on they marched, wounded, freezing, weak from hunger. . . . That night they traveled seventeen miles.

3

More than forty miles northwest of Fort Robinson, and hardly farther than that from the edge of their beloved Black Hills toward which the Cheyennes fought their way so long, stand the Hat Creek bluffs. On these bluffs, near the Head of Warbonnet Creek, Hunting Dog, with all that was left of Morning Star's band, made his final stand.

They lay in a narrow coulee, shoulder deep. Their number was thirty-one.

Eleven days had passed since the hundred and forty-nine Cheyennes had made their game dash from the prison-barracks of Fort Robinson. A cow or two, a winter killed elk, had been all their food.

To the best of the knowledge of the thirty-one, they were all that remained alive. The truth was that nearly seventy of their people had been recaptured by the troops, nearly all of them wounded, but alive. Of the rest, most were dead. By a cruel jest of the gods, Morning Star himself, having become separated from his people, remained alive and free.

They in the coulee could not know that their chief lived, nor any of their friends and loved ones. Repeatedly they had slipped away from the pursuing cavalry by dark, sometimes near the last creeping like coyotes through the close-drawn night lines. Now all that was done. No less than four troops of cavalry, short rostered, but numbering nearly three hundred men, now hemmed them in.

Unspeakably weary, wasted from lack of food, many with frozen hands or feet, they still defended the coulee that was their last of earth.

It was warmer, now. Much of the snow had melted away. What remained of it lay in broad flat patches on the frost-blackened prairie, like irregular paper cut-outs upon dark wood. From the thawing sod there rose a moist odor, suggestive of the spring that was far away. From a clear sky the sun shone benevolently, careless of the sufferings of its prairie people, as if they had lived too long, and were in truth forgotten by the elements they had loved before they were yet dead.

In the clear light of morning Blanket moved among the people in the coulee, stooping low to avoid the bullets that poured into the shoulders of the banks at each sign of life. Among the thirty-one were several who had not moved since the last light of the day before. A young mother still cradled in her arms the body of her dead child. Those who were unhurt looked at each other wanly, their spirits past fear, past despair. Yet—no surrender! One thing in them was unbroken still—the will never to give up.

They could hear the movements in the camp of the troopers, a few hundred yards away, smell the odors of cooked food and the smoke of fires. Why didn't they come? Stoically the Cheyennes waited for the inevitable end. It came soon.

The voice of a Sioux interpreter called from within easy hailing distance.

“I am lying out here on the slope,” it said. “We will not shoot. An officer is with me.” They could hear the low murmur of the other voice, prompting the Sioux. “The officer says that if you will come out and give up, no one will be hurt.”

There was a long silence in the coulee, while none moved to reply. “Do you hear? Do you hear?” the Sioux called.

Hunting Dog ran his eyes over the faces of his remaining people, and in them he found reflected his own intent.

“If there is a man,” said Hunting Dog in a voice terrible with hate, “who has a cartridge left, let him fire it now!”

Of the thirty-one, Blanket was the only man who any longer possessed a single round.

“We hear you!” he cried, and rising to his feet he fired at the emissary three times, emptying his gun of the last ammunition they owned.

After that it seemed that a long time passed. They could hear shouted orders, advancing men.

“We cannot fight them off any more,” said Hunting Dog. “We must wait until they leap into the coulee. Then let us fight with our knives, with stones, with whatever is in our hands, and die trying to kill as many as we can.”

The Otter ground his teeth in helpless rage, but the others nodded, their gaunt faces grave.

For a quarter of an hour a heavy fire was poured into the coulee from three angles, until none dared lift his cheek from the ground. Then there was a pause.

“Now!” said Hunting Dog. “Now they will come!”

They could hear the slog of many feet advancing over thawing snow and wet sod. Then they heard the swift shouted commands, unintelligible in word, but clear in meaning; and all gripped such poor weapons as they had.

The advancing murmur of feet increased to a muffled thunder of sound. Frantic yells of the officers cut through the crash of desultory fire at close range. A skirmish line had advanced, and as it came on it had converged in spite of all that its officers could do; until suddenly a solid wall of men stood over them on the brink of the coulee. Now, now if their guns could have spoken, those in the coulee would have carried many a trooper with them to the land of the dead!

