

*Wild Paradise*

by

King Phillips

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# WILD PARADISE

BY

## KING PHILLIPS

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THE PALM OF THE HOT HAND

GROSSET & DUNLAP  
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# Wild Paradise

## CHAPTER I.

### GOLDEN HOOFS.

You would not call it a circus anywhere north or east of Cobb's Coulee, but down there it was the Greatest Show on Earth—just as advertised. It was composed of an alkali-covered elephant, a zebra lathered by the heat and its own nervousness, a half-bald camel with patches of dead wool clinging to its withers, a wheel-cage or two of big cats, and a troupe of performing horses.

In those days the Santa Fe in Arizona was called the Atlantic and Pacific. Southward from the main branch toward the Coyotero Desert went a spur which was built primarily for the transportation of beef. At the end-of-track, which might have been anywhere in those cañons and sage plains, the usual gambling town grew to what is now Cobb's Coulee.

Cobb's Coulee is unimportant historically. In fact, the event I am about to chronicle is more memorable than any rodeo or Apache raid that the oldest present inhabitant can remember. It was, in a word, the coming of the Vasto Circus.

The elephant shambled down the streets, a lumbering mountain of corrugated, gunmetal hide, of little coyote eyes, of a back the size of a small mesa. A spieler preceded him, riding a burro and howling through a megaphone:

"This aft at two o'clock, ladies and gents! The big show! One bone to see this here bull stand on his head!"

"What bull?" the town horse doctor asked in a rather belligerent voice. He was not going to be fooled by any of these circus con men.

"This here giant bull—with the tushes and the Hindu howdah! One bone—and see the sword swallower and the——"

"That ain't a bull; it's an elephant."

"Don't argue with him, doc," the sheriff pleaded. "He's a circus man which he ought to know what's an elephant and what ain't."

“I’ve been a cow-puncher,” the veterinarian announced, “and I know what’s a bull and what ain’t.”

“The doc’s right,” said the town barber. “That ain’t a bull. And it ain’t an elephant, either. It’s a giraft.”

The mesa of black flesh swung past, leaving the line of stockmen and miners gaping and snorting in the cloud of dust.

“Sure it’s a giraft,” said an old herder. “Can’t you see his long trunk?”

“Any one who calls that elephant a giraft is a fool!” the veterinarian shouted. “I know a giraft as well as a bull or an elephant.”

The sheriff wanted to placate the crowd. “All right, doc. I’ll agree you know what a bull is, and thar ain’t no doubt in my mind about that thar animule bein’ an elephant. Seen pictures of ’em many a time. The circus hombre is wrong, and you’re right.”

“But what I’d like to know,” said the old herder, “is, how come it has a trunk if it ain’t a giraft?”

“A giraft hasn’t a trunk,” the veterinarian asserted hotly. “It’s got a head like a mule deer, same as you’ll see up in the Sierra, only it’s got a long neck \_\_\_\_\_”

“How long?”

“Oh, about as long as that tent pole.”

“Did you ever see one, doc?” asked the sheriff dubiously.

“I sure have. And it’s got legs three times as long as a race horse’s, and it has horns sort of like a snail, and its hide is colored in yellow and black spots same as a Gila monster.”

“Wow! That’s a good one!”

“A mule deer with a neck two stories high!” the old herder exclaimed. “And a hide like a Gila monster, and snail’s horns. Just when did you see that thar animule, Rufe?”

A sheepman who was holding himself up by a snubbing post, gave answer: “I seen one last night—when I had the D. T.’s; and I’m glad the doc here knows what it is. And it’s just exactly like what Rufe describes. And what he says is allus right, so help me!”

The argument was interrupted by gasps, by oaths of amazement, by cries of joy, from the row of stockherders, miners, barkeeps, and gamblers lining

the board sidewalk. Compared to what they now saw, the rest of the parade dwindled into insignificance. All else was hideous and grotesque.

Their eyes widened. They were like the eyes of small boys reflecting the light of candles on a wondrous birthday cake. They saw a white stallion with gilded hoofs and flowing mane and tail. There can be no doubt that never before or since had a creature so beautiful been seen in the cañons or cow towns of the Cobb's Coulee country.

The veterinarian and his companions were too dazzled by the sunlight shining upon that lustrous coat to make any inventory of the horse's perfections. An inventory would have been too long, for everything they saw was perfect; the sleek neck, the keen throttle, the thin withers. But as the horse passed, a change came over the crowd. The gait of an ordinary horse would have blended all these perfections into a harmony. Performance is a good percentage of the points of a winner at a horse show.

A gorgeous steed like this should prance. His ears should be erect, his neck arched, his gilded hoofs plunging. But no! A dead silence fell on the crowd. The high spirit of even an ordinary range-fed mustang was lacking.

They saw the most beautiful bit of horseflesh in the world housing the spirit of a jackass! Ears drooping, golden hoofs shuffling, eyes dull. A plodding stock horse, dragging a cultivator, could not have been more spiritless.

Only once, when a change of wind brought the sage scent of the desert into the crowded street, did the stallion lift his weary head. He sniffed, his superbly chiseled nostrils quivering, his perfect ears standing up. His eyes flashed fire. The crowd saw a momentary vision of a desert king prancing—and then it faded. Again the incarnate jackass.

The man at the silver-studded bridle must have felt that current of ecstasy gripping the horse. For he looked up, startled, and yanked at his mouth. The beast shied, flattened his ears, rolled his eyes. He seemed intent at forestriking at that hated thing in silk top hat and riding boots and kid gloves torturing his mouth.

“Looks like he's a killer!” the vet exclaimed.

“He's got it in for that hombre with the stovepipe sombrero,” said the barber.

“The hombre's pinchin' him.”

“He's holdin' his under lip with a tournkay.”

“He’s torturin’ him.”

“If he didn’t, the hoss would kill him.”

“I’d like to take a pot at that stovepipe with a six-gun. Kin I, sheriff?” It was the horse doctor who spoke.

“You keep that holster flap of yourn buttoned down, doc,” the sheriff said. “I agreed with the management there wouldn’t be no fightin’.”

“Who-all’s the management?” asked the doc.

“That gent who’s plaguin’ the hoss.”

The “management” occupied the attention of the crowd for a moment. And it was their opinion that in comparison with the beautiful animal he was torturing he was the ugliest thing in the world.

When I say ugly I do not mean ugly in the physical sense. The man in the stovepipe was actually a handsome individual, of fine proportion, with long black ringlets falling over his shoulders, and with jet brows beetling over dreamy eyes. A diamond horseshoe winked in his checkered cravat.

There was, in fact, only one hideous thing about him, and that was his mouth. It was uneven, curling up on one side when he snarled at the horse, drooping on the other where customarily he held a cigar stub. His teeth were yellow, his under lip stained.

The glorious Pegasus and all the townfolk of Cobb’s Coulee had one passion in common: they hated this man with an intense and consuming hatred.

The horse had reared again. He tensed and shook his head free. The ringmaster turned upon him. The horse champed as if enjoying the sudden freedom given to his tortured lip. Then a long black whip cracked through the air and cut down across his face, wrapping itself about the sleek, glistening neck.

“You will, will you?” the ringmaster growled. “I’ll show you if I can’t lead you, you old hell-dog!”

Again the crack of the whip. The horse shied off and stood docile, with ripples of silver trembling across the satin of his withers and barrel.

“Still and all, it ain’t the way to handle a fine hoss like that,” a bystander remarked.

“ ’Tain’t a hoss—it’s a thing they calls a ‘steed’ from the Arabian desert. Didn’t you-all see the red and yaller posters advertisin’ same?”

The crowd looked on in displeasure—but it was an aloof displeasure. Unquestionably this critter had to be handled with a strong hand.

Perhaps it wasn’t a horse at all. Golden hoofs and silken mane and glossy, silvery hide was something new to the stockmen of the Cobb’s Coulee ranges. It might be something entirely different from a horse—as for instance that grotesque, striped jackass, the zebra, shuffling along behind an alkali-covered Mississippi Hindu.

But right then the man in the silk top hat cracked his whip, and it came down cruelly on the magnificent silver flanks. The stallion cringed and became again a figure of trembling and pitiable majesty. From the lines of ranchers and herders on the board sidewalk arose a growl, like the growl of a nervous herd. The sheriff immediately recognized the warning.

“Hold your shirts on now, pards!” he cried. “This here gent knows what he’s doin’.”

“He’s scairt!” the veterinarian declared. “He’s treatin’ it like it was a range outlaw, which it ain’t.”

“It’s a circus hoss, and he’s a circus man. He knows. ’Tain’t a bunchgrasser like you gents can handle. No fightin’ now. Let him manage his own critter.”

The murmur seemed to die down. The sheriff was right. It was a circus horse—and it would take a circus man to hold him.

But some one seemed to take a different view of the matter.

“If it’s a horse, it’s a horse, and a circus man better learn our ways.”

The sheriff, knowing perfectly well by the sound of that voice that a bomb had been thrown into the peace of Cobb’s Coulee, turned around.

He saw a tall youth—a prospector who seemed “all bone and shank and patchy meat,” with a high-peaked sombrero, black woolen shirt, and rawhide vest. He was a stranger, and there was a pale glint in his sun-faded eyes which made Sheriff Flapjohn tremble for the peace of Cobb’s Coulee—as well as for the personal safety of every man connected with the Vasto Circus & Rodeo Co.

“Put that quirt down, you yaller-livered skunk!”

The man in the top hat looked about. The parade had stopped. The mounted performers who followed drew rein. The gilded wardrobe wagon and the cage-wagon jolted to a halt with squeaking brakes. On both sidewalks the breeds, Mexicans and miners made a circle about the leader and his trembling horse.

The ringmaster was a big man. He had once, so they said, added three inches to his height with jackboots, and substituted in a side show for a sick giant.

“Are you talking to me, Mr. Yokel?” he said, turning upon the rangy young man who had stepped down into the street.

“I am. Lay down your quirt and leave off torturing that horse.”

“I’ll lay it down around your neck, kid. So get out of here before I call that there bull to toss you out of town.”

The prospector threw away his cigarette and hitched up his wampum belt.

“Stay out of this—all my men,” the sheriff called. “This here stranger kin fight the whole damn circus if he wants; but we stay out.”

The circus leader, hearing this welcome news, lashed his horsewhip as the lanky youth stepped toward him. The black rawhide cracked, and flipped in two coils about the stranger’s neck, splitting his wind-burned skin. The pain and the choking coils must have given him a pretty good surprise, for he staggered back, his mouth open, his gray eyes widening in astonishment.

“Shoot off his stovepipe, the measly coyote!” the stockmen yelled in anger. “Why don’t you throw on him stranger?”

“No gun-throwin’, or I’ll step in!” shouted the sheriff.

“Don’t let him draw!” an old clown cried, elbowing his way back through the crowd. “We won’t draw. ’Tain’t the circus way. Leave ’em fight it out—with sticks and whips and fists.”

“Light into him thar, stranger!” from a cowboy.

“Break his neck. You kin do it!” from another.

The prospector had already regained his balance. He swung a wild but bone-crushing blow toward the other’s chin. It caught the ringmaster on the side of his jaw and sent him hurtling his full length into the sand of the street. He struggled up, leaped back, the crowd giving way to him, and again cracked his whip.

The prospector lunged in, and felt the rawhide twine itself in one stinging crack about his neck. The circus man appeared to be an expert at this business, for the end of his whip flipped around itself in a half hitch.

A powerful yank drew the young mucker's head forward. A blow on the chin dropped him.

"The hell of a way to fight!" the crowd jeered.

"Leave us git in and finish this, chief. Kill the dirty rattler! Come on, chief!"

"It's the circus way!" the wrinkled clown shouted. He was a commanding figure in his domino and his great red diamond eyes and glaring white face. "Everything but guns. Vasto's fightin' fair."

The prospector lifted himself to his knees. The hot dust under him, which his fists clutched, was blazing like the sand of the Coyotero Desert. It shimmered and swept in circles about him, like the mirage of a whirlpool.

Just above were the blazing red blankets of Hopis, the leather chaps of herders, the black and white domino of the clown, the radiant vision of a horse. He clutched at the rattlesnake coils about his neck and pulled a huge demon of a man toward him who was pommeling with fists and kicking him with riding boots.

A terrific din was in the stranger's ears as he staggered to his feet. He saw the faces now—the breeds, the bronzed jaws of Mexicans under sombreros, the cowboys yelling, the ghastly face of the clown, and the one square, brutal, pale face of his enemy. It was bobbing up and down, hurling blows as if from a dozen arms.

He swung for it, and his fist felt the comfort of a hard jaw. He swung again. The head had stopped bobbing. It just hovered there with glazed eyes. Again the prospector's knuckles split against breaking teeth. The face sank forward, falling into another terrific blow.

"That's the way, pard! Claw into him! You've busted his jaw! You've caved in his face! He cain't swing no whip now! No, and he won't for a good long time! There you go agin! Biff! Bang!"

In the dust lay the horsewhip—like a sleeping blacksnake. Off under the spurs and cowboy boots near the sidewalk was the crushed top hat. Stretched out in the warm sand of Cobb's Coulee was the motionless figure of the owner of Vasto's Circus & Rodeo Co.

Sheriff Flapjohn stepped between the prone and broken giant and the victor.

“Look here, stranger, you started this, and you better shag out of town. This here is a peaceable town, but you ain’t a peaceable man. So git.”

He turned to the crowd. “Gents and ladies and Mexes and circus folk—the show will go on as usual. And they won’t be no more fightin’. I’ll give my word to that. This bird which I don’t know who he is, don’t belong here, and he’s going to vamose. So pitch your tents and start the bally-hoo!”

When the stranger had wiped the blood and sweat out of his eyes he found himself staring down into what he thought was the loveliest picture the eye of man had ever seen. The loveliest, that is to say, except for the golden-hoofed stallion.

It was a girl with cheeks finely powdered and tinted to faint carnelian shades. Her arms gleamed snow white under the Arizona sun, and her bodice of tinsel, her white throat and bare shoulders were so dazzling that the prospector blinked as if he had not yet recovered from that first numbing blow of his adversary.

The stranger wiped his mouth, which was open. He judged he was a terrible-looking spectacle. Welts were on his throat, and blood trickled down into the hair of his chest where the whip had cut him.

He took a swig of the cold water which this radiant vision proffered him. A voice that was melodious with childish accents was laughing:

“You sure walloped that gentleman, and they’re havin’ a lulu of a time bringing him to.”

The stranger gulped. The nightmare of whirling color began to focus down to clear and glorious hues: the red of Hopi blankets, the polka dots of the clown, the gold hoofs of the Arabian steed, the purple mesa in the background, and the blue desert sky. Yes, and the halo of gold hair which fell down in curls over the dazzling shoulders of that circus girl who was wiping his face.

“Who in the world are you, anyway?” he asked.

“I’m the one who rides that horse you fought for,” she replied.

## CHAPTER II.

### MILLE POSEY.

The stranger found refuge from the crowd by retiring to the back corral of the veterinarian's shop.

"I need some liniment," he said.

"I reckon you do," the horse doctor replied, as the young man divested himself of his shirt. The latter displayed the finest torso, rippling muscles and sloping shoulders, that the old doctor had ever seen. "I'm advisin' you not to mix in with this circus gang any more," the vet said. "The sheriff's protectin' same."

He added as he was doctoring the patient's wounds: "Of course, a young coot like you, which you ain't afeared of elephants and a couple cagefuls of pumas—why, it looks ridiculous to warn you ag'in' a plain ordinary sheriff."

"I admit I didn't like the way he pulled his mustache when he was advising me to leave town," the stranger said. "Kind of like a cat."

"Worse'n a cat. Because you cain't bribe a harmless necessary cat. But this here Sheriff Flapjohn—well, the town's beginnin' to git his number. He'll always git his man—providin' they's a reward. If not, well, it means the hoss thief has offered a bigger reward.

"He's been sheriff now for ten years, and durin' that time he's officiated at a few lynchin's which you wouldn't exactly call them within the law. But we leave our sheriffs to handle their own hoss thieves. Sometimes they cain't tote 'em back out of the desert, bein' most hoss thieves is breeds which they have kinfolk around who'll save 'em, provided they have time. Best thing to do is to hang a outlaw pronto. Sheriff winks at lynchin', and the ranchers hereabouts wink at the sheriff—if he leaves a posse lynch his prisoner afore bringin' same to trial."

"I haven't lived around these parts very long," the stranger said; "but I understand that's the custom in these frontier and desert cow towns."

The horse doctor examined the man's face, peering over silver-rimmed glasses. "You look like a Westerner to me, all righto."

"I been doing some panning down in Coyotero Desert," the other said. "Been two years down there without getting back to civilization."

“Had some schoolin’, I reckon?” the other suggested warily. It was not customary in Cobb’s Coulee to inquire into a man’s past.

“A little up in Tucson. My name’s Dave Huppert. My father was a missionary to the Navahos up north.”

“All right, Mr. Huppert,” the other said. “Bein’ you’ve introduced yourself, I’ll speak plainer. Them show folks are goin’ to plant a scrap on you, and they’ll dump you.

“If you shoot up any of ’em, which I reckon you kin easy enough, the sheriff will step in—and he won’t be on your side. This hellbender Vasto has money—and he’s got the sheriff fixed. Heard ’em talkin’ when I was doctorin’ up one of Flapjohn’s hosses.”

Dave Huppert felt a little cooler now that his cuts had been doctored with the vet’s lotions. He rolled a cigarette and breathed comfortably. He seemed to be turning this advice over in his mind. He was not an ass.

There was a time to be rash and a time to be cautious. A frontier town with a sheriff who virtually had the power of hanging a man was a bad place to get framed.

He was about to thank the vet for his advice and mount his horse and go, when a member of the Vasto organization arrived at the shop, and announced to Dave that “he’d come to give him a message.”

He was not a very formidable looking messenger. He had bow legs, silvery hair and a red eye. He spoke with conviction, focusing his eye upon the listener as if daring him to call him a liar. He spoke respectfully and his accent suggested Coney Island.

“My name is Padin, sir, boss hostler of the Vasto Circus an’ Rodeo Company. I seen the way you trimmed that bucko when you caught him whipping the white stud—Ali Baba’s his name. I mean the name of the stud. Vasto is the gent you worked over. We all seen it and some of us is thankin’ you, sir.”

“You’re welcome. And what else can I do for you?” Dave asked observing that the old hostler was waiting politely and respectfully for a cue to go on.

“My pard, sir, which is sick and layin’ in the hotel room and which loves that horse like a brother, why I was wonderin’——”

“Wondering what?”

“Well, my pard which is in a sort of bad mental state, seen the way you acted in defense of that horse, and wants to see you. I said: ‘Oh no, he wouldn’t come to see no member of the Vasto Circus, no matter if they was dyin’,’ which may be the case now.

“But I swear to you, sir, that if you come and tell why you saved that horse—and the inspiration of just shakin’ your hand—why it may save my pard from a very serious breakdown.”

“Buckjimpin’ tombstones!” the horse doctor exclaimed.

“Where is this hotel?” Dave asked.

“The Rex Cantina,” said the other.

“Lolly-paloozin’ tombstones!” the horse doctor exclaimed again. The other two turned to him, wondering what these cryptic explosions signified. The doctor interpreted himself:

“The Rex Cantina is the sheriff’s main joint! And he’s rented his rooms out to the Vasto actors. Can’t you figure what this game is, you poor young sheephead!”

“You don’t mean to insinuate, mister, that I’m dealin’ the odd! It’s an honest game. And your police chief ain’t got a thing to do with it!”

“I ain’t insinuatin’ nothin’, hombre. All as I’m sayin’ is that you, Mr. Huppert, better git to your hoss and trail out of town.”