They waited for the wave of fighting men to spring upon them—

A terrific smashing roar seemed to split heaven and earth as the carbines blazed, pouring a terrible avalanche of death into the crouched Cheyennes. For a few moments there was bedlam, a rain of sound, then quiet—

As the thick mist of powder smoke rose and drifted, revealing a welter of bullet-torn bodies and slow-creeping trickles of blood, the wall of men was gone from the coulee's rim; the troopers had dropped back to reload. A thick, wailing sound began to rise where here and there a dying brave lifted his voice with his last strength in the chant of death.

"Do any live?" cried Hunting Dog in a ghastly voice.

The Otter, Blanket, and a man named Gray Rain answered.

"They will not leap in," cried Blanket. "They will kill us where we wait!"

"We must rush them as they come on again," gasped the Otter. His face twisted, and his voice ended in a choking cough.

For an instant the four looked into each other's eyes as they stood there, stooping above the red shambles at their feet. Among them were three skinning knives; Blanket had his empty pistol alone.

"They are coming," said Hunting Dog. "We must go now." His voice sounded distant in the wash of sound. Swiftly he turned and leaped out of the coulee, screaming the cry of battle. Blanket and Gray Rain were at his side; but the war cry of the Otter strangled in his throat. All his life this man had lived for battle, but the fighting death he had desired above all things was denied. He fell back helpless and bleeding from the lip of the coulee, and the last of his comrades passed out of his sight.

Screaming their war cries, the three flung themselves against the oncoming wall of the three hundred; and so died.

CHAPTER XXIII

Cade and Morgan

1

IT was a Saturday night, following a pay day, as Slide Morgan sat again in the tiny cabin at Hickory Lookout. It was turning colder outside, but within was a cozy warmth, an atmosphere of friendship, of comfort, of stable, home-like things. The keen pleasure, bordering on relief, with which Talky had greeted Morgan, had somewhat worn off, but Talky remained jovial and happy; he fairly radiated contentment and satisfaction with things as they were.

Nancy's face, too, had lighted up at the sight of Slide Morgan. She now moved about briskly getting dinner, her hands making gay, bird-like movements. She hummed a song as she worked.

"Looks liks I could help some," Slide hazarded.

"Sho! Men don't know how to cook!"

Slide's face crinkled in a grin.

"I betcha," Talky chuckled aloud, "he's cooked hisself more'n a million meals—"

"An' look how thin he is," Nancy retorted. "Men have to be took care of, or my, oh, my, yuh ought to see how they run down!"

"I guess that's so," Slide admitted. "Havin' eat off o' men cooks for upwards o' twenty years, I believe Nancy's right. Men can't cook. Not any."

"They shore can't cook like Nance," Talky agreed, "that's certain."

Slide had ridden in from Fort Robinson tight-lipped and grim, but the congenial atmosphere was thawing him out. Sometimes his mind reverted against his will to the Fort Robinson disaster, yet for the most part he had come through the terrible days of the outbreak unchanged. Perhaps long adversities, climaxed by the death of Jake Downey, had left him with new qualities of endurance. Or perhaps while at Slim's Place he had plumbed the farthest depths of which he was capable, so that for him there were no new vistas of injustice, horror, or despair.

At any rate, his mind had now turned away from the fate of Morning Star's band, as from a subject irrevocably closed. The friends of his Indian

life were nearly all of them dead; the power of the ban was broken forever. Behind him the doors of the past were closed; he was ready for new things.

These new things were now close about him in the little Hickory Lookout cabin.

"There's nothin' like a big, thick steak o' beef," Talky opined. "I'm glad that's one thing we got plenty of. 'Taters though is another question. Sweet 'taters especially. If I told yuh how much those sweet 'taters cost, laid down here, you'd call me a darned liar."

"He'd have a right to," Nancy put in.