“My pard——”

“The Rex Cantina is the worst joint in town—all perforated by gunshots which they fly around indiscriminate every Saturday night,” the doctor cried excitedly. “Do you need any outfit, Mr. Huppert, for your journey back to the Coyotero where you’re now headin’ back to?”

“If this hombre is telling the truth——” Huppert began.

“Do I look as I could lie, sir?”

“No, you don’t,” Huppert rejoined. “Otherwise I’d take the vet’s advice and steer clear of trouble.”

“Trouble?” the circus hostler said in an injured tone. “You call it trouble to come and see my sick pard? When some one asks you to come and shake their hand—a heart-rendin’ appeal like that, you call it trouble!”

“Blatherin’, hell-bustin’ tombstones!”

“I’ll go,” Dave said. He broke open his six-gun and satisfied himself that it was loaded. “If there’s any trick to this story of yours, hombre, you’re the first one to get dumped. Sheriff Flapjohn’s the second.”

The Rex Cantina was a warped structure of unplanned lumber, in the vast interior of which extended a bar practically the length of a city block. In the center was a dance floor, and on the opposite side, raised on platforms the height of a man, were the booths.

After the circus parade, the cantina began to take on its early afternoon gayety. Gamblers returned; herders came in to wash from their throats the alkali which the parade had stirred up. The full battery of barkeeps was posted, for the day was hot and the town overcrowded. Likewise, the cantina girls returned—dressed in their spangled dresses, silk stockings and war paint.

Dave Huppert followed the stove-up hostler down the hall in back of the saloon into which opened the bunk-rooms. It was a dark place, even in day time, for there were no windows. The door at the end, furthermore, was closed.

As the veterinarian had said, the walls were perforated from the many fights which Rex Cantina’s history boasted of during the past decade. Dave felt the flap of his holster, assuring himself that he could unbutton it, draw and fire in the blink of an eye.

Old Padin knocked at the door, listened, opened it, and beckoned to his young companion. There seemed to be an ominous silence.

Dave listened intently, limbering up his right hand so to speak, then walked in.

Yes, it must be some sort of a frame-up. A blackmail scheme probably. But Dave had no fear of blackmail schemes. He had nothing to lose.

Most blackmail schemes were based on the fear of the victim; fear either of getting into a bad fight with a “husband” of the decoy; or fear of losing one’s reputation! In either case the framers would expect a sum of money. Inasmuch as Dave was not troubled by either one of these fears, he went in.

He did not find a gang of rough looking circus hostlers and tent-peggers or con men. He found just one person in that tiny room. It was the “decoy.”

She was the girl who had first given him a drink of water in the street after the fight. At first, she gave the impression of being one of the cantina

girls; for she was dressed in their garb, and her chin, which had three little freckles, was powdered. Smoking a cigarette, she had filled the room with an aura of tiny rings that were rapidly dissolving. She made the picture of a fairy child blowing bubbles.

“You said something about a sick pard——” Dave grumbled turning to the bowlegged, red-eyed liar beside him.

“She’s my pard. And she’s sick—sick in spirit because of the way Ali Baba is getting broke inch by inch. Who wouldn’t be sick at that? Posey Nuggins, she is. Billed as Mam’zelle Nugent. This here is the bird you sent for, mam’zelle.”

Mam’zelle’s blue eyes widened. She had just been enlarging them with touches of light blue grease paint. They were large to start with. And when she widened them while staring at her visitor in wonderment and admiration, they were the largest orbs Dave Huppert had ever seen.

“Glad to meet you, mister,” she said, holding out a flashing white arm.

Dave’s forehead was wet. They had trapped him, despite his own wisdom. His face which was quite long and horselike, lengthened and turned scarlet.

Mam’zelle, however, seemed well pleased with his appearance. She feasted her eyes on his firm, angry mouth; on his rusty faded brown hair, which curled over boiled sunburned ears; on his tall-peaked sombrero, tilted back from a forehead that was corrugated by desert wind and sand. He removed this hat under the ferocity of her gaze.

“I’ve been looking for you, mister for a long time—for months,” was her astonishing greeting.

“For months?” Dave repeated bewildered. “Well, I reckon you couldn’t have found me in any of these cow towns till today. I’ve been in the desert for a couple years.”

“I don’t mean I was hunting for exactly you yourself,” she explained. “But for a man like you. I wanted some one to save that horse.

“I was praying for you to come along when Vasto started to work him over—out there in the street. And sure enough my prayer was answered: there you were right on the spot—and at the right time.”

She motioned Dave to a chair, and cast the bowlegged hostler a withering look. Padin retired and closed the door.

Dave looked around uncomfortably. There were pictures on the walls of cantina girls and race horses—left there by the former occupants of the room. There also were pencil marks, names carved in the boards, and bullet holes.

Dave stayed because he observed again that the girl was prettier than any cantina girl, than any other girl for that matter who had ever come to Cobb's Coulee.

"Ali Baba was brought from Arabia when he was a yearling," she said with the air of immediately jumping to the matter at hand. "A German animal company brought him—and we took him on with the show. You ought to have seen him then, mister!"

She held up her dainty hands, the smoke mounting in a slender thread from one of them. Dave watched her hands without hearing what she said. "You know what a wild stallion looks like when he's a punk, mister—mister; say, what *is* your name anyway?"

"Huppert. My friends call me Dave. One or two of my best friends, why they call me pard."

"All right, pard, I'll tell you the whole story straight from the shoulder. That horse was the most beautiful thing in the world, with mane tossing, feet prancing, eyes rolling. But he doesn't toss his head any more; he just hangs it. He doesn't prance. He stamps on the ground like a bull that's going to charge. Are you listening, pard?"

Dave gave the impression that he was looking at her without hearing her. It was not only an impression, it was a fact. He was entranced with those freckles which the Arizona sun had brought out on her delicate white skin.

"What did you say, ma'am?"

"Look here, pard, I'll come out with it and no more hedging. I want that horse taken away from Vasto. Vasto's a double-dyed, fire-eating brute. You saw that.

"Ali Baba is a prince, and Vasto isn't good enough to touch his off hind foot. But if his off hind foot would only connect with Vasto's chin, here's one member of the circus who'd give him a lump of sugar for a reward!"

"I reckon Vasto and this horse can be separated easily enough, ma'am."

The girl beamed.

“Then you’ve got what I mean, pard!” she cried enthusiastically. “Look here. Can you imagine how that horse has been dreaming of his Arabian desert ever since he’s been brought down here to Arizona. It’s just like it, I suppose, though I’ve never seen an Arabian desert except as a backdrop to Madame Zuzu’s educated snakes.

“But we’re near a desert here—and Ali Baba knows it. I’ve seen his nostrils tremble every time a breeze comes up from down that way. And I’ve seen his muscles quiver, and his gold hoofs paw at the ground, as if he wanted to get off and run free and wild.”

“This coyote you call Vasto,” Dave Huppert inquired, “is he just plain ornery cruel? Or has he a reason for persecuting a fine critter like that——”

“Both. He’s naturally ornery. A screw or two loose up here. But that’s not the real reason. *He’s persecuting me through that horse——*”

Dave Huppert jumped to his feet. He saw red.

“That settles it!” he cried. “I’ve just started with that hombre. The next time you see him you won’t see him plaguing a stallion. He won’t be able to stand up and whip a sage rabbit when I’m through.”

“What are you going to do?” she demanded in alarm. “You don’t get my idea at all.”

“What did you want me to do, child? I thought you were steering me into another fight. Well, I’m ready.”

“You don’t get me at all, pard. I want you to take the horse.”

“Take him? What do you mean? Rustle him?”

“No—buy him. He’s for sale. Vasto’s afraid of him going bad one of these days—and he’ll sell him if you pay the price.”

“I haven’t got the price for even a stove-up stock horse!”

“You what!”

He stared at her in surprise. Her face seemed transfixed with a deadly disillusion.

“Look here, child, what do you figure I am, anyway! I’m only a mucker from the Coyotero Desert. I said I couldn’t buy a stock horse to make soap with!”

“Padin—the old duffer out there—why he said you’d just discovered a gold mine!” she exclaimed without attempting to hide her disappointment.

Dave burst out in a hearty guffaw. “Why, child, he also told me one! He said he had a sick pard here ready to die unless I came down here with him and shook your hand.”

“All right. I *am* his pard. I feel like dying, too—if that’s the way he wants to put it.”

Dave took her hand again. She winced under the grasp. “There’s only one way I can save your horse for you. And that’s to kill this Gila monster who’s been breaking him.”

“No—not that! I didn’t ask you here for that.”

“If I had this gold mine—I’d do what you want, girl. I’d buy the whole circus—hoping you’d stay with it. But I can’t see you disappointed like this. You’re like a kid who’s just found out there’s no Santa Claus. Well, there’s one way to satisfy you.”

He shoved on his hat and went to the door. She followed him, but appeared afraid of getting her hand wrenched again.

In another minute he was thumping down the dark corridor.

Old Padin who had been listening at the keyhole, recovered his balance, after being tossed aside by this charging bull. He came into the room, grinning from ear to ear, and sucking in his overflowing tobacco juice.

“Well, he came through, mam-zelle—a hundred per cent—didn’t he now! Hope he finishes Vasto right this time.”

“You little old liar!” the girl cried. “Do you know what you’ve done? I’ve sent that boy to commit a murder!”

“Good enough!” said the old hostler, slapping one of his crooked legs. “Didn’t think he’d come through so easy. The boss is as good as dead.”

He changed his tone, seeing the girl burst into frantic tears. “Look here, mam-zelle, what more do you want? Vasto’ll be dead in ten minutes, I tell you. If you ain’t satisfied with that, why then you’re pretty hard to please, I’ll say.”

The girl brushed the white-haired hostler aside and rushed down the hall. The hostler followed.

Dave Huppert had stopped at the long bar—as was natural enough under the circumstances, to cool himself off with a swig.

“There he is!” she said, taking Padin’s arm. “You go on and stop him. You tell him—tell him anything. Tell him one of your lies—the biggest one you can think up. But if you let him go to Vasto——”

“You mean you don’t want him to dump the measly cut-throat?”

“That’s not it!” Posey Nuggins said hysterically. Her old hostler saw that the tears were coursing down the powder of her carnelian cheeks. “I’m afraid Vasto will get *him!*”

“Oh, so that’s it! Well, well! That’s different. Why didn’t you tell me? I thought you was just usin’ the woolly young cowboy as a tool. But if you’ve gone and tumbled for ’im——”

He waddled out on the floor on his bow legs, scuffing up the sawdust. If his mistress had told him this in the first place, he could have thought up a lie sufficient for the occasion. He hitched up his belt, went to the bar, tapped the stranger on the elbow, and prepared to tell the biggest whopper of his spectacular career.

## CHAPTER III.

### PADIN STARTS TROUBLE.

“Excuse me, mister, but kin I buy you the next one?”

Dave Huppert turned around to see a head with a shock of silvery hair and two red eyes leering up across his shoulder.

“Do you know, mister, you’ve got the distinction of bein’ the one bird in the wide world which can break that little child’s heart.”

This opening naturally enough intrigued the young prospector.

“She’s a queer little kid,” the hostler went on. “Plumb full of phony ideas. Won’t let any of the trainers work any tricks with the led stock which includes bein’ cruel to ’em, nor with the big cats either. Phony ain’t it?”

“But the animals know her ideas better than any of us humans with the show. Why they ain’t a cat in the whole show would so much as snarl at her.

“We had a lion went bad on us wunst. Escaped out of his cage. We found him in a barn eatin’ a horse which he’d just killed. No one dast go near.

“Then what should happen but this little kid—well, mister, I seen the picture with my own eyes. Her gold hair, you know, and her flashin’ white arms!

“Why she was right there in the stall—combin’ the lion’s mane with a Spanish comb I give her for her birthday! Magic comb that. She used it to curry down a leopard which had just killed two tent-peppers.”

“What do you mean by my breaking her heart?”

“Why bustin’ out of her room this way, swearin’ you’ll murder the boss. She can’t abide seein’ anything murdered—fish or fowl. She kin pretty near abide seein’ the boss git his—but not quite.

“Why, we had to kill a elephant wunst which was in musth and was tearin’ up a town. And she cried like it was her own child, which it was in a manner of speakin’. She’d raised it; healed it when his head steamed with fever—or he was in high-sterics.

“Works magic on ’em all. I heard once she brought a hedgehog back to life—after it was dead. But that I don’t necessarily swear by.”

Dave Huppert would have sworn by it. His steel-gray eyes softened. “You’re passing off some mighty queer statements, hombre,” he said, “but damned if I don’t believe you.”

Padin seemed tremendously pleased. “You see, pard, she’s got the trick of knowin’ just what a sick animal needs for to git cured. Whether it’s wolf or a wallapai, her prescription works.

“Now in the case of this horse, she knows just what he needs—a month in the desert where he belongs. A month with the right kind of a trainer. And that girl knows a horse lover when she sees one!”

“You mean you want me to take him to the desert?”

“You’ve guessed it!”

“You get hanged for horse stealing in this State,” the other replied.

“Granted. But you ain’t goin’ to steal him. That’s what I come to tell you about. The girl thought you was rich. I stretched a point there, I’ll admit.

“They said you was back with a new claim. I figured you’d discovered a mine—ain’t that natural? I ain’t a miner. Don’t know nothin’ about claims.

“Figured you could buy out the whole circus. Told her so. So she said maybe you’d buy Ali Baba and take him back to the sands of Araby—so to speak. I mean the sands of the desert down toward Mexico.”

“I will but the horse is worth ten times what I’ve got.”

“Oh, no. You’re mistaken. That horse belongs to the girl. But it’s contracted for. And she has to stick to the show doin’ her act, bein’ she’s supportin’ a widowed mother and three kid brothers back in Missouri.

“Ever since that horse come within smellin’ distance of sand, why the girl said she was goin’ to sell him to the first woolly cowboy that come along—so long as he looked as if he could manage him—and treat him kindly. Like a brother—that’s what she specified. And sure enough you come along——”

Yes—Dave remembered the girl’s words. She had been “watching for him.” And he had shown up at the right time.

“But lookee here, boy,” Padin said confidentially. “She’s so sot on seein’ that horse go wild out in the desert again, and with a wild master the likes of you, that she just now made up her mind to part with him. She’s satisfied that you’re the one man between here and the Suez Canal which can handle that horse—and use kindness in so doin’.”

“What do you mean? She’s not *giving* me the horse.”

“Not exactly. But she’s giving him to you—to take down into the Coyotero Desert and bring him back to life, so to speak. A little whiff of desert wind—and palms and date trees——”

“Your geography’s mixed, old duffer.”

“Oh, no. That’s what the stud had back in Arabia—and there’s plenty of desert trees here which he’ll recognize—I don’t mean necessarily date trees. But they’re desert trees just the same, and he’ll recognize them. And he’ll change to the prince that he once was.”

“She’s trusting her own horse with me—a stranger——”

“Sure. If you don’t come back—why she’ll be satisfied just the same that the horse got his innin’s. If you do come back—why she’ll be waitin’ for you in Tucson where they’re puttin’ up our advance advertisin’ paper now. Bein’ that’s our showstand next month.”

“How about this skunk Vasto?”

“Ah, yes. Now you’ve asked me somethin’, mister. Why he mustn’t know. If he sees you ridin’ out to the desert with our star horse, he’ll just git his con men to go after you and plug you.

“It’s got to be done on the Q. T. Tonight I’ll meet you in some place you kin designate—where no one will find us. Midnight it must be.

“Then in the mornin’, I bein’ the boss hostler of this aggregation, I’ll spread it around that Ali Baba has been stole by Mexicans.”

“I told you what I’d get stealing a horse.”

“But you ain’t really stealin’.”

“If it looks that way—I get hanged without trial——”

“Oh yes, I know. But just hop on Ali Baba’s back and see who kin hang you! You’ll beat the Santa Fee overland into California if you’re of that mind.”

He took Dave’s arm. “You ain’t backin’ down, mister. You cain’t refuse that little kid any desire she specifies.”

“I didn’t say I was backing down,” Dave rejoined. “Only you better go easy about giving that alarm of a rustled horse—or my name’s adobe mud.”

“Where’ll I meet yer?”

“There’s a gulch down at the end of the main street—a half mile beyond the cantina.”

“I’ll be there at midnight,” the other said out of the corner of his tobacco-stained lips.

“What’ll it be this time,” Dave asked, as they both turned to the bar.

“Champagne,” said the old hostler.

“Two shots of redevye,” Dave stipulated to the barkeep.

Early the following morning Sheriff Flapjohn was summoned from a sound sleep.

One of Vasto’s men, a gnarled mozo with red eyes and stained teeth, announced that a horse had been stolen—*the horse*, the headliner of the Vasto Rodeo & Circus Co!

The obese Flapjohn, puffing and wheezing, pulled on his jack boots, his hat, his holster, and went out into the cool desert dawn.

In the lot between the Rex Cantina and the Frontier Palace Hotel, the big top of Vasto’s show was already down, unlaced, but it was not as yet stowed with the poles aboard the wagons. The chuck wagon, wardrobe wagon and cage-wagon were still arranged on the three sides of the sand lot, their wheels in purple sage.

The elephant was there, weaving up and down at his peg—for the excitement of every man, woman and child of the organization had been easily sensed by the old Mayor of Bombay. The zebra was at his picket line, his mule-like tail swishing at blowflies.

The acrobat, the bareback rider, the clowns, the candy butcher, the canvas men were gathered about a grim and badly battered gentleman whose two blackened eyes had been carefully painted with grease paint. There was a palaver as excited as that going on in the monkey cage.

Sheriff Flapjohn elbowed his way into the crowd.

“Oh, there you are, are you!” the man with the flesh painted eyes roared. It was Vasto himself. “A hell of a sheriff you are! First you agree to take a good slice out of our receipts for protection—then you let one of your gunmen attack me. And now look what’s happened. My star performer——”

“Ali Baba—the white stallion——” others chimed in. “He’s gone, sheriff!”

“What do you mean gone?”

“Some one’s stole’ him.”

“’Tain’t possible,” said the sheriff. “No one could rustle a big white stallion like that. Ain’t no one fool enough to try.”

“Well, he’s rustled just the same!” Vasto snapped back. “He didn’t just gallop off. We’re too careful about that. My boss hostler here keeps him tethered same as if he was a herd of elephants.”

The old red-eyed hostler spoke up: “The halter was cut, sheriff. Lookee here. That don’t look like the knot was untied? We don’t tie no knots. Ali Baba’s been taught to untie ’em with his teeth. Some one cut this halter and got away with him. Ten thousand dollars—that’s what that horse is worth.”

“They’s some mistake, gents,” the sheriff said. “Ain’t no one would take a hoss like that. These here rustlers—Injuns and breeds—they wouldn’t dast take a hoss of that thar nature. A stray fuzztail mebbe—but a stallion like that. No gents. ’Tain’t possible.”

“You mean you ain’t goin’ to help me get my horse back?” Vasto exclaimed belligerently. “And after the graft you worked yesterday!”

The sheriff flushed. But he was diplomatic. He wiped his moon face.

“I don’t figure we’ll have any trouble gettin’ that thar animal back, Mr. Vasto.”

“Well, how are you goin’ to git started?”

Flapjohn pulled thoughtfully at his red mustache.

“I’d like to clear up a point first,” he said. “Bein’ you’re so all-fired certain they’s a rustler made off with him, are you figurin’ on offerin’ a reward?”

“A thousand dollars—for the horse and the man who took him. I want the horse alive—but the rustler can be a carcass for all I care.”

“That makes it much simpler,” said the man with the star. “I’ll post up a reward right now. And then we kin git started huntin’.”

A sheepherder who kept a shack at the lower end of Cobb’s Coulee rode up to the lot.

“What’s all this I hear about your white stallion bein’ rustled, gents?”

The story was told. Then:

“I seen him last night,” said the herder.

“Seen him? Where? Why didn’t you tell us? Seen a horse bein’ rustled? And you didn’t give the warnin’?”

“I seen that stranger who beat you up yesterday ridin’ out to the desert,” the herder explained. “He was ridin’ his own pinto—and leadin’ a white hoss. I wasn’t close enough to see what the white hoss was. But now I reckon you-all have a clew.”

Without a word Sheriff Flapjohn turned upon his heels and ran to the corral behind his office.

“We’ll git your man all righto!” the sheepherder cried to the gaping circus folk.

Vasto left his men and went after the sheriff. He found him ordering a stable mozo to fix up a food and waterpack. Flapjohn himself went into his office to take stock of his six-gun and cartridges.

Vasto followed.

“Now that we’re alone, sheriff,” the circus owner said, “I’ve got a thing or two to tell you.”

Flapjohn knew that this was to be a private interview. He closed the door, and without looking up laid a long row of cartridges on his desk.

“I understand, sheriff,” Vasto said, “that there’s been a sort of custom around this Coyotero Desert that when you find a rustler with the goods, you figure it’s best to hang him on the spot.”

“In some cases,” the other said non-committally. “But this bird who stole your hoss——”

“Just a minute. I’ve heard that a trial often results in acquittal——”

“In certain cases,” the other repeated in the same tone. “But I don’t figure this hellbender will have much of a chanst thataway.”

“Still and all, sheriff, I’ve heard there are delays. You have to find witnesses. Can’t always get ’em. Some of ’em are afraid to testifyin’ against an outlaw. Because shootin’ at sight bein’ prevalent in these parts, they’re liable to find themselves dumped in the sawdust while they’re peaceably takin’ a snootful of liquor at some bar.”

“That thar ain’t a uncommon practice, Mr. Vasto,” the other agreed genially.

“Furthermore, some of the poor ranchers can’t afford to meet the expense of bringing a man to trial—even though they know him to be guilty.”

“Granted. But——”

“And it’s known that you can’t just take a rustler to trial, find a judge, and have him condemned to death. You have to git evidence. And evidence down in the Coyotero Desert is hard to transport into a court room. At best, it’s circumstantial.”

“Very often.”

“Therefore, it is a custom for ranchers hereabouts—and in all Western frontiers where shootin’ and rustlin’ is common—to wink at any sheriff who takes it into his head to hang a rustler.”

“Any sheriff that does that promiscuous-like gets a hell of a name, Mr. Vasto. Lots of such-like sheriffs turn out to be bad men—with the name and fear-sway of bad men.” He yanked uneasily at his mustache.

“As for me myself, I’ve used them methods wunst in awhile. Right now, I’ve got a bad name. That’s why I always wants a good reward specified, and I want the reward myself. Because every rustler I hang, stretches my reputation considerable, as you might say.

“I come back, give as my excuse that they ain’t no jails to keep ’em in, and that if I’d try to tote a regular hellbender up from the Coyotero I’d git bumped off on the way by one of his gang.”

“Fine! That’s where I’m leadin’ to,” Vasto declared exuberantly. “The answer to it all is, Mr. Sheriff, I want you to kill this horse thief. That’s more important than gettin’ the horse.

“He cut me up proper yesterday before all my men. And I ain’t goin’ to sleep peaceful till I know he’s dead—and through my own order.”

“This ain’t the middle ages, Mr. Vasto.”

“I’ll be damned if it ain’t. You’ve got the power of life and death over a man who’s stole a horse. And you’ll use it. You git a thousand cold smackers \_\_\_\_\_”

“I ain’t to be bribed, Mr. Vasto,” said the other. “Although it would be the easiest thing in the world if I go down there with a posse and glom onto

that hellbender, to leave my men hang him.

“They’ll want to do it. Ain’t never rode with a posse but that the alkali gits ’em all het up and they want to hang a man soon as they catch him. Sometimes they wait an hour—because it takes an hour to find a tree down in them bad lands.

“Sometimes they don’t allow him a minute to say his prayers. But if that happens this time I’m going to object. It’s ag’in’ my conscience.”

“A thousand bones——”

The sheriff shook his head. But he was pulling at his red mustache, and Vasto, a born mind reader, knew what was going to happen.

“If I bring the hellbender back and deliver him to you,” Sheriff Flapjohn said miserably, “will that be as well?”

“As well? Damn me, it’ll be a thousand times better!”

“But it’ll have to be done in secret, you understand that.”

“Don’t think I’m an ass, Mr. Sheriff.”

“Where’s this here show travelin’ to after it leaves Cobb’s Coulee? Mule Town, you said? Then let me see.” He shoved the end of his mustache into his mouth. “Let me think this out. It may take a day to trail this bird; it may take a week.”

“I’ll wait in Mule Town a month,” the other suggested eagerly.

“When I git him, I’ll bring him to a deserted ranch seven miles south of Mule Town. I’ll send a messenger to you tellin’ you he’s there.”

“It’s settled.”

“Bring the reward in cash, Mr. Vasto.”

“Don’t worry about that. If you give me that gunman alive, it’ll be worth a thousand for me to have him alone, for just fifteen minutes.”

Sheriff Flapjohn did not shake on this deal. His eyes dropped. He wiped his rusty moon face.

A little later Vasto saw him riding southward out of town.

Mlle. Posey Nuggins had heard this commotion in the circus lot. It was not long before she learned what had happened. Just what the circumstances were she could not guess. It was all too mysterious. But the answer was

plain enough: that desert prospector had, like all other men, succumbed to her charms. And he had granted her wish! Ali Baba was free!

But Posey could not be satisfied with merely the conclusion. She must know something of the premises. She searched out the boss hostler, called him from the crowd of tent-peppers and animal trainers before whom he was declaiming, and asked him point-blank:

“Padin, just what happened?”

Padin’s red eyes looked startled. His leathery skin broke out with blinks of sweat. He started in bravely, then his voice broke and he said softly: “I reckon it’s plain enough to you, mam’zelle. You know everything. More’n I do.”

“The last I saw of that prospector he was on his way to Vasto—and it looked as if he was going to finish him up right—if I could judge the blaze in his eyes. Thought he was going to murder him. But then—I sent you \_\_\_\_\_”

“You sent me to stop him. Well, I did. Right thar in the dance hall. We had a few drinks, a talk. He said he couldn’t buy the hoss, but he’d free him one way or another. I didn’t know what he meant. I knew well enough that he’d do somethin’ rash, bein’ you’d worked the same witchcraft on him you do on anythin’ that lives and breathes, be it a man or a elephant.”

“Is that all you know, Padin—look me in the eye now you old four-flusher! Look me in the eye!”

This was the wish which Padin could not for the life of him satisfy. He could lie to any one in the world—with the blandest, most innocent look ever seen on the face of man. But he could not look this girl in the eye when he lied.

He mumbled for a moment, casting around for the best way out of this difficulty. Finally he found courage.

“You see, mam’zelle, it was like this, and if I ain’t speakin’ the honest-to-God truth you strike me dead here at your feet!

“I sort of felt that woolly young fellow was goin’ to up and steal the horse right under our very noses. Bein’ he was completely under your spell and would do anything.

“So I sort of made it easy. Told the hoss-boys around the picket line they could go for the night; enjoy theirselves gamblin’ and sousin’. I said I’d stay on watch.

“Along about midnight he showed up. Had a red bandanna drew across his face. But I couldn’t help knowin’ those gray eyes of his. They just hypnotized me. Worse’n Madame Zuzu and her educated vipers!”

He shivered in the recollection—or I should say the fictitious recollection of that experience. “I felt a ice-cold gun muzzle breathin’ ag’in’ the back of my neck!”

It occurred to him, as soon as he had made this artistic statement, that to see the gray viper eyes and also be held up from behind was a difficult situation to visualize without proper explanation. He hastened to add:

“He made me stick up my hands. I wouldn’t do it.

“Not me! Quick as a flash I turned around ready to fight with my bare hands, when I seen them eyes! Then it was I knew him.

“And I stuck my hands up so quick that he actually blinked in surprise. He must of wondered how my hands was up—when he could of swore they was down at my side!”

“Go on with the rest!” she said impatiently. “You’re a whiz-bang with your hands, I grant that. But the horse——”

“Oh, yes, the hoss. Well, mam-zelle, they ain’t any more to tell. He hopped on and with a gun in each hand went gallopin’ like a streak of lightnin’ off for the desert. I followed. But it was no use. The last I seen of him, he was sailin’ away over sand and rocks, headin’ straight for the Rio Grande.”

Neither Padin nor the girl realized that the Rio Grande was nowhere near Arizona, but this slight geographical inaccuracy was of little importance. The main point about Padin’s yarn was already a proven fact: Ali Baba was gone.

“I didn’t think that young kid would actually steal the horse!” the girl exclaimed in a surprised tone.

“Neither did I! You could of knocked me over with a feather!” Padin agreed. “But you can’t always tell! You’d witched him with your eyes, mam-zelle! How could he refuse? None of us can ever refuse your wishes, can we now?”

“If you ask anyone—be he a clown or a cowboy—your slightest wish is granted, ain’t it now? And you sure had that raw-boned yokel goin’ in circles, I’ll say!”

“But if he’s caught!”

“Caught? With Ali Baba to escape on?”

“Vasto’s pretty well worked up. He’ll give a reward. If the boy’s ever caught——”

“Why a trial will free him. Me and you can argue these rustics out of their eye teeth. *We’ll* save him! I’ve got a trick or two at argufyin’. And all as *you* have to do is to wink at the twelve good men and true—and there you are!”

Optimistic as this version seemed, the girl believed it.

“I didn’t think I was turning him into a regular outlaw!” she said. “But he certainly looked like one at that! First I had him swaggering off to commit murder, then he steals our best horse! Well, I’m handing it to him for a sport anyway!”

“But if they catch him we’re sticking by him, you understand that, Padin?”

“Sure I understand it! We’ll save him. A trial won’t amount to nothin’. Murder would be different. But just stealin’ a hoss—why that’s nothin’. These Westerners are big-minded yokels. What’s a hoss to them? Why just look at the droves of ’em all about!”

“All a man has to do around here is to go out and rope one and pay a Injun five dollars to bust it. Stealin’ a hoss in this country is like stealin’ a umbrella back East.”

This seemed to comfort the girl tremendously. Yes, in a country where horses could be had for the asking, it would certainly be a crime condonable under the circumstances.

She put her arms about the white-headed, comforting old liar.

“The main thing is that Ali Baba is free at last!” she said. “But remember this, Padin, if that boy gets into trouble you and I are sticking to him like barnacles!”

The boss hostler went back to his picket line and the led stock. He was happy when the girl was happy. And he complimented himself on his successful, convincingly dramatic methods of argument. He was never beaten. You just simply couldn’t help believing him!

## CHAPTER IV.

### A DESERT SHEIK.

Far down beyond the last grazing lands of the Cobb's Coulee ranches a desert wanderer had encamped for the night. His own stock cayuse was foraging for himself in a barranca of weeds. A white stallion, looming like a marble statue in the full glow of the moon, was tethered to a tree-bole, and not far away the prospector was making a supper of cold beans from a can.

Ali Baba, the Arabian horse, watched his new master.

Whether enemy or friend, this man had treated him in a peculiar way—a way that Ali Baba would not forget.

The stallion had no friends among humankind—save that one little girl who rode him. All others of the circus were afraid of him—even the hostler who curried him down every night.

But here was a tall strange creature with the high-peaked sombrero who was not afraid of him. Ali Baba must have wondered why.

He would show him one of these days that all humankind, excepting that girl, must necessarily fear a giant stallion. They must hold his mouth tightly, and pinch his lips, or he would bite. They must keep away from his back or he would break their legs with his hoofs. They must keep away from his head or he would rear and forestrike and dash out their brains.

But this human being, strange to say, showed no fear. How easy it would be for the horse to pretend friendliness, then turn when he least expected it, and crush him to the earth!

Ali Baba, with nostrils quivering, eyes rolling, ears flattened back, studied this rash, audacious fool for a long time. He feared the man with a new sort of fear: he might be another devil like Vasto, who could inflict a stinging wound from afar off with a long snake-like whizzing weapon in his hand. It would be best to wait for a while and not look for trouble. The man was queer. He was gentle. He did not smell like Vasto. He smelled like a dry keen wind. Ali Baba remembered that smell—half of the desert, half of man—a memory that went back to his yearling days in Arabia.

Half of that scent he loved. Half he hated. Men had come when he was drinking at an oasis and thrown a noose about his neck. Yes, about a neck

which had never felt pain except the love-bites of the mother mare, or the warning bites of the father stallion, chasing him from the herd.

This man brought it all back, for the hot desert wind had given him the one touch of fragrance which had sent a numbing current of fear through the wild horse when he was first captured.

And there were other fears that gripped the pampered circus star. They were fears rooted deeply in his first days in the world: fears of every shadow, every sound, every danger lurking in the barrancas, biding their time behind giant boulders, ready to ambush him from the chaparral.

The sound of his own hoofs upon the rocks terrified him. His gilded hoofs were used to the soft-sounding sawdust. But here at every step he struck a sharp ringing note, and sparks flew from under his feet! Bits of dry chaparral, chased by the wind, scudded before him. In the moonlight, and to his untutored sight, they seemed like devils dancing venomously and silently in his path. Gaunt cactus trees loomed with upstretched arms all about him. They were like beings afraid to run, afraid to attack, but waiting, holding their breath until he came close.

He was in a sweat, his silver coat darkened in streaks so that he looked like a pinto. His mane tossed; he shied with such strength when he was being led down those strange trails that he very nearly bowled his captor's little paint horse off his feet.

But here he was unharmed, tethered to a stump. The paint horse was calmly and stodgily munching at weeds; the man was eating pungent beans.

Ali Baba might have been in a box car munching bran mash. He might have been galloping around and around on an endless sawdust trail with rows of leering, shouting faces about him. The talon-like hands of a ring master would be gripping his soft mouth. Hour by hour, day after day he would gallop slowly around. The hot glare of the big top above and the smell of the hundreds of hated human beings, and of the dreaded caged cats, would be torturing him.

But now this sickening picture dwindled away into vistas of sand billows, of moonlit mountains. He dreamed of desert trees, of an endless horizon, toward which he could gallop unimpeded by man or beast. Warm sand was under his feet—and he remembered the pleasant touch. And he remembered the sound of tinkling water in a dry hot land.

But no, this was more exciting. He sniffed. He tossed his mane. He champed. His ears pricked up. He was still ridden by fear—but it was a

peculiar type of fear.

It was the fear that the mariner who loves the sea bears for her power. It was the fear that a lioness bears for her shaggy and majestic mate. It was the fear of a horse for the master that he loves. It was the same fear Ali Baba had felt when a colt, and his mother took him out across a windswept plain of sand and rocks and ravines. It was not after all fear. It was ecstasy. It was the bewildering ecstasy of a saint who is assured of Heaven, meeting the horror of death.

Ali Baba must have had some intimation in that terrifying combination of menacing circumstances—the steep trails, the black shadows, the moonlit desert, the gaunt man—an intimation that he was going to be born again.

He tossed his head, and the prospector looked up at him, enchanted by the sight of the moonbeams glowing in that silvery mane. For the brief moment that spanned that nervous gesture, Dave Huppert had a vision of the horse that Ali Baba might become. A dejected circus horse, with the soul of a mule, by that one proud, ecstatic tossing of his mane and head, had become like Pegasus.

The divine fire of Pegasus coursed through the veins of the big stallion. He wanted to break away and gallop for miles over that moonlit plain, racing his shadow through the crisp air.

He looked over toward the hummock of sand where was lying the stranger who had brought him to this paradise. The man was sleeping, his head upon a saddle, his big boots stretched out in the white sand. He seemed gigantic, but bereft of his usual majesty. He was asleep and powerless.

Ali Baba examined the tree-bole which was his anchor.

Silently and in a deliberate manner, he nosed about the halter which imprisoned him. Now, I have already recorded that one of the many tricks Ali had learned in his circus education, was the trick of yanking and nibbling at a knot until its coils opened up.

He knew that if he pulled at these loops one after another something would happen. Some loops if yanked would tighten the knot and he would have to start his work over again. Another loop could be yanked out free of the knot entirely. If he kept up this pulling and nibbling long enough, he would suddenly find the rope cast off.

For this reason his hostler at the circus always hitched him by means of a snap hook which was beyond the creature's skill. But in this case the man

who had brought him into the desert had—naturally enough—tethered him with the simplest sort of a knot—a half hitch or two.

It was child's play for Ali Baba. For such is the nature of this particular knot, that no matter how hard you tug at it, it will not bind. The horse nibbled away deliberately and with considerable self assurance, until he found himself free.

He did not spring off down the trail. He was too wise for that. He had the impulsive spirit of his wild desert ancestry in his veins, but at the same time he was a horse brought up in the company of man.

Men were peculiar. They did not watch him, if he stood still. But whenever he shied, they jumped for him. They let him alone if he hung his head; but once he showed any fire they were at his mouth.

He never could understand men. They were cruel and pestiferous. They shouted at him; they made whips crack over his ears; they imprisoned him in box cars that rattled and shrieked over endless stretches of night; they tortured his mouth whenever he reared; they were afraid of him when he champed. They were foolish, and weak, and puny. Yet, something told him that they were wiser than they were foolish, and their puny size was to be feared—as you might fear a small leopard.

Now here was this man lying down just a few yards away. As I say, he had no longer the majesty about him that strikes terror into all animals. He was supine, helpless, with eyes closed, arms inert, and no whip in his hand.

Ali Baba could have leaped into the air and landed with all his terrific weight upon that man's skull. Thus he would be avenged of all the wrongs mankind had done to him. Thus he would be paid for his years of imprisonment.

The big stallion wandered up toward the hummock of sand.

He watched the man lying there, half expecting that he might awake and hurl out a black cracking snake from his hand. But as he watched, the breeze shifted slightly, and the big horse, being now to the lee of his captor, got that scent again—a scent that he could not understand.

It was a scent unlike any of the circus people. It had no menace in it—as for instance the menace that always clung about the animal keepers who fed the big cats. Rather than a menace it was a scent that evoked the desert of the stallion's youth. There was the smell of earth and sand and dry wind; there was the scent of a human being purified by fierce suns; there was the suggestion of cactus, of desert flowers.

Then the stallion remembered. This was the man he had followed into paradise. It was a man he loved. It was a wise and crafty man. One that had never harmed him. One that had brought him to this desert spring in the moonlight to drink.

The big horse swung off, his gilded hoofs making scarcely a sound on the soft sand, his huge white form moving into the light of the open plain, then galloping away, silent, ghostly, like Pegasus trailing over the cloud-like sand dunes.

The dawn had not yet come when Ali Baba, racing gloriously along the outskirts of the desert, was halted at a lonely rancho by a peculiarly thrilling sound.

A mare had seen him and had whinnied.

He came up to the corral of the little desert outfit his neck arched, his gilded hoofs lifted high, his mane waving. It is safe to say that he made the most wondrous picture of symmetry and grace that that little claybank mare had ever seen or dreamed of.

Ali Baba reached across the corral fence, his sleek silvery neck glistening in the light of the low moon.

The claybank was afraid when he came so close. She had run to the fence to meet him, but then seeing the light shine upon him, she wheeled about and scampered off. He followed the stake-and-rider fence to the other end of the corral.

She waited. Her head stretched out, her nostrils dilated, snorting, her muscles quivering with excitement and fear. Again she scampered off, but then wheeled, looked at him, lifted her head, sniffed at the breeze. Yes, he was the most glorious sight in all of creation. There he was prancing up and down in the moonlight.