"Well," Talky admitted, "not these identical 'taters, but ordinary 'taters, I mean. These here I won in a poker game. But yuh can't always do that. Now take those onions she's fryin' with that steak. Sometimes it looks like yuh can't tell which will bring the most—a prime steer, or a peck o' onions."

Under the influence of appetizing food, genial companionship, and the stimulating presence of Nancy Chase, Slide Morgan spent a contented hour. Then the problems from which he had fled when he rode north to the Niobrara with Partridge Geer began to creep back.

Nowhere in his life had he ever seen anything as beautiful as Nancy Chase appeared to him now. He was glad that it was pay day, so that Cork Walters was in Roaring River; it was a supreme privilege for him to sit here with just Talky and Nancy Chase, basking in the light of this girl's eyes. For a time this was enough.

Then suddenly the full force of the problem he confronted surged over him, gripping him by the throat. For a moment there was a sinking sickness in the pit of his stomach as he realized that he was beaten again, this time without so much as the privilege of lifting his hand in his own behalf.

But this time he knew that he was equal to the test. Subtly, without realizing it, in his days on the prairie he had become master of himself, and, having won to this, was master of all things. He did not realize this now; but he found himself calm and ready, and knew what he must do. An iron turned in his heart at the thought of not seeing Nancy Chase again; but even as it twisted, his old easy grin was on his face, and his voice went on unchanged.

"This boardin' housekeeper," he related, "was named Owl Nose, an' he was one o' these fellers with a mustache that looks like it was always goin' to make him sneeze the next minute. Well, Snigger O'Grady got the notion that Owl Nose was warmin' over pancakes on us, an' dishin' 'em up from the day before. O'Grady was called Snigger because when he first came

there he gave out that he was called ‘Trigger’ back where he come from, an’ the boys played like they misunderstood him.

“So one mornin’ Snigger stuck a lot o’ toothpicks in the pancakes that was left over on the platter. Next day, come breakfast, old Pop Smithers bites into a toothpick first thing.

“Pop r’ars right up. He yips, ‘I gotta have the *boneless* flapjacks for *my* breakfast,’ an’ he grabs Owl Nose by the neck—”

“What did I tell yuh?” Talky chuckled, turning to Nancy. “Any place where Slide Morgan is, is jest bound to be different from any place else yuh ever see.”

Well, it must soon be over. He drank in the sight of Nancy while he could. His memory of her as he saw her now would have to last a long time; clear through to the end, most like. He dreaded to have the evening come to an end; but when they at last had said good night he climbed the ladder to the loft humming a song.

“What tune is that?” Talky asked.

And Morgan sang some of the words, lightly and gayly, though he thought that something was going to let go within him.

> “Wall-eyed cayuse, mean as mean can be—
> Go kick the foreman, stay away from me.”

He pulled off only his boots, and crawled into Cork Walters’ bed. Talky undressed, and presently blew the lantern out. For a long time Slide lay awake, listening to Talky Peters’ regular breathing. Suddenly Talky spoke out of the dark, surprising him, for he had believed the other man asleep.

“You ain’t goin’ back on me, Slide, are yuh?”

“Shore not, Talky; I’d never do that.”

Slide knew that he lied. By the time the sun was up again Talky would know it. Peters would think the rest of his life that Morgan had gone back on him, had failed to play up; that made it tough, but there was no help for it. What he was going to do was best for all concerned. They would never understand, but that was a good thing, too. . . .

In the solid darkness an hour before dawn Slide climbed down the ladder, his boots in his hand. At the last he weakened, and left a note for Talky, stuck to the frying pan with bacon grease. Then he saddled the shaggy indifferent horse, and rode away in the soft muffle of new-fallen snow.

It was only the middle of the morning, and Sunday morning at that; but by good fortune Slim's bar was open. It being the morning after pay day, Slim could not afford to miss the chance of gathering in any stray gentry of thirst who might be stirring before the opening of the Happy Chance bar.

At Slim's smeared counter Morgan stood and drank sparingly. A single blear-eyed customer had been there when he came in, drowsing at a back table as Slide once had drowsed in the same place; but this man was gone, and except for the morose Slim, Roaring River seemed completely devoid of life.