The moon was waning, the sky in the east made a pale vermilion background to this superb suitor. She watched him, then meandered slowly, hesitantly up toward him. Their faces touched. He nudged her shoulder with a gentle toss of his head. Again fear overtook her, she turned, as if a rider had yanked her mouth, wheeling her about.

But this time the princely steed was not satisfied to prance up and down that crooked pesky fence. With scarcely any run to give him momentum, he leaped into the air, kicked up his gilded heels—the gilt had worn off now

because of the sand but they still had enough speckled yellow to twinkle as he took the jump. As easy as a rocking horse liling back and forth, he was over the fence.

They raced around the corral. They nudged each other, they nibbled at each other's throats and necks and backs. She fled and the white steed galloped after her. She was caught; they played at fighting; they chased and galloped again. Then when the great white steed seemed to have assured himself that she would follow him to the ends of the earth, he took the leap again and was out of the corral.

She stood baffled, quivering, neighing to him. What sort of a trick was this? Was it so easy to find freedom? Merely a little run, an upward leap, a twinkling of hind feet in the air, and there was the whole desert for you to race in!

She paced around, whinnying, fretting like a caged animal. She fretted herself into a lather. She whistled to him to come back. She made such a rumpus, that some one in the main ranch house heard her and a window threw out a band of yellow light into the corral.

This was enough to urge her on. Day was coming and hard work. She was no stock horse. She was cut out for the desert trails. She galloped toward the fence, and then, losing confidence wheeled off to the flank, instead of taking the jump.

The stallion was furious. He neighed, and tossed his mane. As gracefully as a bit of tumbleweed blowing over a boulder, he sailed into the corral again.

He chased the mare up against the fence—this time with no pretence of gentleness, biting her shoulder, shoving her before him. She understood easily enough. But at the fence she balked.

He took the jump this time—as if to show her how easy it was. She was not standing still, dumbfounded the way she had stood before. She was racing along with him. Somehow or other the miracle had happened. She was free, galloping along at breakneck speed over the sage plain.

Behind, a voice was calling to her. She recognized it. But she would not heed it. It was not the voice of her master. It was only the voice of a human being!

Dave Huppert awoke the next morning with the sun slanting its hot rays directly into his eyes. The heat of the light was one thing that awoke him. Another was the sound of horses' hoofs in the pebbles of the waterpocket. He looked up with a start. There was the tree-bole in front of him, but the white stallion was gone.

The next instant, jumping to his feet, he saw what had happened, or what he thought had happened. Ali Baba was down there heaving his sides with long, loud, soul-satisfying swigs.

He had freed himself from his tree-bole, but that explained only a part of what had happened. His sides were lathered, his tail and mane tangled with thorn. Evidently he had gone on a good long spree. And besides this, there was a claybank mare with her muzzle thrust into the water. The mare was fatigued, her hide shaggy and wet.

Dave Huppert went down to the pool to examine this new addition to his outfit. She was not a wild horse, although her recent journey from the outskirts of civilization down into the desert gave her an unkempt and rangy appearance. Dave knew she was not wild, for she permitted him to approach.

Besides this, he saw the brand on her thigh: the brand of the Box Deuce. He did not know where the Box Deuce ranch was. If he had it would have been wise—despite the loss of valuable time—to take the mare back and explain this little familiarity which his stallion had indulged in.

Dave looked up at the stallion. “So *that's* what you've been up to! You old villain!”

The stallion answered with a huge belly-expanding sigh. He seemed to be glad to get back. The desert—much as he loved it—was a rough country. Much rougher than the soft sawdust rings he was used to.

The approach of the strange human being with the wilderness scent about his clothes, did not seem to disconcert the big horse. He had made up his mind that the man was all right. He was the master; he was the benefactor. He was the one to thank for this new and glorious life. He was the one who knew where water was; and where the loneliest trails were. He was the one who knew where Arabia was. He must be followed.

Dave examined the halter, and came to the opinion that the big fellow had torn himself free from the tree-bole—taking part of the wood with him. In his galloping through the thorn and mesquite the wood had come free from the halter.

But the halter, strange to relate, had no knots left in it. There was, of course, the chance that the loose knots had worked out in the thick mesquite. Mesquite is tricky enough to pull the knots out of a fishing net.

“Tonight, old fellow,” Dave laughed, “I’ll tie a new kind of knot.” He hitched the horse to a sycamore stump, then turned to the mare and shooed her away.

“You get a-going, old girl,” he said. “I don’t want any of the Box Deuce herders on my trail!”

She went trotting down the cañon. But anticipating that she was liable to change her mind, Dave followed her. He chased her up the cañon sides racing alongside, giving her flanks a wallop now and then with the bight of his reins. Reaching the top of the cañon wall, where there was a divide across which lay another valley leading northward, he gave her another lash and sent her galloping terror-stricken on her homeward trail.

He then returned to his camp ground and packing up his outfit, saddled his own bronc, hitched the stallion’s halter to his pommel as before, and hit the trail.

When he found himself again jogging along the desert trail, a sense of mingled freedom and security came over him. He had picked his way carefully—choosing the beds of gypsum and the boulder washes of the cañons where his own pony and the big stallion could leave no tracks. In a word Dave had given the world the slip—so he thought—and it would be hard to tell who felt the freer down there with the Coyotero mesas and cañons stretching southward before them—the stallion or the man.

He rode on, singing blithely. In his mind’s eye was the picture of a girl with golden hair and flashing white arms and a glorious smile. He had an engagement, according to the boss hostler of Vasto’s Circus, to meet that girl a month hence in Tucson. Until then it was his duty to keep the white horse and restore the spirit which the circus life had destroyed. A very pleasant future—as far as Dave could foretell.

It was while dreaming these roseate dreams that Dave Huppert was rudely awakened by an occurrence which he might have easily foreseen. The mare was not to be cast off. She had elected a new master—the stallion—and there she was picking her way down the same zigzag trail in pursuit!

Dave, for all his love of horses, could have shot her without compunction. But instead, he relieved his feelings by kicking his heels into

the flanks of his mount. Both the little bronc and the white stallion broke into a gallop.

What good this would do, Dave himself could not have explained. He knew perfectly well that the faster he covered trail, the faster the mare would follow. And it was certainly no earthly use trying to elude her.

She caught up presently, as friendly and unwelcome as a lost cat.

But this must be stopped. That mare was a branded mare. It would be disagreeable to be caught leading her into the heart of the Coyotero desert where for many years bandits had hidden their rustled stock. He would have to give an account of this theft, if they ever found him. And the only account any horse thief was ever asked to give of himself down there in the Coyotero was a tight-rope act.

He thought of ways to dispose of the pest. He could not lose her in the arroyos. She was too much in love with the magnificent Ali Baba for that! He had already proved the futility of this course.

He could shoot her. But this was abhorrent, as well as unwise. She was a pretty little claybank. And she was a good humored critter, too. All the world loves a lover; and most surely all the world would love a poor little Arizona cayuse who had completely lost her heart to a circus star!

No, he would not shoot her. He did not even reflect how unwise this would be. He wouldn't shoot her anyway.

And this was lucky for him. They did find her tracks—along with the tracks of the stallion, and Dave's own bronc. If they had found her dead on the trail, they would have held him to account for it.

There was one other possibility: Why not tether her to some piñon or sycamore tree down there in a boulder wash?

This possibility appealed to him far less than any other. For he had no intention whatever of leaving a good natured, lovelorn cayuse like that to broil in one of those hot cañons, to starve, to be tortured with thirst, or attacked by desert lobos.

Thus it was that Dave Huppert decided to jog along into the heart of the desert. True enough they had a clew to his trail now. Dave had covered his tracks, choosing silt and lava beds and boulder washes where his mount left no hoofprints. But the stallion had run free that night. He would not choose lava or rocks. He would choose sand where he could be tracked! It was up to Dave now to give the world the slip again.

He would take more care than ever in choosing his ground. He would speed up, traveling in the early morning and late afternoon; resting at night without a fire; covering as much trail as he could by moonlight.

He cut out on a sage plain and headed for the sierra on the horizon called Sundown Mesa. The stallion loped along with him in high spirits. And close behind jogged the little claybank.

## CHAPTER V.

### FLAPJOHN ON THE TRAIL.

It was early on that same morning that three riders arrived at the Box Deuce outfit. They were a trio that would command attention in any part of the range. One was a squat chunky fellow with faded red hair, a deeply corrugated face of the same color, and a rust-speckled star. Another was a barkeep—the sharpshooter in Cobb’s Coulee. The third was a chulo—a swarthy, high-cheekboned breed who knew the desert gulches and passes like an old coyote.

This little posse had picked up the tracks of the white stallion in an arroyo a few miles from the Box Deuce shacks. When they arrived at the cow ranch they found the outfit in a state of disorder. The cook was at the cow-shack swearing and calling to the hands—although it was a pretty late hour for herders to be breakfasting.

Riders were galloping in from the surrounding trails. On the porch of the main ranch house, two fat, red-faced ladies were watching the surrounding hills.

And another unusual thing: Sheriff Flapjohn was received with unwonted enthusiasm, although under ordinary circumstances he was treated rather coldly by the Box Deuce brothers. He had never before been anywhere in the county when the outfit was raided. But here he was on the scene early in the morning.

“What-all brought you here, chief?” demanded the elder brother, Tim Boskin, a raw-boned gray-whiskered scarecrow. “We was raided last night. My pet mare—three-quarters thoroughbred—was rustled. But how come *you’re* on the scene.”

The sheriff refused to take this as an aspersion upon his past inactivities. Besides the news about a stolen mare was important and surprising news.

“We’re on the trail of the hoss thief right now,” he said to the assembled hands. The Boskin brothers, their fat wives, the cook, the wrango and the cowherders had come down to meet the three man-hunters.

“You-all know the circus outfit which showed in our town,” the sheriff went on, “well, a stranger from the desert—who looked like a prospector, which he was, a gaunt fightin’ lookin’ hombre with pale gunmetal eyes—

why he took it into his head that he wanted the outfit's star performer. Which same was a white stallion—the finest hoss ever seen——”

“Worth ten thousand dollars,” supplemented the barkeep.

“We tracked him to this here ranch,” said the sheriff.

“Well, then it's the same hombre which rustled my claybank,” said one of the Boskins. “Seems like he's a specialist in valuable hosses. I'll give five hundred dollars to see that hellbender stretched—and to git back my little mare! And what's more, chief, I'll lend you all my cowhands here—and fresh horses—and me and my brother will join in likewise.”

“If it only happened last night,” said the sheriff, “then it 'pears to me we kin get somewheres. Look around here for the tracks of that hoss——”

“Cain't track my mare, bein' I rode her every which way yesterday,” Tim Boskin objected.

“But we can track the stud,” said the sheriff. “He had shoes on which you can easily identify: Light hunting shoes which you'd never see in this country; seven nail holes; and the whole shoe concave on the ground side.”

“Well, I'll be damned if I ain't seen them very prints in this here corral!” one of the herders said.

The whole gang went to the corral where the claybank had been kept the night before. The gate was closed—had been closed that morning—according to the wrango.

“The rustler was sort of systematic,” the sheriff said, pulling at his mustache thoughtfully. “Then again, closin' a gate after you've rustled a hoss, don't mean nothin' here nor there.”

“It's my opinion he didn't use the gate at all,” said Tim Boskin. “They ain't no tracks of this huntin' shoe you mention hereabouts. And they ain't been no wind to cover up same.”

From the corral several of the herders spoke up.

“Here are the tracks over here chief. Here they are. Runnin' up and down thisaway. Here they've dug into the corral dust—like he was fightin'.”

The sheriff, dismounting, went over to the desert side of the corral.

“Them are the prints we been trailin', sure enough!” he announced.

“Looks to me like the stallion took off—where those deep marks are. And he cleared the fence.”

“Well, I swan!” said one of the ranch wives.

“How about the mare?” asked another. “Do you reckon he took her over the fence?”

“It ain’t impossible,” said Tim Boskin. “She was a spry little critter. I led her over a couple of bars at the gate wunst. But she never took a leap this height.”

“Well, she did last night,” the wrango said. “Here’s where she lit.”

They all crowded to the fence and looked at the tracks on the other side.

“And there’s where she lit out for the desert,” said the wrango. “Looks like she went with a will, too. Lopin’ right along—if I know how to read tracks.”

“Well, I swan!” said the two ranch wives.

“Well, I’ll be damned! Straight for the Bad Lands!” cried Tim Boskin. “My poor little claybank!”

“Let’s hit the trail right now, chief. We’re all with you!” said the other Boskin.

“Now wait, gents!” Sheriff Flapjohn objected. “We kin git this hellbender all right. I’m figurin’ dead certain on that. But I don’t want to go troopin’ down there with a whole outfit of yippin’ cowhands and a cook and a cavy wrango throw’d in.

“All I want is two good men. You two—the owners of this outfit. I’ve heard tell that you’ve held the record for sharpshootin’ in this here country for nigh onto thirty years. That satisfies me. Just us five; you Boskin brothers, my two deputies here and myself.”

“ ’Pears to me that’s not a bad idea, chief,” said Tim Boskin. He ordered the wrango to saddle a couple of his best desert horses.

The two grizzled old men said good-bye to their wives. They got their six-guns and holsters and ammunition. The saddle horses were brought.

“One thing else,” said the sheriff. “You mentioned somethin’ concernin’ a reward.”

“Five hundred dollars—if we git both the hoss and the hellbender,” said Tim.

“And your own services throw’d in?” the sheriff asked shrewdly.

“So help me, yes!” Tim cried readily. “We ain’t givin’ the five hundred to ourselves—even if we do catch the rustler. It’s for you, chief.”

“Then let’s hit the trail,” said Sheriff Flapjohn.

They were off. The two fat wives were excited and weeping, and looking southward to the diminishing cloud of alkali. The rest of the herders waited in dumb disappointment. They were half of a mind to follow—against the orders of their foreman. But the voice of the cook detained them:

“Chow-pile! An hour late, you cowdogs! Take it away! Chuck away! Chuck away!”

## CHAPTER VI.

### STRANDED.

Late that afternoon Dave Huppert, riding his paint cayuse and followed by the white stallion and the claybank, trailed down into a deep gorge. It looked—at that time of day—as if a long, narrow lake were lying down there; a lake of blue water, on which there was the unnatural shimmer which a practiced eye recognized as the only sign that the water was unreal. He rode down toward the edge of the mirage and loped along, his three horses churning up a slight mist of alkali on the steep trail.

To any one on the rim of that gorge, looking down at the retreating figure of Huppert and his horses, it looked as if the sky-blue water at the point at which he was “wading in” began to steam. But there was only one chance in a thousand of his being seen. Dave knew the place to be a dangerous trail, cross cut with deep draws, choked with giant boulders. The prospectors of that part of the country used it as a pass between the frontier of the mining country into the long slope of desert that stretched down to Mexico.

I said the chance was one to a thousand. Well, that one chance befell. He was seen. And he was seen by just the sort of man he would have expected to find in that locality. A man slight of build, unshaven, with stained teeth, a receding chin, and no eyebrows; a man with alkali-whitened eyelids; a bit of make-up that made him look like a stage idiot. A man in ragged two-gallon sombrero, red bandanna, brown woolen shirt, khaki trousers and cowhide, hobnail boots.

This gentleman peered down over the granite rim of the gorge and watched that strange spectacle of a man wading into a mirage. He watched the “water” churning with the alkali dust. He even observed the phenomenon of those three horses swimming neck deep in the water.

Leaving his own cayuse—a ratty piebald—in a side draw, he scrambled down the mesquite-filled dry creek and crawled to the bottom of the gorge. By the time he got there the blue water had receded bit by bit. It went so gradually that his eyes, no matter how hard he looked, could not tell where its edge was. Then coming out into the boulder wash of the gorge bottom, the ragged, white-browed gentleman found himself in a waste of dry hot rocks.

With the vanishing of the water, the purple shadows had deepened, climbing halfway up the gorge wall. The sun had gone, but it had done its work. The place was an oven. It would be an oven all night. No breeze ever got there. No water ever got there—except every ten years or so, when a storm might tumble the whole hodgepodge of cactus and boulders upside down.

Now Dave Huppert, threading his way carefully in that wilderness, decided to spend the night in this retreat. If he were found by a posse he could put up a good fight. In fact, he could escape them without fighting at all. For it would have taken an army to dislodge him from those pits and draws and saguaro clumps. He could hide himself in the mesquite of the upper slopes, like a flea in a rug. He could crawl up when he was so minded and escape over the divide.

Dave did spend the night there—but not exactly according to his plans. When he was walking his pinto and leading the stallion along the boulder wash, he heard a heart-rending groan coming from the brush. It was like the groan of a dying coyote—then again like the groan of a dog scratching his ear. Or else it was—well, it was like the groan of anything except a human being.

Dave waded into the brush, parted it, and near a red rock found a prostrate man. He looked at the man for a moment—the sorriest and funniest looking spectacle he had ever seen. A man with white-rimmed eyes, and clothes torn by mesquite thorn; a man who seemed like a big rag doll hurled down there from the cliff—as if on a refuse pile and forgotten by the fates and destinies, a too pitiable spectacle even for a buzzard.

Buzzards always spotted a bit of flotsam of this nature. They wheeled around high overhead waiting for the morsel to finish dying. You can see them in the desert any time. But this bit of refuse was so frowsy as to fail even to entice a buzzard.

Dave Huppert grunted. It was almost a chuckle. He had come here in time to save this thing—and it seemed a huge joke against Providence.

“I reckon a little sip of water’s going to help you out, hombre,” he said.

The man stared at him with blinking, innocuous eyes. He seemed inclined to disbelieve the existence of this rescuer. His small head lolled.

Dave fell down on his knees before him. The man’s arms came up and circled Dave’s neck. Now, this was an ordinary gesture. Who wouldn’t put

his arms around you if you saved him from the unspeakable horror of death by thirst?

But when Dave felt those long, root-like fingers intertwine behind his neck, and the strength of those arms pulling him downward, he had a faint intimation that something was wrong with this whole business. Why under the sun had there been no buzzards wheeling up there and waiting? It meant that the man had *not* been dying of thirst—or else he would have stumbled along for hours, perhaps a day or two, trying to find a water pocket.

A buzzard always spots a man under such conditions. Of course if a man keels over suddenly with heat stroke, the carrion bird is not apt to get the news for some time.

But here Dave was tightly embraced with vise-like arms—choked, in fact. And in that same instant he realized that the scarecrow had hidden a six-gun in his sleeve, with the barrel in his hand. And he was pressing the barrel against his victim's neck.

The steel was not cold. Nothing was cold down there in the bowlder wash of Rattleweed Draw! The steel was flesh warm. The “dying” prospector had gripped it tightly and imparted the heat of his own blood to it. At first Huppert thought it was the man's wrist.

“It's too bad, hombre,” the ragged thing on the ground said, smiling through broken teeth. “You're a good hombre wantin' to save me thisaway. I'm right glad to meet you.”

“Take your damned paws off my neck,” Dave said, pressing himself away.

“I will, pard. But hold your own paws up and claw the air first.”

Dave obeyed this order. His six-gun was taken from him, which brought a futile string of oaths. But he could make no move of resistance unless he wanted to swallow some lead from that muzzle at his throat.

Dave got to his feet.

The other still lay—now more in the manner of comfortably reclining—in the bed of rattleweed.

“I'll take a drink now, pard.”

Dave threw him the canteen. The “dying prospector” refreshed himself and emptied the rest of the water into the sand.

“Now, then,” he said affably, “what’s your name and what-all are you doin’ down here in my hangout?”

“I’m a prospector,” Dave rejoined. “But what the hell difference does that make? I’m not after *you*. I’m trailing along through to Mexico.”

“Prospectors don’t trail through to Mexico by this here route,” the other objected. “And *you* ain’t goin’ to trail through to Mexico by this here route.”