As Morgan slowly sipped his liquor his eyes watched the façade of the Happy Chance. Somewhere behind it Abner Cade lay. That the man was alive he had learned from Slim. Only the day before, the cattleman had been seen to step out of the Happy Chance, which he still owned, to spend a few moments in the sunshine of the street.

When Cade learned that Morgan was across the street in Slim's bar he would come after him. There was no shadow of doubt about that. He would come if he had to be carried.

Slide looked forward to this eventuality coolly, but with a pleasurable thrill of anticipation. There were advantages, after all, in having no future. It enabled a man who had a fight on his hands to drink before breakfast without qualms, and enjoy the situation properly, without troubling himself as to the result. If something had gone out of Morgan it had taken fear with it. He was more like himself on this quiet Sunday morning, as he waited for Abner Cade, than he had been for many a long moon.

The beautiful part of it was that he had only to wait. Presently some friend of Cade's would notice him and bear the word, and action would begin. There was no doubt that the immunity he had borne while he had lived in Slim's Place was gone now that Abner Cade was able to take notice of things again.

Probably Cade's aim would not be up to its usual pitch. But then neither was his own; for while he could now use his right hand to lift his drink with, his gun still swung on his left side, and it would be his slow left hand which he would have to use. These things lent elements of interesting variation to what promised to be a point blank gun-fight.

The door of the Happy Chance pushed open, and a figure slid out. The man swaggered casually across the street, apparently merely an early riser, headed for the only open bar. But once he was inside he strode swiftly to

Morgan's side. Slide confronted a small man with weak, watery eyes, but a face lined and leathery. A chew of tobacco distended one clean-shaved cheek.

"Yo're Morgan," said the man at once, "ain'tcha?"

"Check," said Slide.

"I'm Cork Walters."

"I've heard the name," Slide acknowledged, extending his left hand.

Cork went on in a low mumble, leaning close. "I slept in the room next to Abner Cade's, an' jest now woke up. They're gangin' up on yuh over there."

"Good," said Slide. "Hardly expected them to get word so early."

"I jest thought yuh ought to know," Cork explained. "Cade's got fellers with him that'll back him up. I wouldn't put it past 'em to shoot two-three at once, if yuh nailed Cade. I dunno how you look at them things. But if it was me, I kind o' believe I'd put this off until I could run into this feller alone. I'd ride."

"I don't hardly believe I will," Slide answered. "Mebbe I can show 'em where they're kickin' it out with the wrong mule."

"Well," Walters apologized, "I jest thought I'd mention it, seein's there's goin' to be five-six against one."

"Thanks anyway," said Morgan.

"There's another slant to this gang business," said Cork Walters suddenly; and with that he hurried out and ran back across the street to the Happy Chance.

Five minutes passed. A scrawny-necked man with snaggly teeth and a dirty tobacco-stained mustache let himself in inconspicuously, puttered along the bar, and finally took up a position at the rear. The man who had sat at the rear table when Morgan first appeared now returned and ordered a drink, standing at the end of the bar nearest the door. Then more came, wandering across in groups of twos and threes, until a dozen men were lounging at the tables, or leaning against the bar.

Slim looked at Morgan curiously, and his fat face seemed to pale a little as he surveyed this record breaking assemblage. But he hurried up the ordered drinks, making the most of the circumstances before trouble broke. . . .

Across the street, in a square room in the second story of the Happy Chance, a flat-chested youth with a nervous face was fumbling with a gun belt and chattering in a distracted, pleading voice.

"Fer Gawd's sake, Mister Cade, leave some one do this fer yuh! Leave me do it, leave anybody! It ain't in reason—"

A smouldering cigarette trailed from his lower lip as if glued there; it flicked up and down, forgotten, beating time to the young man's almost hysterical jabbering.

Abner Cade sat motionless on the edge of his bed. His peculiarly light eyes, with their sagging lower lids, stared out from their dark hollows with so little expression that the eyes of the young man dropped whenever they turned to his.