“What’ll you stop me for? I’ve got nothing you want.”

“Oh, yes, you have! You’ve got a hoss there which kind of took my eye. I could tell he was a real hoss—from a mile away. And now that I’m close to, that little claybank kind of takes my eye likewise.”

“Take ’em both and be damned,” Dave said. He really meant it. He judged that no man could travel very far with those horses. The whole countryside would have heard about the white show horse by now. And as for the claybank from the Box Deuce—her home must be close by and her owner would not be apt to give her up without a good long search.

“I’m goin’ to take ’em both, but I ain’t goin’ to be damned. I’m goin’ to be safe.” He settled back in the brush again, crossed his legs and looked up blandly at his victim. “Safe is my middle name which I reckon I better take that paint cayuse likewise. He looks like a handy little cutter hisself—for desert trails.”

“You mean you’ll leave me here to wander in these arroyos on foot!”

“Well, I *would* be a sheep-headed coot if I let you take one of your hosses and shag off to the nearest cattle ranch to give the alarm.”

“Well, damn you for a bloodthirsty coyote, you might as well murder me here and now.”

“No, I never murders when it ain’t necessary.” He laughed. He was hideous, ridiculous, lying there like a scarecrow which the wind had blown down in the weeds. “I’m a peaceable man. I’ve heard tell of men bein’ hanged for murderin’. And a slug in some cases is as clear as signin’ your name to a job. No slug, no murder, no clew.

“And no buzzard—till maybe to-morry night or the next day. That’ll give me time enough to git out. If I potted you here, there’d be a buzzard up in the sky in half an hour, which same bird would advertise your whereabouts long afore I could cover the necessary amount of trail.”

“Well, of all the desert rats that ever crawled out of hell!”

The scarecrow chuckled. He lifted himself leisurely and sauntered off through the brush to the three horses.

Dave watched him, helpless, baffled, beaten. He contemplated making a wild rush, hurling a rock; or begging for quarter. But quarter was the last thing this demon would give him. And as for making any move toward saving those horses, he knew that at the first step he would be dropped.

The outlaw mounted one of the horses—the one that was saddled. The stallion, hitched to the saddle, followed. As for the claybank, the outlaw gave her a thwack or two, driving her ahead, and he soon found out that she would of her own will remain with her two companion horses. A half hour later the group disappeared over the crest of the gorge wall up which they had zigzagged.

Dave remained below in the purple light of dusk. There was nothing to do now. Nothing to eat, nothing to drink, nowhere to go. He was overcome with a sudden thirst, and this brought to his mind the fact that that hellbender had foreseen this little possibility.

A smile of utter chagrin came over Dave Huppert's gaunt, wind-burned face. His sun-faded gray eyes glowed. But in that light there was something besides utter hopelessness. He was thinking of what would happen to that bandit.

"If anybody's trailing me," he said to himself, "that bandit is going to bump straight into 'em. And if he's lucky enough to escape that, I wonder just how he's going to get along with that stallion. If he's a bit careless in the way he speaks to him, or in the way he hitches up that hackamore, I reckon that horse will be trailin' back to me sooner or later."

## CHAPTER VII.

### ALI BABA'S HAREM.

The renegade led the stallion and the other horses over the gulch wall and into the barranca where he had tethered his own ratty piebald. He packed the six-gun which he had frisked from Dave Huppert into his duffel-bag. The cartridges, however, which fitted his own gun, he tucked into his cartridge belt.

Chuck Chapote, which was the name this lobo ordinarily went by, was, in one respect, a peculiar outlaw. He did not run true to the desert thief of frontier legend and song, in that he disliked loading himself down with two heavy guns. He was not a two-gun man—in which respect, it must be said, he was human. His left hand, as far as aiming and pulling a trigger were concerned, was useless. A Mexican palmist had once prophesied that he would die by reason of that clumsy left hand.

Chapote was a good shot as long as he tried to shoot one gun. But try as often as he would with two guns, he could not hit the side of a shake barn. A barkeeper had made a bet that he would stand up and let Chapote blaze away at him at fifteen yards as long as he guaranteed to fire two guns at once. It was a safe bet.

Chapote packed the useless gun away and then fell to examining the two horses he had stolen.

“The hombre was headin’ for Mexico, after all,” he said to himself. “Here’s a stallion with tender hoofs—which they ain’t never felt rocks, leastwise not for a couple years or more. And this claybank with the Box Deuce brand—well, might be he’d bought her from the Boskin outfit, but it looks more like he’s rustled two highbred hosses and is makin’ off with ’em.

“This pinto with flint feet—that’s his own hoss because he had a saddle onto it, and likewise his waterpack and feed. This pinto is a regular desert cayuse, no doubt about that. One look shows he’s lived in these here gulches all his life.

“In other words here’s a hombre ridin’ a regular desert cayuse, and leadin’ two highbred hosses—and headin’ through this pass for Mexico. What’s the answer? He’s a rustler. That’s what. And so much the better. It

means if he ever finds his way back to water and civilization, he won't squeal."

Chuck Chapote mounted his own piebald and gathered his three stolen horses. Now that stallion, on closer examination, set Chapote to thinking. He had never seen such a magnificent bit of horse flesh in that part of the country. In fact, Chapote had never seen a horse like this in any country or any clime. He was such a beauty that, in the event of his being a stolen horse, it was an absolute certainty a posse would be on his trail hunting for him.

Chapote decided that the best thing to do was to head south—in the same direction which that unlucky horse thief down there in the gulch had been taking. No use stopping now that darkness had fallen. The quicker he could cover trail the better. And the quicker he could get rid of that white horse—giving it to some Mexican henchman of his to be taken across the border—the better.

As it turned out he got rid of the stallion much sooner than he had bargained for, and in a very disconcerting manner.

As they started on a good lope down the trail, Ali Baba awoke to the fact that an attractive stranger had joined the company; I mean by that, the piebald which Chuck Chapote was riding.

Now, when I say attractive, I do not mean attractive to the sense of sight. Chapote's piebald was the rattiest, chunkiest, stove-up, calf-kneed cayuse that Ali Baba had ever seen in all his travels between the sands of Arabia and Cobb's Coulee, Arizona.

But she was a mare. And she was a mare that had the tang of the desert in her furry piebald hide and the burrs of the desert in her ratty mane and tail. Ali Baba was intrigued. And it is needless to say that Chuck's piebald was enchanted with this beautiful and divine creature sidling up to her, as she jogged patiently along the trail. If the beggar-maid of ancient folklore loved King Canute, Chuck's piebald certainly loved Ali Baba.

But the complication to this love affair lay in the fact that Chuck was riding the mare at the time, and was leading her on a difficult trail through mesquite, down dry creek beds, into barrancas and around saguaro cactus patches.

Ali Baba did not concern himself with these troubles, however, but instead gave the chunky cayuse a bite on her ratty neck, which sent her wheeling. Her rider, before regaining his balance, found himself shoved up

sharp against a cactus arm. The encounter left him with an assortment of needles in his cheek, hand, neck and shoulder.

Chuck Chapote resolved that it was high time to put a stop to this love affair. He timed a fierce swing of his fist which landed with a dull thud on Ali Baba's nose.

The horse sprang back, his muscles quivering, tossing his head until the hackamore yanked him down again. For a moment he champed nervously, his head hanging, his whole body shaking as if from the force of the blow.

"I guess that'll hold you for awhile, old jackass!"

The rider looked at the horse quizzically, puzzled at the strange cringing manner in which the big fellow had taken his punishment. He had changed abruptly from a magnificent desert king to a broken-spirited, fear-ridden stock horse.

"Damned if I didn't hurt his feelings callin' him a jackass!" Chapote laughed. "The old hoss is actually goin' to burst into heart-breakin' tears! Well, you come along now, Mr. Fuzztail, and if you don't want your feelin's hurt agin, you better act like a gentleman."

Ali Baba followed submissively, his head hanging. But he was brooding.

In those few brief moments of jogging along behind the renegade and his ratty piebald, a change came over Ali Baba. It was a crisis in his experience. For several years he had taken those blows from the ring master of the Vasto circus. But he had chalked up each blow in his memory. He was going to get payment for every one sooner or later.

And now the time had come. He had been in Paradise for many hours now, galloping at will over sand dune and loma and sage plain. The sawdust ring, and Vasto's whip, and Vasto's cruel talon-like hands were things of the past. Then came this unlucky mortal and gave him a blow on the face! He was a mortal of Vasto's kith. Perhaps he was leading Ali Baba back to the sawdust ring again!

No, that must not be! Not by all the saints of the Happy Hunting Grounds, or by the Beard of the Prophet—or whatever it is an Arabian horse swears by.

Ali Baba was changed. A few hours of the desert had changed him. He was on his own ground. There was no sawdust ring under his hoof; no circle of laughing and shouting human beings about him; no "big top" of canvas

over him; no great cats howling in the animal cages; no black whip circling about his neck.

About was the desert moon—peeping over the shoulder of a giant mesa; the desert sand was beneath his hoofs—the same moon and the same sort of sand he remembered as a yearling. Now what did this puny mortal mean by challenging him in his own desert where he was king?

Chuck Chapote was laughing over the escapade. He laughed even though his face still tingled with those cactus thorns.

“A wonderful cayuse—but no guts!” he was chuckling to himself. “I’ll send him down to Mexico for the *presidente* to ride in some parade or other! A single harsh word from me and the poor ole critter’s heart is broke!”

And then something happened.

Chuck Chapote felt a vise-like grip on his right arm. A set of giant teeth pinched into his bone; he was yanked from the saddle as he was in the very act of drawing his gun. As he fell to the sand he saw a horse rearing above him, with forehoofs lifted. It was a terrifying picture of magnificence and rage—the sort of horse you might dream of in a fever, poising above you. It was but a momentary glimpse of a mane lashing and glowing in the moonlight, of bared teeth, of wild burning eyes.

Chapote, with a wounded arm, fumbled awkwardly for his six-gun. Then came those hoofs. He rolled—averting their downright stamp. He rolled over the hummock of sand, his shoulder caught the weight of a hoof, and the force sent him crashing down a creek bed against a boulder.

For a moment he thought that every bone in his frail frame had been torn apart. His arm was limp, bleeding where the teeth had pinched him. His shoulder felt as if it held up the weight of a mesa—like Atlas holding the world. The back of his head had got a good thwack as he hit that rock, and he found himself lying, stupidly gazing upward and choking with sand and blood.

High above him on the bank, there was the radiant vision of a white horse, with the moon beyond casting a halo of light in that tossing mane. If Chapote had only had his six-gun now! But this had been knocked from his hand. He was helpless—helpless even to rise. All he could do was to lie there, wiping his mouth, swearing, groaning, while the white stallion calmly left the scene of this short easy battle and trotted away.

The claybank, the pinto gelding and the piebald mare looked down over the bank to satisfy their curiosity—as horses will—then the claybank trotted

after her lord and master.

Dave's gelding, although he had no particular friendship for the stallion, wheeled and galloped off after the other two. They were going toward the spot where they had been taken from Dave Huppert. Dave's horse made a bee-line back to find his lost and beloved owner.

Now as for the bandit's horse—the piebald—the situation was more complex. The piebald had been a faithful old cayuse to whatever master fed her and watered her in the past. Her present master—Chapote—who had stolen her from a Mexican, had given her a few beatings, but then that was to be expected.

She was a patient old cayuse with the marks of many a whipping from her other masters, outlaws or desert muckers. And the hard trails which she had been sent on, had given her scratches on her feet, and scars on her furry hide. In the long run, she concluded, human beings were hard taskmasters.

But here was a new possibility. A horse might be her master as well as a man, and lead her to pastures, and find water pockets for her, and protect her from lobos, and show her where to hide from the desert sun.

What a master he would make! What a glorious creature! The stove-up rat-tailed critter gazed after him. Her old carcass—a bunch of hide and hair and bones—became galvanized.

There was a clear, hypnotic Arizona moon hanging between two steep mesas. I dare say the moon has the same effect on all of God's creatures—not only on sentimental human beings.

At any rate the piebald mare, seeing that radiant Pegasus, galloping off with mane and tail and beautiful hide gleaming in the rays, made a very natural and sensible choice. Chuck Chapote—a broken scarecrow lying there in the rattleweed—was not much of a rival to the celestial Ali Baba.

When Chapote saw his mare leaving him, he screamed out in choking hysterical oaths for her to come back. It was some time before he realized the enormity of the trick she had played on him. Chapote had left Dave Huppert in the desert to wander around on foot, until he died of thirst. And now this same fate was meted out to Chapote. Dave's horse and the stallion were going back to him. The claybank followed.

And as a final little practical joke, that miserable rat-tailed, knock-kneed mare had taken what food and water Chapote had packed on her, and had jilted him! Could any joke ever played upon hapless mortal equal that!

Dave Huppert's pinto, needless to say, found his way back to his master. The big stallion did not want him hanging around anyway. He gave the little pinto to understand that very clearly.

The stallion proposed to search out Dave likewise, but he took his time. He was free now, and he desired to make the same use of his freedom which he had made the night before.

He went racing along over the sand dunes, thrilling once more to the ecstasy of existence. The claybank followed close. And far behind came the ratty piebald. But her magnificent lord and master would have none of her. He desired other worlds to conquer.

And there came a time during that night's escapade when he stumbled onto just what he wanted. He found a camp in one of the cañons where there was water. It was the water which he had smelled out first.

Three men, engaged in a map-making expedition, were asleep in the open. They had a good string of horses foraging around in the dry grass slopes of the water hole. There were four geldings and three mares.

When the map-makers woke up the next morning, they found their cavy consisted of four horses instead of seven! Three mares—a red roan, a skewbald, and a seal-brown filly—failed to answer the morning mess call.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### UNCLE PETE.

That white stallion was possessed of a sinister power over mortal fates. He had left one man—Chuck Chapote—to the mercies of the desert, and now he was hunting out another man, to plant on him the indubitable evidence of horse thievery. If he left a man, the chances were in favor of that man's dying of hunger or thirst; if the stallion went to him the chances favored the man's hanging.

Dave Huppert was tossing fitfully in dreams as he lay upon his bed of rattleweed and sand. Thirst had given him a feeling of fever. He had fallen, beaten down with discouragement and fatigue. A miserable sham of sleep overtook him. And he was awakened by a soft, hot, pudgy mouth caressing his touseled hair.

He started up with a cry and saw standing above him the most precious thing in the world—his own stocky pinto. And on that pinto there was a gallon can of water and a foodpack.

Dave jumped to his feet and threw his arms about the horse's neck. The father in the parable embracing and weeping over his returned son could not have been more moved than this prospector over the return of that shaggy little cayuse.

What had happened to the stallion and the claybank Dave did not care. He might mourn the loss of that stallion, but the possession of him meant the possession of that pesky claybank with the Box Deuce brand.

Dave had no further desire to possess the most beautiful horse in the world. The loss was a good riddance. Dave was free now. That horse thief who had taken the animals would probably be caught and given a smell of hemp.

He swigged down the lukewarm water from his pack until he felt drunk. Then he started a real supper. And he took his time. Why not? There was no incriminating claybank hanging around now. He was free of all suspicion. He ate his fill and drank some more. He ate so much and drank so much in celebration that he fell asleep. And this time his sleep was the most blessed annihilation of fear and pain that any mortal had ever known.

At sunrise he awoke. He had breakfast and saddled his beloved pinto. Then as he mounted and looked up the cañon, in which direction he proposed to ride, he saw a string of horses coming down the zigzag trail in single file.

Now he had expected that that stallion might conceivably break from his captor and come to him. He had even feared that the claybank would come likewise. But to have a whole herd appear was beyond his fondest fears! But there they came, jogging along, the stallion in the lead, the claybank following faithfully; then three strange mares, and the piebald fuzztail bringing up the rear.

Dave realized now that he was in for it. Here were five stolen mares. He had no idea whom they belonged to. He had not even seen Chuck Chapote's piebald until now, for the outlaw had hidden his mount in a ravine before his encounter with Dave.

But upon examination Dave found out quickly enough whose mare it was. She was saddled and equipped with canteen and duffel-bag. In the latter Dave found his own gun.

"Your horses are bent on playing practical jokes on us poor humans!" he laughed. "Anyway, you're mighty fair in the way you even scores up!"

There was but one thing to do now: to head south good and fast. The stallion would follow and so would his mares and there was no doubt about the owners of the mares getting the trail sooner or later. They were probably on the trail now and Dave had no desire to meet them. A trial might free him, but a lynch posse would not.

He dug his heels into his bronc and went galloping down into the heart of the desert.

Behind him came the cavy, like a wild herd stampeding. The sound of their hoofs on the rock slabs of that narrow gulch echoed like thunder. Dave had the conviction that the clatter could be heard all the way between Cobb's Coulee and Mexico!

He covered ten miles of trail, then in the afternoon climbed to the crest of a mesa and looked back. From that height he had a good view of the sand plains over which he had traveled.

Distances were deceptive. Far back he saw gypsum beds which looked like splotches of light. On the sierra which fringed the northern side of the plain he saw long shadows—some of them real shadows cast by the

afternoon sun, others fake shadows caused by denuded areas of granite on the mountain sides.

A mirage formed in the breast of the plain as he looked. It might have been ten miles away; it might have been twenty. The sierra where the Cobb's Coulee ranges were looked so close that you would expect an hour's ride across the desert plain would bring you there. It is a distance of fifty miles.

But Dave had been pocket-hunting in the desert long enough to know just how much his eye lied. He knew where Cobb's Coulee was. He knew where Mule Town was. He knew where Puma Mesa and the Copper Sink mine and the United Jack mine were.

As he looked toward a red mesa at the foot of which stood Mule Town he remembered that just about now the Vasto Circus & Rodeo Co. was scheduled to show there. The miners and cowboys and Mexican breeds would be gaping at the elephant and arguing about the physiognomy of a giraffe. He yearned to be there worshiping at the shrine of that bareback rider with the golden curls and the snow white arms!

As he gazed thus toward the portals of civilization from which he had banished himself, he saw something on the near side of that mirage on the desert's breast. It was directly on the trail—as near as he could judge—which he himself had covered the day and night preceding.

He strained his eyes. They were pale but metallic eyes, trained to every peculiar sign of desert gulch and mesa and mirage. They were eyes so hardened to the fierce glare of the red mesas and quartz cliffs and alkaline beds, that he could look at them with the unblinking equanimity of a buzzard.

Little dots were moving toward him across the flat plain. They seemed like ants. Then they seemed like a pack of lobos. But in the desert lobos rarely went in packs. They generally went singly, like an outlaw.

As he looked he saw the faint mist churned up and following them. He knew perfectly well what it was now. He did not stare very much longer.

It was a posse trailing that claybank and those other mares. Likewise they were trailing him—to lynch him.

Although his horses were exhausted by the rough trail of that night, he urged them on over the top of the mesa. He covered the few miles of flat rimrock without another rest. No time to lose now. For he was assured his trail had been picked up.

No time to double back or find lava beds or fine silt, for the sake of hiding his horses' tracks. One thing he might have done: that was to hitch the horses to some tree, or tree-bole, and ride on. They would undoubtedly be picked up by the posse.

But there was no tree or tree-bole—or even a sharp enough rock to hitch them to—not on the whole broad plain of that mesa top. There was a cactus or two, but a cactus won't hold a horse very long.

Besides what was to be gained? The day before, this move might have counted for something—that is to say, when the claybank first attached herself to the party. But now that she had followed her mate this far into the desert, she was a definite proof of Dave's guilt. The posse would merely pick up the stolen horses, and thus assured of the thief's guilt, hunt him down.

He rode on, quickening his pace. He had a better plan.

He reached the southern rim of the mesa top and skirted the cliffs for a few miles in search of a certain cañon. An old mucker had his diggings there, where for some years he had worked a small vein, doing a little ore-crushing on his own account.

Dave reached the bottom of the cañon about noon. A few shacks, an arrastra for crushing ore, worked by a mule; a corral or two and a spring of sweet water caught in a clay hollow—this was all there was to relieve the dead monotony of cactus and rocks and gulches.

Old Pete Duffle was a dried up carcass—a bit of human slag, as you might say, from whom the desert had sucked all emotion except a residue of greed. He had said that when he reached forty-five he would retire and go to Paris and buy blooded horses and ride them through the Bois. He had money enough to do this when he was forty-five, but he wanted a little more. He was now sixty.

“Hello there, pard!” Dave called. “Old Uncle Pete—do you remember me—I'm Dave Huppert.”

Uncle Pete looked up at the rider and his outfit of horses coming down the steep bank. Pete was like an angry little dog looking up at some one intruding upon the ceremony of gnawing at a bone.

“Where-all did you git that white hoss?” Uncle Pete asked. It was naturally his first question. He asked it even before he assured himself that he knew who Dave was. He had not seen Dave for a year.

This horse was more interesting than any human acquaintance Pete had ever had. It was a horse in fact very much like the ones Uncle Pete was going to drive in the Bois one of these days.

“I rustled him from a circus,” Dave announced blandly.

“You *rustled* him! What in tarnation may you mean by that, young feller!”

“Just what I say. I’m a horse thief.”

“I don’t swallow jokes, young feller. And you better figure on makin’ fun of some other pore old mucker aside from me. Cain’t bother with jokes.”

“You get me a meal, Uncle Pete. I’m dying with hunger. And that’s no joke, you can bet on that. I’ve been on the trail twenty hours straight—barring a little episode back at Rattleweed Draw.”

“Are you ass enough to trail down this fur without a foodpack?”

“I’ve got my own food, uncle, but you cook it. I’m afraid to build a fire \_\_\_\_\_”

“*Now* what are you handin’ me?”

Dave unstrapped his duffel-bag, got out a slab of bacon, some flour for flapjacks and some sugar for his coffee. He recalled the fact that at a previous visit the hermit used a sugar of his own, ground from mesquite pods.

“Pronto now, Uncle Pete. They’re on my trail.”

“You’re daft, young feller. If you’re Dave Huppert—same as I knew a year or so back—well then you ain’t no hoss thief.”

“I said I’d tell you a good joke—if you let me eat first.”

The old duffer hobbled into his shack, and begrudgingly poked up a fire, rattled about with his tin plates and pots. His guest meanwhile watered the cavy of horses, turned them into a corral where a cayuse belonging to the hermit was munching at alfalfa.

Presently he smelled the coffee, and the bacon. He made the door of the shack in a succession of wild leaps. He did not sit down at the box table for his meal. He ate it from the stove.

“Now, then, Uncle Pete—get set to believe every word I’m telling you. Because you’ve got to testify in my behalf, and use every fact I’m setting before you.

“First, so’s you’ll not interrupt me, I’ll tell you a posse is trailing me, and is now probably halfway across the mesa top. In an hour, maybe two, maybe three, they’ll be down here asking for me. You can tell them everything I’m telling you.”

The gray-whiskered prairie dog looked up with every mark of disbelief in his glittering eyes.

“A circus came to Cobb’s Coulee, and I saw a horse”—his guest went on—“the finest horse ever born. And it was being treated the same as a Mex treats his burro.

“A circus girl gave him to me so I could save him from being tortured and bring him out here to the desert where he can run free. But now that I’ve got him in the desert he’s been stealing all the mares between here and Mule Town—as you can see!

“The stud’s attached himself to me and his harem of manadas have attached themselves to *him*. And here I am trying to hide in the desert with a whole herd clattering along with me!”

“But how come——”

“And worst of all a posse is hot on my trail. I could easily shake ’em riding alone. But I can’t be carrying a whole horse ranch along with me.

“All they have to do is to take their time, and ask questions: ‘Have you seen a rustler with a white stallion and a remuda of assorted brands?’ Any one that’s seen me will help ’em along.”

The old mucker pondered over this and a slow chuckle began to shake his frame like a cough. “Wal, if you ain’t in a tarnel fix!”

“Not if you help me.”

“Me? Me do what?”

“You’ve got to keep these mares and tell the sheriff just what I’ve said.”

“You have a hoss which has swiped a lot of mares and they’re found in your possession. Do you reckon any sheriff in Arizony would take that as an excuse?”

“No. That’s why I’m letting you explain it to him,” Dave said breezily.

“Well, I’ll be caterwopously damned!”

“Now wait. They’ll believe my story if they could only see what a way that big silver-coated fellow has with mares. He’s what you might call a

sheik. A mare just simply can't resist him. You tell 'em and they'll believe you. But if I told 'em they'd hang me first—then believe me afterward."

Uncle Pete scratched his grizzled, stained beard. There was truth to this.

"You better shag out of here, young coot, as quick as your cayuse kin pack you. And don't stop shaggin' till you git to Mexico."

He thought for a moment, seemingly in great distress. It was up to him by all laws of the desert to help this young prospector out of his fix. Finally he said begrudgingly: "As for them mares, you kin leave 'em in my corral, but I ain't goin' to feed 'em!"

"The posse will come before they need feed."

"Very well, then, but mind you, I ain't goin' to incriminate myself. I'll tell 'em you was here. I take it you kin fight if they go on chasin' you?"

"I can. But I need some more ammunition. Thirty-two's."

"Ain't got any thirty-two's."

"I'll pay you well for a couple boxes!"

"I said I ain't got any!" the old mucker rasped. "You'll find a posada down at the foot of that thar mesa where you kin buy all you want." He pointed out of the mouth of his cañon across to the horizon.

"It's a gaming tavern kept by a Mex breed. A place where I've heard tell outlaws git their outfits and drinks, and spend their Sunday evenin's quietly gamblin' and knifin' each other."

"That'll suit me," said Dave. "And you keep a good lock on that corral gate. Those mares will sure be broken-hearted when I take their Ali Baba away from them."

A little while after Dave Huppert had ridden off, leading his white horse, Uncle Pete looked up at the head of his cañon and observed that he was about to receive some more guests.

Now old Pete Duffle was a man who loved to exist unto himself. He was aloof from the petty affairs of mortals. He had lived so long without benefit from mankind, that he felt greatly put out whenever they came to him with their problems. He was also in his way something of a coward. A posse of riders bent upon lynching, loping along in a cloud of dust, is always a

formidable sight. Pete Duffle did not realize what terror that sight would strike into his own soul.

He was innocent. What could they do to him? He had nothing to do with this horse-thieving tangle. And yet—he reflected—he had voluntarily thrust his hand into the whole dangerous game: there were those stolen mares right in his own corral!

What would those riders say—right off hand? They would say: “You explain this, hombre. And be sharp and pronto and keerful with your explainin’. One slip of the tongue—and you git the short end of this here rawhide lasso!”

It was terrifying. The gnarled sun-dried mozo began to take on a semblance of violent emotional life. He trembled. He licked his lips which had been dry as a mesquite twig for fifty years. His Adam’s apple came to life and writhed. He ran down to his corral. He ran up and down, cracking his knuckles and praying. “What the hell am I goin’ to tell ’em!”

He jumped into the corral. He shoo’d the horses up to one corner. Perhaps he could hide them in one of his shacks. What a lunacy!

“And yet—what the hell kin I do!”

The claybank mare kicked up her heels and galloped around him. She cast a longing glance down the cañon to the sage plain. She estimated the height of that fence. If the stallion had only leaped over the fence she might have had nerve enough to follow him—as she had done that other night, when she first fell for his charms. But no, this fence was too high.

“What and the hell!” Uncle Pete was praying and mumbling fervently. “They’ll give me the hemp, shore’s I’m livin’! They’ll leave me to dry up thar in the wind, hangin’ from that sycamore limb! Yes, so help me—they won’t give me a chanst to explain nothin’.

“And they wouldn’t believe my explanations anyways! It’s only a alibi—they’ll say. And dam’ if it ain’t. That young hellbender like as not rustled this stock—and he’s sage-brushin’ me! I’ll bet them mares wouldn’t go after that thar stallion—even if I freed ’em!”

This hypothesis was very intriguing. He wondered if they really would! He burned with curiosity. “That young coot was comin’ Injun on me—or my name’s adobe mud! So help me—he was comin’ Injun on me! I don’t believe a word he said!”

At any rate—whether he believed or not—he was going to satisfy himself with absolute proof. He opened the gate.

The claybank was the first. She scampered out like a race horse responding to the gong. The three mares from that map-makers' camp went next. And then went the old piebald, with hope springing eternal in her equine breast. Perhaps this time—when he saw how faithfully she proposed to follow him through life—he might deign to give her a kick or two with those splendid gold-specked hoofs!

Old Pete Duffle breathed a sigh of enormous relief. It escaped from his body like the air from a toy balloon, leaving him shrunken, shapeless, wrinkled but happy. Then something happened which was far beyond what the old skinflint had bargained for.

While he had been in that shack conversing with his visitor, his own saddle pony—a snuff-brown mare—had succumbed to the attractions of Ali Baba. This mare was in the same corral where they had imprisoned the others.

When the gate was open—and all the horses trooped out—the impulse to run along with them took hold of her. Before Pete Duffle knew what was taking place she had bolted out of the gate.

He saw her, yelled to her, ran out, screamed, waved his sombrero. But it was no use. The little claybank leading the race had struck too high a pace. The whole remuda took it up. It was much too good a pace for old Pete Duffle.

He watched them trooping along down the trail. He choked in amazement, in rage, in horror. *His own mare*—the old mare he had worked for fifteen years! The only saddle pony he had ever bought and paid for in his life!

“Cost me twenty dollars!” he wailed. “And ten to have her busted! Hoowah! Hoowah! Why did I open that gate! I’d ruther of been lynched than lose her! Hoowah! What a fool I am!”

## CHAPTER IX.

“OOWAH! WHAT A DAY!”

When the posse of riders trotted their horses down into the mucker’s outfit their grim appearance struck old Pete Duffle with another qualm of respectful fear. They were not to be tampered with. He must be careful.

The man they thought a horse thief had come to his diggings, had dined there, had watered his “stolen” horses there. And Pete had let him go on unmolested—a fact which would put the posse into a bad humor with him to start with.

They were impatient-looking men. They were angry-looking men. They were murderous-looking men. And worst of all, there was Sheriff Flapjohn, who had been known to hang more suspects than any other “peace officer” in Arizona.

Pete Duffle was so impressed with this hard-boiled dignitary that he cast only a cursory glance upon the others: two rangy stockmen, a chulo, a barkeep whom Duffle recognized and a fat man in khaki and puttees.

The sheriff spoke:

“Have you seen a bird here leadin’ a big white racer—a stallion?”

Old Pete was confused. Thoughts were whirling in his brain. And now that he was confronted with this posse of alkali-covered and alkali-thirsty men he lost his nerve. He gulped.

“Yes, you’ve seen him,” Flapjohn answered for him. The little mucker’s eyes were bulging and his Adam’s apple was kicking in its traces. “You’ve seen him all righto. Wall, out with it! Did you feed him? Did you water his rustled stock? Did you notice he was in a hurry? If so, why couldn’t you use your fool haid and see that he was a rustler?”

“He had a big white stallion, chief,” Uncle Pete gulped. “Never seen the likes of such a hoss—and a lot of mares—which I noted the brands—a Box Deuce.”

“Our claybank!” exclaimed one of the riders. “Was she all tore up with mesquite and the rocks of this here trail he’s taken?”

“Wait, now, gents,” the sheriff said. “*I’m* doin’ this here cross-questionin’.”

The legal term had its effect. It scared the mucker out of his wits. He had been on the verge of telling about his own mare—but he saw he must satisfy their questions first.

“Now, then, what sort of a consarned sheep-headed jack are you to let a rustler like that git off, particular if you seen a white racer, which you’d orter know didn’t belong down in these parts?”

“He stuck me up, gents, that’s why!” the old fellow begged. “Stuck me up, so help me—a pore old mucker that ain’t never done nothin’——”

“What did he hold you up for? How long ago? Which trail did he take? Why the hell didn’t you fight back? What sort of a blatherin’ lop-eared rabbit are you anyway, to let a rustler git away, when you’d of got a thousand dollars reward if you’d showed some guts!”

“Which way did he go?” one of the posse repeated, seeing that the sheriff was firing too many questions for the addle-headed Pete to answer.

“Thataway!” Pete said, pointing toward Mexico. He was about to blurt out the fact that Dave Huppert had proposed outfitting himself at the Mexican gaming tavern at the foot of Sundown Mesa. But he reflected just in time that this would involve explaining: why would a horse thief be telling him that he was heading for Sundown Mesa? “He went thataway, chief,” he repeated, pointing in a very indefinite southerly direction.

“Is that all you know?” the sheriff asked fiercely.

Old Pete looked up into the brown eyes—brown they were, but they seemed to be flaming with a murderous threat.

“Sure it’s all I know, chief!” he faltered.

“All right then, git out some chow—a lot of it—and feed this gang. And git out all the hay or oats or alfalfa you’ve got and feed our mounts. Pronto now!”

Uncle Pete gasped. He looked at his guests—a bunch of gaunt, hungry wolves they seemed—and calculated rapidly just how many cans of beans and vegetables, and how much flour and how much coffee and bacon and flapjacks and syrup they were going to consume. They exceeded his wildest surmise. And so did the horses.

In fact, they helped themselves, opening every can they could find in his shack. If a band of outlaws had descended upon him they could not have cleaned him out more thoroughly.

He came in from feeding the horses and watched them. He begrudged every stick of wood he had collected. There was not much wood in that locality. And here they were making a big enough fire for a barbecue. He had that wood measured—and calculated to last him through the winter. But he would have to strike off about a good month—and the month of January at that, when he needed it to warm his shack.

He glared at each man with a personal and venomous hatred. There were the two Boskin brothers, lanky, raw-boned old fellows that ate enough for a whole cattle outfit. There was the barkeep from Cobb's Coulee, with wiry brows beetling over glittering tiny eyes. The others ate noisily. But this barkeep ate without making a sound. A whole can of beans vanished down his throat—and you could not hear a smack of his lips. He was like a cat at milk. Or rather he was like a puma over the remains of a steer.

And there was another man who ate more than all of them put together—a fat man in khaki outfit and leather puttees. He was a member of that map-making expedition, and had joined the posse in order to get back the three mares stolen from his camp.

“I don't know much about your lynching ways, chief,” he was saying between mouthfuls—or platefuls. “Back East we generally give them a trial—even if it's murder. But in a case like this it's worse than murder.

“There in the dead of night this brigand comes along and slices out our three best saddle ponies. My partners back there told me not to wait to lynch him—shoot him on sight. That's why they sent me.

“I'm the best shot of that trio. I can hit a tin can up in the air six times with this here gat. And I'll tell you, this bucko we're after is goin' to have six holes in him for the wind to blow through before you hang him up.”

Old Pete Duffle by this time was thoroughly convinced that the best thing for him to do was to align himself with the strongest side. The men were heated to the murder stage. They were in no mood to believe the story of that stallion and his love affairs. They all knew horses and they all would believe it—if *they wanted to*.

But all they wanted now was obviously to lynch somebody. If Dave Huppert had not stolen the mares, well at least his horse had stolen them, and they would probably hang him anyway.

Pete Duffle decided to do his explaining some other time. Or else let Dave do his own explaining. The whole point now that interested old Pete was that mare of his.

“Gents,” he announced finally and with extreme humility, “I hope you all will find the rustler.”

“Oh, you do, do you?” Sheriff Flapjohn snorted. “Well, it’s pretty late to be hopin’ thataway, when just a little while ago you’d already found him!”

“Gents, I couldn’t throw on a gunman like that. You know that. Just look at me. Do I look as if I could fight a big gray-eyed lobo the likes of him?”

They laughed at the notion.

“Well, why blame me? I didn’t let him go because I wanted to. In fack——” he hemmed a moment. It might be a complicated matter telling them about his own mare.

He would have to lie about the manner of her abduction or else come out with the secret of the whole business. He decided to lie. What could he lose? And what did he care about Dave Huppert? That young coot had caused him enough trouble already.

“Gents,” he announced softly but dramatically, “I didn’t get a chanst to stop that hellbender. Why? Because he was goin’ to throw on me if I batted an eye! And why was he throwin’ on me? Because he was rustlin’ my own hoss!”

“What! What’s this? What are you sayin’? Rustled your hoss?” They all broke in—looking up from their dishes for the first time. “You mean he stung you, too!”

“A little snuff-brown mare, so help me!” Pete Duffle said, feeling much more comfortable now that he had entered this fraternity of wronged horse owners. “A little mare—the handiest little critter you ever saw. A bit old perhaps and gray about the snout, but all the same handy! And here I am without a mount. Nothin’ but a ol’ mule! And *that*, gents, is why I didn’t give chase to this two-gunman!”

The others looked around at each other, swearing loudly, triumphant, tremendously pleased.

“Well, pards,” the sheriff said, “here’s the first man we’ve got who actually was present and seen the whole business!”

Duffle cleared his throat. He was going to object. He had not actually *seen* Dave Huppert do anything of the kind. And he’d hate to swear to it. But, by Heaven, that’s just exactly what he had said!

“And whatever you’ve said we’ll ask you to stick to it—when we catch this hellbender,” the sheriff proclaimed.

“You’ll ask me to *what*——”

But Flapjohn had already shoved back his chair and thumped out to his horse. A little later the whole posse was clattering off on the trail.

“Oowah! Oowah!” old Pete Duffle gasped as he watched them dwindle away in a cloud of dust. “Et out of house and home—and now I’ve got the blood of an innocent man on my soul! I’d sure of been better off if they’d lynched *me*! Oowah! What a day! What a day!”

## CHAPTER X.

### THE CIRCUS COMES TO MULE TOWN.

The tent top of the Vasto Circus & Rodeo Co. had come down, been unlaced and stowed with poles aboard wagons, and the whole show had lumbered out of Cobb's Coulee. In Mule Town the led stock cantered down the street, wagons creaked, the calliope and the cats roared. Zebra and show horses brayed out Vasto's glory.

Con men spread their lures; tent-peggers hoisted the white top. Madame Zuzu got out her snakes and, figuratively speaking, stung every sheepherder or cowboy who was intrigued by the poster of her huge fat self in muslin maharmah and desert sandals.

In Jinson's Frontier Palace, which was a combined hotel and honky-tonk in the center of town, a professional gambler, a barber and a harness-maker were at cards. This rangy trio turned from their table to gaze at a very comely picture framed in the doorway which led from the gaming room to the vestibule of the hotel.

They saw a girl whose golden hair gleamed under the rim of a small natty sombrero. She was a girl with an anxious face, with hazel eyes, carnelian cheeks. The dry hot air of the desert country had not yet put its mark upon that face—except for three freckles on a dimpled chin.

"Actress," the barber whispered to his companions. "Belongs to the show."

"I know who she is," said the harness-maker. "Seen her picture pasted up on Nogales' chow wagon. Bareback rider. Picture shows her doin' a fling on a bareback hoss. White hoss."

"Gentlemen, that's the hoss which was rustled back there in Cobb's Coulee," the professional gambler suggested.

"Ain't no doubt of it," said the barber. "Heard 'em talkin' about it in my shavin' parlor. Hoss was worth thousands of dollars."

"Don't believe it. Ain't no horse in this range worth more'n five hundred!" said the harness-maker.

"Looks like she's mournin' the loss of her hoss now," said the barber. "She's readin' one of them 'Wanted' signs which the sheriff has had stuck

up all over the range. Everywhere you go you see one. On shake barns, saloon fronts, livery stables, stage offices, everywhere. Hoss was rustled right out of the show one night.”