Since last he had been seen outside of Roaring River, Cade had changed almost beyond recognition. His muscular cheeks had wasted and sunk, and even his lips had paled to a ghastly gray. The grim solidity of his body, too, was gone, revealing a great, bent frame, gaunt and stooped under a burdening weight that was not there. He spoke in a husky murmur that somehow still carried a faint suggestion of ballasting rock.

"Put on the belt," he told the young man.

The gun belt was passed very gently about Cade's motionless body; the two parts of the buckle rattled together with the trembling of the youngster's hands.

"Mister Cade, yuh can't make it! You mind what the doc said. A feller with a stummick wound don't dast make a quick move. One quick move, he says, an' ever'thin' inside tears out in one rush. Jest one quick move—"

"Sling on that iron," came the low, husky voice.

Very gently the youth eased the heavy six-gun into the holster; only the faintest change showed in Cade's face as the belt dragged against his waist. The youngster almost sobbed.

"We all know yo're game, Mister Cade! Ever'one knows yuh ain't scared! If you'd only jest stay quiet, in a few days—"

"Help—me up."

"Mister Cade, fer the love o' Gawd!"

Cade's fingers gripped the young man's arm, and, giving up at last, the other raised the great gaunt figure until the wounded man stood on his feet. Slowly, step by step, they made their way out the door; along the hall; down

those narrow, creaking stairs; through the deserted bar of the Happy Chance. . . .

From his position at the bar in Slim's Place, Morgan's eyes wandered past the dirty glass in the front window to the door of the Happy Chance. It was swinging open, now.

Calmly, with almost the detachment of a man apart, Slide watched that door open. Through it Abner Cade was coming, slowly, steadily, one arm across the shoulders of the flat-chested young man. In a few moments, now, Slim's Place would reek with gun smoke. . . .

The voice of the snaggle-toothed man snarled in the back of the room.

"Box R men keep yore hands above yore belts! I'm in the lookout chair, here, an' I got seven men backin' Cade's play!"

Instantly there came the sound of a smashing blow, and that man's breath whistled through his teeth. There was a shuffle of swift movement, quick, harsh voices, the crash of an overturned chair; then a single voice, speaking in the sudden hush.

"Lookout chair's changed hands! Boys, keep them reptyles against the wall where they belong!"

A swift glance over his shoulder gave Slide a confused impression of shouldering men, the glint of guns, hands raised by men who backed against the walls, and the swift grin of Cork Walters as Slide met his eye. In one astonishing moment of action the Box R men, routed out of their bunks by Cork Walters, had made their play and taken the upper hand.

"Fightin' fools," breathed Morgan, "old fightin' fools!"

The slow beat of his heart quickened to a lifting pound. The situation was changed now. A moment or two before, he had been a man without future, nor friends, nor hope. The implacable destiny that had seemed to dog his trail throughout the year that was past had lain heavily upon him, so that he had stood inertly, spiritlessly, as he waited for this final meeting with Abner Cade.

But about him now were men who wrote their own destinies, never hesitating to pit themselves against stacked decks in a game that seemed lost.

Half way across the broad street, moving slowly to save his strength, yet coming steadily as an inescapable doom, was Abner Cade; he leaned upon the slight young man as upon a staff. Slide noticed how wasted Cade was,

how the look of granite had slipped away from the shoulders of the wounded man. Yet Morgan was not thinking about that. He had suddenly come into the knowledge that there is no final defeat while a man still lives. He knew that when the moment came to draw he would put every ounce of nerve that he possessed into the single movement that would be his bid for life.

The flat-chested youth thrust the door open, then leaped aside to be out of line, and was seen no more. In the doorway loomed Abner Cade. Morgan seemed to see only the eyes of the man, sagging, curiously light eyes that stared out of their dark hollows steel-hard, unchanged.

Slide stepped out from the bar that was deserted now, since all pressed close to the walls; and with his left hand hanging loose at his side he waited, alone in the middle of the room while no one moved.

Thus they faced each other at last, the man who desired this meeting above all things, and the man who had avoided it for so long; and their eyes met and locked, holding each other for a moment that seemed unnaturally long to the many who watched, waiting for the crash of the guns.