“Can’t sage-brush me,” said the harness-maker.

“Nor me,” said the gambler. “It’s all a advertisin’ scheme!”

The three stopped their discussion to feast their eyes on the bereaved and beautiful bareback artist. The latter had left the “Wanted” sign and was pacing up and down the vestibule, thwacking her whipcord skirt with a little crop. She was pale.

“Damned if I don’t hope they catch the hoss thief and burn him alive!” the barber exploded. They watched the girl until she disappeared into the street.

“’Tain’t advertisin’!” the barber added hotly. “Some mucker from the desert posed as a prospector from the Coyotero. Tall, gaunt, horse-faced, savage-lookin’ hombre with eyes like gun-bores. Beat up the owner of the show somethin’ awful—with elephants and all standin’ around helpless!”

“Who fed you all that?” the harness-maker laughed.

“I seen him!” an old white whiskered prospector said.

The players turned and looked up at the newcomer. “You seen him! When? Where? Why didn’t you tell the Sheriff?”

“I don’t mean I seen him since he rustled the hoss. I seen him down in the Coyotero a couple months back. Fits your description exactly. Had a pinto—and a pack mule. Made up like a regular prospector—but I could see through the disguise. Worst lookin’ two-gun man I ever met up with. I’m tremblin’ all over just thinkin’ of him.”

“Lucky for you—you didn’t git your gizzard sliced open. They say he got a holt of the circus owner and tore him to pieces with his bare hands. Circus owner won’t never recover. Bones broken same as if he’d had a set-to with a b’ar.”

“You’re gyppin’ us!” some one snorted.

“Mebbe so. You cain’t believe everything you hear—in particular when circuses is concerned.”

“No, you cain’t,” said the harness-maker. “In fact, I don’t believe nothin’ I’ve heard—durin’ the last ten minutes.”

“Oh, you don’t don’t you?” the old prospector retorted belligerently. “Not even that I seen this hellbender with my own eyes?”

“No—I don’t believe that.”

“Or that he stuck up the circus at Cobb’s Coulee?” asked the barber.

“No—I don’t take no stock in that either.”

“Or that he got into a fight with Vasto, with elephants standin’ by, and broke his bones?”

“Nary a bone. That’s my bet.”

The harness-maker looked around the group to see which one was going to call him to account for these insults. It seemed that every man was contemplating drawing a six-gun. But providentially this gun fight never came off. An intruder presented himself.

“Kin I set in on this game, gents?”

They looked up. They did not have to look very high for the man was so short that his wrinkled brown face was on a level with theirs.

“You’re welcome, stranger,” they said, “whoever you are.”

“I’m Mr. Padin, boss hostler of the Vasto Circus an’ Rodeo Company.”

“Set right down. How many chips?” they said eagerly.

The little circus man had borrowed or begged twenty dollars somewhere which he produced. The silver cart wheels made a jingle pleasant to all ears.

“How much are these here chips?”

“One peso a piece.”

“Give me twenty.”

They said nothing. But they played three hands. Three hands were all that were necessary to clean Mr. Padin out.

“Lend me a buck and I’ll try again,” said the incorrigible Padin.

“Oh, no,” the barber objected. “All as we want of your company, Mr. Padin, is to straighten out a little quarrel we just started. This here ole coot which keeps the harness shop won’t believe nothin’ we’re tellin’ about that white horse.”

“You mean Ali Baba—the stallion which was stole’ from our last stand?”

“Ali Baba is what we mean. And we’d admire to have you explain to this gent that we ain’t lyin’ when we say a prospector from the desert with gun-bore eyes horsed in and broke up the show.”

“Broke up the show!” the boss hostler snorted. “You mean he *shot* up the show! I never seen such wholesale murderin’ in my life.”

“Murder?” the harness-maker asked. “I didn’t know they was any murderin’. Why didn’t the sheriff——”

“Oh, they ain’t daid. When I say murderin’ I mean that he shot six shots—had a six-gun, you see—and every shot lodged home. The clown got his—a tent-pegger got his—Vasto himself looked like a sieve when the bandit got through with *him*! And, what’s more, the zebra and the elephant and the chimpanzee got theirs!”

The company looked triumphantly at the skeptic, as if to say: “Now will you call us liars—after hearing this eye-witness?”

“And what about the fist fight in the street? Tell him about that.”

“Fist fight!” the hostler scoffed. “A fight with knives and guns is more like it!” The audience gaped.

“Why that gunman from the desert come horsin’ in on a wild-lookin’ mustang, rode up to Vasto, threw a big rope—lasso or whatever you call it—yanked Vasto from his feet, twirled the rope around his neck and was about to hang him when along come the Mayor of Bombay—the elephant.

“Picked the gunman from his saddle, whirled him over his head with his trunk—and all the while the gunman was shootin’ at the crowd, at the cage-wagon, at us poor unfortunate hostlers, canvas men, cappers, con men and all.

“Finally the big tusker, seein’ the havoc that was bein’ wrought, threw him—must of been a hundred yards—into a corral where the elephant bales was stacked. By this time the whole town was up in arms and givin’ chase.

“Sheriff and his men mounted their saddle horses. I myself mounted a zebra which ain’t never been rode before. Vasto mounted the camel—and we all went pell-mell after him. The most hair-raisin’ chase you ever did see, gents, so help me!”

“And the hellbender got away, didn’t he now, Mr. Hostler?”

“He did, and I’ll tell you how. He was wise enough to pick out the fastest hoss that ever raced between Epsom Downs and New Orleans. He lit on him

bareback—hoss hadn't never been rode before, except by Mam'zelle Nugent, who kin ride anything. And like a streak of white lightnin'—hoss and man hit for the desert."

He concluded dramatically. "They won't never catch him."

The barber turned triumphantly to the skeptical harness-maker. "Now do you believe what I told you?" he asked.

The other looked defeated. "Well, I reckon you might of been right. This gent seems to know what he's talkin' about."

The professional gambler stared at the circus man, calmly, inscrutably. Finally he took out that stack of jingling dollars.

"Here, pard, take 'em back," he said. "I got 'em from you by bluffin'. But I don't deserve 'em. You're a better man than I am in that line of activity! Take 'em back—and use your talent which the good Lord has given you!"

As I have already written, "Mademoiselle" Posey Nuggins when she read that "Wanted" sign, turned pale.

She read it over several times. She could not believe its horrible import:

WANTED DEAD OR ALIVE! *The Horse Thief which rustled a white Stallion from the Vasto Circus & Rodeo Co. You can track same by the shoes: Hunting Shoe with Fullering punched with 7 Holes. Concave on Ground side. The Rustler was last seen Beating up Vasto, Prop. of the Rodeo Co. He is 6 ft. two in height. Rangy. All bone & Shank like he was hungry. Steel-gray eye. Don't come it on him unless yore heeled if you value yore life. If you find trace of the horse or this hellbender better notify me. And leave me handle same.*

*\$1000.00 (one thousand) Reward.*

JEFFERSON FLAPJOHN. *Sheriff*

When Posey Nuggins read this sign more emotions crossed her face than could be seen by the gamblers in the barroom through that door. Astonishment, fear, pity and a fierce anger were reflected alternately. She was astounded at the placard's purport; she was overcome with pity for the

poor “rangy” looking youth from the desert, whom she herself had inveigled into all this trouble.

She paced up and down the little vestibule—while the townsfolk—I mean, of course, the menfolk—stared at her in worship and awe. She was unconscious of the effect she had upon them, or rather she was so used to that effect that she had come to take it as a matter of course.

As far as she was concerned there were no miners, or cowboys, or barkeeps or gamblers in the hotel. She was alone—alone with that enigma.

Just what had happened? The boss hostler Padin had told her that the young prospector had, to satisfy her whim, rustled the horse. She had felt no fear whatever about his ever being caught.

But what in the world did this sheriff mean getting the whole countryside after the youth? And what cowardice had prompted him to phrase his reward in that way? He had suggested plainly enough that the best method was to shoot the young prospector on sight. And the worst of it all was she realized that the prospector had actually stolen the horse. At least that was the old hostler’s version. She had believed the hostler.

Dave Huppert had shown himself to be a hot-headed, savage fellow. And she had no reason to doubt but that he was in love with her. They all fell in love with her. And she had picked him out as her champion. What was more natural, more inevitable, than the outcome? The young savage, knowing her wishes, had taken the horse and packed off for the desert.

But a grave doubt arose in her mind now. That fellow was honest. She knew it. Here was one contradictory fact. He would not steal a horse. He was a Westerner and knew something of the dishonor and the vital danger of stealing horses.

She had looked at the whole thing from an Easterner’s point of view. But now that sign offering a reward for him dead or alive gave her a new point of view—the Westerner’s view. At the same time she also reflected that old Padin was given to currying and shining and brushing up facts as well as his horses.

The very moment that this doubt entered her mind she searched out the old hostler. She went to the street—to the sand lot where the circus had pitched its tents. She asked for him. He had gone to the Frontier Palace to gamble, they told her. She went back. Yes, there he was in the gaming room rehearsing the Cobb’s Coulee street fight in terms that were, to say the least, Homeric.

She called him to the vestibule.

“Padin,” she said seriously, “you’ve got to do something that’s hard work. Powerful hard work. It’s the hardest bit of work you ever did in your life——”

“Mam’zelle—I’ll clean out the Aegean stables—as the ol’ sayin’ goes. Which is supposed to be the hardest work ever accomplished by a conscientious hostler.”

“This is harder: *I’m going to ask you to tell me the truth.*”

The hostler bared a silver-haired head and wiped his brow. His red eyes blinked uncomfortably. That certainly was a request!

“That sign,” the girl said, pointing to the placard, “says that Dave Huppert actually stole Ali Baba——”

“Well, didn’t I tell you that, mam-zelle!”

“Yes, but you weren’t telling the truth.”

The red eyes blinked some more, then fell—examining the unpainted floor and the Navaho rug of the vestibule. Miners and townspeople were seated on benches all around spitting and worshipping.

Padin felt cornered.

“You tell me the truth. If you ever told the truth in your life, you tell it now.”

“Tell you what truth, mam’zelle?” he asked miserably. Apparently he did not quite know what the word meant.

“Do you realize, Padin, that the whole desert is hot on that boy’s trail, and that they’re going to drop him on sight?”

“They won’t find him if he rides Ali Baba.”

“You can’t tell. Ali Baba isn’t cut out for rocks and gulleys and chuckholes. He’s fast on a smooth track. But they say these little broncs can travel better in the desert.”

“The desert is mother’s milk to him, mam-zelle,” the hostler said wisely.

“Just the same, that prospector went out all because I begged him to. And if he really stole Ali Baba, he’s an outlaw. And I’m to blame——”

“Oh, you ain’t to blame, mam’zelle!” the old fellow blurted out. His leathery forehead was wet. He imagined that every frontiersman there was

staring at him—ready to shoot him down for what he had done.

“Oh, I’m not to blame then?” she pursued quickly. “Why not? Didn’t I beg the kid to take the horse?”

“You wanted him to buy it. You thought he was rich—bein’ he’d worked at gold diggin’.”

“Well, if he didn’t buy it—what did he do? Careful now. Don’t tell me he stuck you up. I don’t believe it.”

“Honest, mam’zelle!” He winced under her hot, angry eyes. “Oh, hell!” he exclaimed. “Let’s git out of here—and go over to the lot. We’re bein’ stared to death.”

She took his arm. A dozen pairs of hungry eyes were watching her. Padin thought they were watching him. There was a dead silence, except for the excruciating sound of horse flies which buzzed all about the vestibule. Padin was in torture.

“All right, mam’zelle. He didn’t rustle the hoss. He’s too square. I know’d it lookin’ at him.”

“Then what did happen?”

“I told him the hoss was yours—and that you gave it to him.”

“*You told him—the—horse—was mine!*” the girl gasped.

“Sure. Ain’t he yours? You ride him.”

“Didn’t it enter your fool head that that lie may cost a man his life?”

“I’ve told much bigger lies than that without it doin’ nobody any hurt,” the old hostler grumbled.

The onlookers heard very little of this conversation, but they saw the expression on the girl’s face. She looked as if she were going to rend the little old man to pieces.

She turned from him exasperated. She started for the street and then went back. Perhaps she was going to give the old duffer a tanning with that crop she held in her hand. She showed very clearly that she wanted to whip something. She whipped her cordovan riding boot—and old Padin cringed.

“What and the hell, mam’zelle!” he pleaded. “Don’t blame me. I was tryin’ to save Ali Baba. You know that. How could I know what was goin’ to come of it? How was I to know these fool Westerners hang a man for stealin’ a hoss?”

“They won’t hang him,” the girl burst out. Every one heard her this time, and the rows of townsmen held the cigarette smoke motionless in their half-opened mouths. This drama between the two circus folk was more vital than they had imagined.

“I’m going to hotfoot down there into the desert and find that sheriff,” she announced.

“Holy smoke, you *are* crazy!”

“Get two saddle ponies right away, Padin,” she ordered. “And get some one in town to outfit us and take us back to Cobb’s Coulee. From there we can trace this double dealing, throat-cutting sheriff down into the desert.”

“What do you mean, outfit *us*—ma’am? Who do you reckon’s goin’ on a wild-goose chase like this—aside from yourself?”

“You are!”

“Well, suffering tombstones, what and the hell!”

“Perhaps if we get down there and run out of water, and get mixed up with a few bandits, you’ll decide it’s better to spill the truth once in awhile.”

“Look here, mam’zelle,” Padin cried. “I’ll take my medicine. I’ll get mixed up with all the bandits you want me to. I’ll die of thirst. I’ll starve. I’ll fight pumas. I deserve it. It’s a just punishment. But what are *you* punishing *yourself* for——”

“It’s not punishment,” the girl said. Anger had left her; her eyes were bright with a softer fire. She went to the “Wanted” sign again and tore it down. “*Rangy. All bone and shank like he was hungry. Steel-gray eye.*”

“I want to see him again,” she exclaimed to the old hostler.

## CHAPTER XI.

### POSEY SEEKS A GUIDE.

When the outlaw, Chuck Chapote, had been attacked by Ali Baba, he was left, bruised and helpless, at the bottom of an arroyo.

Picking himself up finally from the chaparral of thorn he limped and climbed along until he found a mule deer trail which he and his henchmen had used many a time as a highway from the desert to civilization.

His first adventure was to discover the posse led by Sheriff Flapjohn.

Now Chuck Chapote, in accordance with the psychology of any thief, jumped to the conclusion that this posse was hunting for him. Inasmuch as it was still night time Chuck found it a simple matter to hide in the mesquite while the posse passed.

Luck was with him when morning came. One of his own gang—a Mexican rustler—was riding along that same trail, heading for the gambling hall down at Sundown Mesa. This Mexican obliged his pard and master by taking him home—that is to say to the Mexican's xacalli up in a lonely barranca. Here he outfitted Chuck with a saddle horse.

Chapote, realizing that the sheriff and a posse were combing the barrancas and cañons down there in the Bad Lands, decided wisely to go north for a day or two. Having been long hunted by Sheriff Flapjohn, Chapote always followed a certain very successful policy of his own:

Whenever the sheriff went down into the desert Chuck went back to civilization. His identity was not yet known to the sheriff. But to be found skulking around those bad lands would give any bona fide horse thief a bad name.

The sheriff kept tab on every one he found down there—on all the prospectors, Mexicans and Papagoes, on their horses and their horses' hoofprints. But he showed no particular interest in the inhabitants of Cobb's Coulee.

Thus it was that Chapote decided to spend a day or two in Cobb's Coulee, refreshing his soul at cards and cuevo.

His first engagement in town, however, was at a little shack called the Eagle Feather Restaurant. It was a hot, stuffy place, noisy with blowflies,

pungent with onions, chile con carne and Mexican beans. It was the best restaurant in town, but at that time of the afternoon it was empty save for the proprietor and one guest—the veterinarian.

Now Chapote was not a very respectable or prepossessing looking gentleman to be seen in any kind of restaurant. His lips and receding chin were cut from that combat in the desert with the white stallion; his two-gallon hat was torn, as was his brown woolen shirt and corduroy trousers.

But in Cobb's Coulee a citizen does not need a boiled shirt or well-stiffened sombrero to be called respectable. The owner of the Eagle Feather Restaurant where Chuck had come to eat dinner, was a one-eyed gentleman with tobacco-stained teeth. The veterinarian who was sitting opposite to Chuck across the oilcloth of the table, was unshaved and smelled of horse liniment. Chuck Chapote, in fact, had no corner on uncouth physiognomy or dress. He was known in Cobb's Coulee as a prospector—ennobled by the marks of the Bad Lands.

While Chapote was stuffing himself with the beef stew of the Eagle Feather *table d'hôte*, two people entered—a small, bowlegged old man with a starched shirt front and no collar about his leathery neck, ushering in a very comely young girl. Both were apparently worn out from a long journey. Both were hungry. The girl was in a great hurry to be served, for—as she announced to the proprietor and waiter of the establishment—she was going down to the desert that very afternoon.

“Circus folk,” the veterinarian whispered to Chapote. “Might you’ve heard of the horse they lost—wonderful lookin’ critter with silk mane and tail and hide like ermine, worth thousands of dollars. Sheriff Flapjohn’s down to the desert trailin’ the thief.”

“What thief?” Chapote asked.

“Didn’t you see that sign—right up thar over the counter?”

Chapote looked around. But the girl who had just entered saw it at the same time, and left her table, went over and ripped it down angrily.

“Well, I’ll be jiggered!” the veterinarian exclaimed. “Can you beat that. And it was offerin’ a reward for the hoss! The hoss that belonged to *her* show!”

“Was it a white stallion?” Chuck Chapote asked.

The veterinarian was scratching his chin and staring at the pretty girl. What in the world had she torn down that sign for? And why was she going

into the desert?

“How much reward, and what-all did the sign say?” Chapote asked.

The intensity of his tone compelled the veterinarian’s attention. “A thousand reward,” he said. “But what in tarnation——”

“What did the hoss thief look like?” Chapote asked.

“He was the hellbender that pretty near busted up the circus peerade the mornin’ they was in this here town.”

“I wasn’t there.”

“He was kind of handsome in his way except that he had gray eyes that bore into——” the veterinarian paused, noticing the peculiar light in the desert man’s face. “Look here, Chapote, you didn’t happen to cross trails with that outlaw?”

Chuck started. “Who—me?”

The girl and the white-haired old fellow at her table looked around.

“He was not an outlaw! I’ll have you men understand that!” It was the girl who had spoken. Her voice had such a ring of assurance and anger to it that it silenced every one in the room.

The proprietor came from behind the partition where onions were sizzling, potatoes boiling and horseflies buzzing.

The veterinarian chose to make an objection: “If he ain’t a outlaw, how come they’re offerin’ a reward for him daid or alive?”

“It’s all a bonehead mistake,” the girl shot back. “He’s not a horse thief! As for the stallion—well, we begged this man to take him to the desert. The horse was being tortured by Vasto and we wanted him freed. This outlaw as you call him, was turning a decent trick!”

“That’s goin’ to be hard for the sheriff to swallow,” said the proprietor. “Particular a sheriff like Flapjohn. He’ll string him up as soon as he catches him.”

“Well, he won’t catch him!” the girl cried desperately. “I’m packing my little grip for the desert myself! If this kid Dave Huppert can only keep under cover long enough I’ll get to the sheriff first—and have a heart-to-heart talk with the gimlet-eyed old gent. He’ll know everything when I get through with him.”

The boss hostler looked sheepish. It was hard to sit there and let the girl take the responsibility for this tragic situation on her own young shoulders.