Abner Cade's hand flashed to his gun, a short, two-inch movement only, for the holster hung ready to his hand; and Slide, with a mad grip and jerk, snatched out his own gun and fired.

The sound of the single shot roared in the close room, followed instantly by the smashing report of the other gun. Then, while the air still rang with the explosions there was another sound, muddled, ineffectual, the sound a man makes as he slumps inertly to the floor. . . .

Through the pungent powder smoke Slide stared down at the limp figure of Cade unbelievingly, for he was sure that he had missed.

"Yuh got him," said Cork Walters at his elbow.

"No, he shot wild," said some one else; "there's a hole in the windy pane."

Some one was turning Cade over; the limp figure was hid by stooping men.

"Deader'n hell," said a voice presently; and another, "He sure is."

Then at last, the voice of some one else: "He ain't hit at all! Somethin' must 'a' let go inside . . ."

But the irony of Cade's inner death was lost upon Morgan, for his mind was numbed by the shock of his release from a struggle that had seemed to be without end. He strode around the body of his enemy to the door, and the men there stood aside to let him pass.

CHAPTER XXIV

Peters Throws in His Hand

1

AS Morgan rode west out of Roaring River he met Talky Peters face to face on the trail.

"Well, thank Gawd!" swore Talky when they were within speaking distance. "I was afeared you'd took to the tall grass!"

"Talky," said Slide, "yo're too late. The bother's over already, before breakfast even."

"Didja get him?"

"No, I missed him. I slung the widest, craziest shot yuh ever see. But jest as he threw down on me he quill-wheeled, and his shot went in the floor. I never was so surprised in all my born days."

"The strain must 'a' popped somethin'," Talky supposed. "I ain't amazed. Shot up like he was, the wonder is that he ain't fell over before. Everybody said they never see such a man."

"Well, it's over, anyway."

"I shore am glad o' that," said Talky; but he did not sound as if he had been worried about that alone. He hesitated, as if he had mislaid what he was about to say; and there passed several moments of uneasy silence.

"Well," said Morgan at last, "guess I'll be ridin' on."

"Where to?" asked Talky dully.

"Oh—over the divide—someplace—"

"Slide," said Talky suddenly, "you got to go back there!"

"Back where?"

"Why, back to Hickory Lookout. Nance—"

Morgan opened his mouth to speak, then shut it again. His face reddened, but he held himself in check, and steadied his voice before he spoke.

"If they's one man in the world," he said at last, "that ought to understand why I can't stay where Nancy is, you ought to be him."

"I understand all about that, Slide," Talky said thinly, "an' that there point is the whole sum an' substance o' this thing. I know jest how you look at it; but I reckon you don't know how the land lays as well as I do, that's all."

Talky's persistent obtusity angered Morgan unreasonably, so that he flared up.

"I can give you a few pointers yet," he ripped out. "There's things I never told you about this, an' that you ain't got no more idee of than a jackass out in the corral!"

"Ye-es?" drawled Talky. "I reckon not."

"You reckon not, do yuh?" Slide blazed. The tension of his emotions was too much for him, and his reserve snapped. "You reckon not? Well, I'll jest give yuh a thing or two to chaw on, if yuh want to be so damned bullheaded! I never told yuh how come I killed Lew Cade, but I'm tellin' yuh now! It was because I run onto Nancy in Lew Cade's arms!"

He had expected this to be a lash in the face for Peters, and in his present savage mood he did not care. But to his utter loss Talky looked back at him unmoved.

"Yeah," he answered, "she told me about that."

"*She told yuh!*"

"You understood me correct," said Talky.

Slide hesitated a moment, taken aback; then he rushed on.

"An' you set there on that horse, knowin' that I killed this man *right as he stepped out o' her arms*—an' yuh know I'm wild ravin' crazy about this same girl, an' yuh know how she must think o' me—" he was leaving Talky Peters out of the question for the moment, but in his anger at the perversity of the man he did not care—"an' yo're tellin' me I should go back there an' live where she is! Well, yuh got a damned sight less understandin' than I give yuh credit for, that's all! There's no point arguin' with yuh. I'm leavin'. If yuh can't understand nothin', you'll jest have to set there in a stupor an' take things as they come!"

His legs pressed the horse's barrel, and the animal moved forward; but Talky seized the reins, close to the bit.

"Listen a minute," Talky suggested. He was grinning faintly at the other, ironically and without humor.

"I'm sick o' listenin'."

“You got the case wrong,” Talky pursued. “She wasn’t playin’ Lew like you thought. He grabbed her, that’s all.”

“He what?”

“He grabbed her. Seemed to me, to hear her tell it, she was kind o’ grateful to you fer gettin’ her loose.”

Slide stared blankly. An old nightmare had been taken out of his life so suddenly that he felt as if the ground had been knocked from under him.

“Talky, you ain’t lyin’?”

“Why the hell should I lie about it?”

“Well,” he said at last, the anger gone out of him, “that’s somethin’.”

“Somethin’,” Talky mocked him. “Yeah, I reckon that’s somethin’.”

“It don’t change the main point, though. . . . You leave go that bridle!”

“She read that note yuh left fer me,” Talky remarked indifferently.

“You showed her that—”

“The one sayin’ yuh was wild crazy about her, in case yuh forget what it said,” Talky amplified.

“You didn’t have no right—” Slide raved.

“When she found out you’d left a note, she ’lowed she had a right to see what it said,” Talky told him. “An’ after thinkin’ on that, some, I reckoned mebbe she did.”

Morgan glared at the slender man, speechless.

“It didn’t have no more effect,” Talky went on, “than a crate o’ dynamite, set off on a dark night on the edge o’ the main herd.”

“What,” Morgan heard himself saying, “what did she say?”

“She didn’t say nothin’,” Talky answered, and his eyes smouldered for the first time. “She cried.”

“She—*what*?”

“You heard me!” Talky rasped savagely. “She cried! You made her cry, yuh hear? I’m proud o’ you, I am!”

“I—” Slide began.

“Yes, I, I, I!” Talky raged. “You’ve used that word enough! I’ve come after yuh to send yuh back there, an’ back yo’re goin’ to go! Or else yo’re a whole damn sight lower thing than Abner Cade had any idee of. An’ one other thing, Mister Man: Right now yo’re up against a feller that ain’t goin’ to keel over, like some, at jest the first sound o’ yore gun!”

Slide sat and looked back at Talky Peters, and as he did so he saw their relationship in a new light. It meant nothing that his old friend was reviling him; he saw only that his friend, not himself, was a beaten man, futureless, adrift, whose only remaining purpose was that Nancy Chase should have the thing she desired, regardless of himself. They had ridden a long way together, these two, fighting, dodging, contriving devices; and in all that time it had been Morgan's iron that was in the fire, not Talky Peters'. And now that their ways parted, it was Talky who faced the long prairie trails alone.

It seemed to Slide that he could not now desert this man who had never turned away from him. He knew well enough that there was no room for them both at the Arrow C camp.

"Talky," he said, "I'm not goin' back. It wouldn't be right fer me to go."

"You got to!"

"No, not in a million years."

But in the end he went.

2

He was clean-shaved and wearing new clothes; and the lathered horse he dismounted before the Hickory Lookout cabin was the best horse that money would buy in the neighborhood of Roaring River. Slowly, with controlled hands, he slacked off the cinch and dropped the loop of the reins upon the hard-trampled snow. He walked to the door and knocked, and heard Nancy's voice call, "Come!"

He opened the door, then stopped and stood in the opening, his shoulder against the jamb. Nancy Chase stood facing him; she leaned against the table behind her, her hands resting on its edge. For a long time neither moved, nor spoke. . . .

Talky Peters, riding southward alone, didn't look just as he did when he first met Morgan, for his wound was not thoroughly healed. But some of his old cocksure nonchalance was in his face again; and it was Morgan's own careless saddle song that he hummed as he rode:

“Easy swing, easy slide,
Easy eat, easy ride,
Let the leather in the saddle take the wear;
Easy come, easy go,
Spend it fast, get it slow,
One place is like another . . . anywhere . . .”

THE END

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 *Painted Ponies* by Alan Le May]