“A slight misunderstanding, gents. You wouldn’t quite see all the ins and outs of it. But you’ll remember that this here Dave Huppert beat Vasto up because he didn’t like the way Vasto was treatin’ that thar hoss. Huppert was right. He’s my friend. He’s every one’s friend——”

“But he’ll hang none the less!” adjudged the veterinarian.

“How do you reckon you can find the sheriff down in them Bad Lands, miss?” the proprietor of the restaurant asked.

“I want a guide—a man who’s been there—who knows all the trails,” the girl replied.

“They ain’t no trails except what’s made by mule deer,” said the proprietor, staring at this extraordinary girl out of his one eye.

“There must be some one in town who can steer me on the way,” the girl said. “My pard and I know about as much of this country as we do of Timbuctoo. But they tell me all the prospectors hit out from this town—and come here to have their pay dirt assayed, and their claims filed. You aren’t telling me that there’s not some one in town who knows the lay of the land.”

Both the horse doctor and the proprietor turned to the narrow-shouldered, unshaven tatterdemalion, who was loudly finishing up his beef stew.

Chuck Chapote looked up, his white-rimmed eyes turning blandly from the veterinarian to the proprietor standing above him, thence to the girl at the adjacent table.

“Mr. Chapote here is well advised of all them trails,” said the proprietor.

“Who—me?” Chapote remarked.

“The lady wants to head a expedition down into the desert, hopin’ to find the sheriff.”

“Yes—so I heard,” Chapote said, wiping the gravy from his plate with a hot biscuit. “So I heard.”

“When are you headin’ out thataway agin?”

“Me? Oh, most any time.”

Posey Nuggins was not greatly impressed with the appearance of this Mr. Chapote. But at least he looked like a native. Any one would have been

welcome as a guide—even a tipsy Navaho.

“Do you think you can help us out, mister?” she asked.

Chuck Chapote picked his teeth thoughtfully with a fork. His bruised, unshaven face was inscrutable.

While all this talk about the white stallion was going on, there was Chapote, still sore from the attack the stallion had made upon him; and still brooding over the way the tables had been turned upon him in his encounter with this fellow Dave Huppert.

Now Chuck Chapote had been thinking faster than any one else in that room. All this about a man beating up the owner of a circus and rustling one of his horses, was news to him. But he did not have to do any miraculous detective work to come to the conclusion that this circus horse was the very horse that had attacked him down there near Rattleweed Draw.

The discovery of this fact brought with it the knowledge that Sheriff Flapjohn and his posse—whom Chapote had seen trailing south—were after that horse—and the man who had stolen it.

Chuck was in the habit of turning any such situation as this to his own good. There was a man—a rash, devil-may-care young prospector, who for some crazy reason had turned what the girl had called “a good trick.” Well, he had gotten himself into pretty hot water. And Chapote saw how he could turn a good trick himself—and very much to his advantage.

The sheriff had long been trailing a certain band of horse thieves down in that desert who had made steady inroads on the horses of all those desert nesters and prospectors. Chuck Chapote was the head of that band—but he had managed thus far to keep his neck safe. But it was getting harder and harder after each theft to keep his identity a secret. One little thread of suspicion and he would find himself hanging from a pine tree up on some mesa top.

The time had come to get a scapegoat, to carry the suspicion of Chapote’s many past thefts. And here chance had played into his hand. Why not make a scapegoat out of the man who was already being trailed?

What a marvelous opportunity! The only trouble was Chapote had a pessimistic fear that that fellow Huppert might stay out of the sheriff’s way. He had seemed like a pretty hard looking customer. Chapote recalled the pallid flame in his eyes when he found out that he was being stuck up in the very act of handing Chapote a drink! He would hate to have that fellow go free.

Now, according to Chapote's analysis, Dave Huppert was dismounted. Perhaps his pinto had gone back to him. Perhaps the man was wandering about Rattleweed Cañon in search of water—which he would never find there. In either case he could elude the sheriff and his posse—at least for a day or two. If he had his horse he could probably escape. If he were on foot he could hide in the mesquite as safe as a cricket in a haystack.

The sheriff could not possibly find him until hunger and thirst forced him out. The sheriff meanwhile would be riding up and down those arroyos—and every mucker and Mexican in the locality would know of his whereabouts. If the girl went down there she would find the sheriff without any delay or difficulty.

Chuck Chapote—weighing all these matters in the twinkling of an eye—came to a definite conclusion:

“Gents,” he said quietly, “and you too, ma’am. I’ve got somethin’ to tell you.”

“I thought you could tell us something!” the horse doctor said. “You’ve just been down thataway. Out with it.”

“I’ve seen this here prospector who was so kind-hearted as to take that thar white circus critter to the desert.”

“You seen him!” the hostler gasped. “Well, sufferin’ tombstones! What do you mean by that! Where—how—what was he doin’?”

“Had the sheriff found him? Were they on his trail? Is he safe?” These questions were from the girl. “Are you sure he was the one?”

“Now wait and I’ll tell yer. He was ridin’ a pinto. He was a big, lanky gent—handsome, as you said, pard——” he nodded to the horse doctor—“except that he was raw-boned and wind-burned and rangy in general \_\_\_\_\_”

“That’s the hombre!” the veterinarian exclaimed.

“Was leadin’ a white stallion. Down there by Rattleweed Draw. Likewise there was another hoss—with the Box Deuce brand.”

“Probably arranged for another as a pack hoss,” the horse doctor suggested.

“Don’t know about that. It was a snappy lookin’ little pony for a pack hoss. Maybe he got her for to change off with his own mount, bein’ he was figurin’ on fast trailin’.”

“That’s the answer,” said the proprietor.

“But do you know where he is now? Was the sheriff anywhere on his trail?” the girl asked.

“Right direct on his trail, ma’am.”

“But can we follow them? Can we get there in time? Do you think they’ll hang him without any trial——”

“No doubt about that last point,” one of the men said.

“I reckon I could show you the way, ma’am,” Chuck Chapote suggested. “I know the water holes and the short cuts and the places to steer clear of. You see this here sheriff has most like been wastin’ a lot of time zigzaggin’ around pickin’ up the fugitive’s tracks. They’ll be playin’ hide and seek down there a day or two more, I reckon.”

“Then you think there’s a chance?” the girl cried eagerly.

“If you’re willing to put up with some hard trailin’——”

“I’m willing to trail to the Panama Canal! I’m willing to ride anywhere—*if we can only save that poor kid!*”

“Kin you grubstake us then for a couple of days, Mr. Eagle Feather?” Chapote asked of the proprietor.

“I reckon I kin have my ole woman fix you up a pack pronto,” the other rejoined.

“When do we light out?” the girl asked with boundless enthusiasm.

“In an hour—half an hour—twenty minutes——” Chapote said.

“Ten minutes is more like it,” said the proprietor. “My ole lady works fast.”

Old Padin, whose enthusiasm for this desert trip was not quite equal to the girl’s, followed the proprietor to the kitchen door.

“Is this here gent safe?” he asked quietly. “Looks like a queer bird to be follerin’ all the way to Mexico.”

“He’s the handsomest guide we got around here,” the other rejoined.

“Handsome! Wow!” Padin turned back. He did not like the outlook. He did not like Chuck Chapote. And he was pessimistic about ever finding the sheriff or any one else down there on that horizon of red mesas.

“It’s certainly white of you, mister, to go back with us when you’ve just come to town for a hot time,” the girl said to Chapote.

“Don’t mention it, ma’am,” the scarecrow rejoined, gnawing off a hunk of tobacco. “I got my own reasons. I’d hate to see that thar young feller strung up if he’s innocent like you say. And I believe you, ma’am. He had the most innocent lookin’ eyes I ever met up with——” and he added to himself—“outside a puma lion’s cave!”

A few minutes later three riders—a girl who rode her sorrel with the ease and grace of a professional equestrienne, a ragged hombre in a huge sombrero, straddling a Mexican saddle, bumping along on a desert mustang, and, finally, a stove-up silvery-haired fellow with dusty felt hat and grimy soiled shirt front—these three galloped their mounts down the main street of Cobb’s Coulee.

They passed the outer saloons and shacks while the townsfolk watched them.

“A gal hittin’ south—for the mesa!” an old stockman exclaimed.

“It’s a circus gal,” another explained.

“And besides she’s got Chuck Chapote for guide,” said another. “And Chuck sure knows that territory.”

Chapote, as a matter of fact, knew just what route he was going to take. He knew every inch of it to the smallest hog-wallow or arroyo. It was the shortest route to a Mexican gaming tavern far down near Sundown Mesa. It was a tavern where Chuck often met his cronies and henchmen—from which headquarters he was in the custom of starting on his predatory rides.

There was no reason in the wide world why this girl should suspect where she was going.

“A hell of a place to take such a little lady!” Chuck said to himself as he set up a good pace. “But she won’t have to stay there long. Just long enough to give Sheriff Flapjohn time enough to get his man—and hang him.”

## CHAPTER XII.

### AT SUNDOWN MESA.

It was for a very brief space of time that Dave Huppert felt himself free. Riding his own pinto and leading Ali Baba, he headed for the open plain. The southern horizon was broken by the purple mountains of Mexico. The plain itself, dotted with mesquite and cactus, was a vast expanse which with one exception was unbroken by the slightest rise of land or depression or creek bed.

That exception was Sundown Mesa, a mountain of granite and shale with a flat top that extended for a hundred miles like a table on the horizon. The sides of the mesa were cut with deep gulches and arroyos in which for years past rustlers had found refuge.

Dave Huppert knew that the danger of his being seen crossing that plain was very great. And once seen it would be a mad, straight-away chase. In this event he held little hope of winning, for his pinto was worn out and the stallion—soft and unaccustomed to the hard trails—was still worse for wear. Some of the horses of that posse, furthermore, might be fresh.

Nevertheless it was of paramount importance that he make the try. He might for awhile go cautiously, keeping himself against a background of grease-wood and black sage which would make his detection difficult at first.

Likewise—with only two horses—he might trail along over the harder packed ground to avoid kicking up dust. A cloud of dust was the first sign which would give him away.

He had just started out on this perilous venture when something happened which annihilated his last hope of success. A cloud of dust came down out of Pete Duffle's cañon, a clatter of hoofs, a wild galloping—and there on the plain a few furlongs behind him came six riderless horses!

The horse in the lead—he knew without so much as giving it a second glance—was a claybank. Then came four more critters, and far behind trailed a shaggy, mule-like thing in mottled gray and black.

Dave swore. He swore audibly. His two horses shied at his tone, wondering what had angered him. The stallion hung back and neighed. He

arched his neck. He pranced and tugged at the halter with which he was hitched to the pinto's saddle.

The pinto, running along sidewise in response to his rider's kicking, looked back. He seemed very much interested—if such an emotion is possible in a horse, he seemed amused. His pudgy lips curled back over his long yellow teeth, and his breath came out in short puffs. In fact, he gave the exact simulation of laughing. Dave Huppert felt that the gods themselves were laughing at him.

There was only one thing to do. He could not possibly cross that plain now without being caught. He decided to hit straight for Sundown Mesa, where, in those deep gulches and arroyos, he could play hide and seek with the posse. If luck was with him he could watch his chance and then try for another break across the plain.

He started on this new tack, heading westward for the giant cliffs of the mesa. Almost immediately he saw another cloud of dust coming up from the alkaline beds of Pete Duffle's cañon. Riders emerged and headed for him.

This was disconcerting, for it suggested the probability that the posse, having reached Duffle's diggings, had been shown the trail he had taken—that is to say, the general direction he had taken when leaving old Uncle Pete.

They raced along. It was nip and tuck for the rest of the afternoon. Perhaps night would come in time and he could give them the slip—whoever they were. But before night came he realized that his paint cayuse was petering out. And the stallion—lathered with sweat and stumbling heavily along the hard ground—did not promise much as a means of escape.

Ali Baba, so to speak, had been on a tear. He was paying for it now. What he needed was rest, and a good meal, and some water. He was used to being curried down and put into a well-bedded stall after ambling about the soft circus ring. He was not used to this racing madly over rocks and thorn shrubs for days and nights without rest.

Dave sped his horses now to the limit of their endurance. A long, killing run across the flat plain, over stretches of sage, and past the long low dunes of sand, brought him at sunset to the foot of the cliffs.

Then this trail—which had been made by mule deer—forked, one following the main bed of the gulch, another zigzagging up to a ledge screened with piñones. Dave took the latter trail, reached the ledge, and gave his horses a breathing space.

As he sat there on a rock, looking down into the deep dusk of the gulch through which he had come, the death-like stillness began to throb. It was like something long lifeless returning to this world with a faint beating of pulse. Dave recognized that growing rhythm. It was the galloping of horses over rock slabs and hard adobe.

He looked far down below him, straining his eyes. Presently he saw them—a band of riders. He watched them. There were six.

Dave kept his horses well back from the ledge of rock. He himself was screened by the thick scrubby trees. And it was getting darker rapidly. There was no twilight, for when the narrow strip of sky turned from crimson to dark purple, night came into the cañon.

The last that Dave could discern was the file of riders coming up to that fork in the trail. They took the wrong trail—naturally enough. The mule deer trail up to Dave's hiding place was inconspicuous even in daylight.

He heard the hoofbeats of the horses growing louder, then diminishing as they climbed up the main stream bed of the gulch. Later the muffled beats dwindled to a rhythm that was almost imperceptible to the ear. It seemed to break, bits of the sound drifting back on a breeze.

For awhile at least Dave had given them the slip. He resumed his own trail, climbing higher and higher, until he reached the mesa top. He then climbed another step—a smaller mesa or picacho of volcanic formation. On the top of this he found a depression of ground in what seemed to be a crater bowl. Here there were piñon trees and grass.

From the rim of this he could look down on the top of the main mesa, where a few miles away he saw a fire glowing. Apparently the posse had encamped for the night—knowing that it was impossible as well as dangerous to hunt around those gulches in the dark.

The next morning Dave looked down again. He saw the posse—like ants moving off to a cañon. They searched the cañon, then came back, rode across the top, searched another. They spent the whole day in this futile enterprise. And the whole day Dave rested, as secure as an eagle in its eyrie.

That night he slept, and his horses slept, and the posse encamped about a fire, which could be plainly seen from the rim of Dave's mesa.

He took stock of his provisions the next morning, and decided to stick it out one day longer. He knew where he could get a grubstake if that posse would only give him a chance.

The chance came the next afternoon when they were searching a cañon about five miles away.

As soon as the sun went down Dave saddled his pinto and climbed down the steep trail on the southern side of the mesa, toward the outfitting post. It was a post where he had stopped once before in his travels. He had never stopped there again, because some Mexicans who had ostensibly come for a night's carousal had robbed him.

The place had a bad name, for it was supposed to be a hangout for rustlers and outlaws. Whenever the sheriff came around he found nothing but an old adobe house, a fat Papago squaw and a hunchback man who was the sutler.

When the sheriff went back to civilization the adobe house was lit up with jack lanterns; the sutler played a guitar; a Mexican would crop up from somewhere with a dancing partner and give an exhibition of the guaracha or sombrero blanco. In fact, the mice played hard as soon as the cat went back to Cobb's Coulee.

Under cover of night Dave Huppert and his cavalcade of equine pests trailed down the long cañon to this posada. It was the same posada where Chuck Chapote, outlaw, had decided to bring his two victims, the girl from the circus and her old companion, the boss hostler.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### THE TRADE RAT.

The keeper of that Mexican posada was a curious fellow. He had brown twinkling eyes, a long nose, and long wisps of black hair sticking from his lip. He was partly humpbacked. Not a very prepossessing character, but genial in speech, a good host, a passable guitar player and a sharp trader. His only name, so far as Huppert ever knew, was the "Trade Rat."

In the parlance of Eastern crookdom this fellow would be called a "fence." The crooks with whom he traded, and with whom he made arrangements for a grubstake and a journey across the border, were in most cases Mexican horse thieves.

On a certain night the lonely adobe house was deserted except for the Trade Rat, and his mountainous squaw who was making *eñchiladas* on a flat rock. Mine host was plunking "*La Paloma*" from a guitar.

Shortly after sunset a desert breeze brought the fragrance of sage which the heat of the day had sucked up from the plain, and mingled it with the more invigorating tang of *piñones* from the higher reaches of the *cañons*. The world was perfect and quiet. A few horses dozed in a corral; a handful of chickens went to roost; an owl came out from under the tiles of the posada roof and went off in search of a pack rat or a mouse.

For awhile the only sounds were the hoot of the owl, the strains of "*La Paloma*" and the squaw patting the meal cakes for her *eñchiladas*. Presently into this harmony mingled the clip-clop of horses' feet upon the soft dry earth.

The twanging of the guitar stopped, and so did the patting of hands upon the meal. The Trade Rat came out and stood in his doorway, listening and waiting. The coming of horses always meant something important in that part of the country. It might mean renegade Apaches who wanted to buy *redeye*; it might mean a sheriff and his posse hunting down a rustler; it might mean a prospector returning from his diggings with gold dust.

In this last case a theft would have to be arranged, a theft that would leave the proprietor free of suspicion. A simple matter: The Trade Rat would announce himself robbed. The hapless prospector would also announce himself robbed. After a few months, perhaps, the sheriff would come down

to investigate. But he could not find anything around the outfit to incriminate the proprietor. It was hard to pin anything on the Trade Rat.

In the present instance, the coming of horses proved to be a novelty. Three riders presented themselves. The Trade Rat, standing framed in the yellow light of his doorway, stared through strands of his matted black hair. He gave the impression of a lithe but misshapen animal, ready to spring at the slightest warning, and in any direction—to flee, or to attack.

He puffed faster at his Mexican cheroot as the riders trotted their horses up to the veranda. Then he stopped puffing and exhaled with considerable relief. One of the riders was a friend. Not a friend exactly, but a very valuable acquaintance; a man who had paid well and many a time for small favors. It was, in a word, Chuck Chapote, the cattle rustler. He was in the company of two very strange characters: a handsome young girl, and a silvery-haired, leather-necked little man.

These two were an enigma. They were not dressed as Westerners. They were not nesters. It was not a prospector and his daughter. The old fellow was more of a servant, attending to the horses when they dismounted and taking orders from the young girl. Chuck Chapote's introductions did not immediately solve the question.

"Two friends of mine," he said. "We're dyin' of hunger. Git your ole woman to cook us chicken with Mexican rice—and git out a bar'l of pulque."

The proprietor stared out of his fierce buzzard eyes. He was going to ask questions, but he saw something in Chapote's face which warned him to keep still.

"I'm figurin' on a good time tonight. Want to show this here little gal—a circus gal—just how we Arizonians celebrate."

The proprietor could hold his tongue no longer. "What-all are you celebratin', Chuck?"

"The fack that we got here alive," the other rejoined. "This here gal fainted a couple times when we was trailin' through them hot arroyos. Don't blame her."

"I come nigh onto passin' away in a faint or two myself," said the hostler.

"Git your squaw to fix up a room. Good clean bed. She's quality—this gal. Wonderin' how come I'm to be found in her company—ain't you? I kin

read your glitterin' eyes easy enough, Ratty. Well, I'll tell you. I'm her guide."

"Where-all are you guidin' her to?" asked the other. He wanted to get the drift of this business before playing some false move. Never in all his eventful life at that posada, had the proprietor seen this cattle rustler abducting a woman. And most certainly that was what he was up to.

"She hired me as a guide," Chuck Chapote said, "so's I could take her to the sheriff——"

"*Then you know——*" the proprietor checked himself. His all-seeing eyes warned him again. Chapote's expression had changed.

"To find the sheriff—Sheriff Flapjohn," the rustler said so that every one could hear him. "You see this here Sheriff Flapjohn is trailin' a man down here who's innocent. And this gal wants to find him—and prevent a lynchin'."

"I reckon you won't be findin' no sheriff tonight, Chuck," the proprietor said.

"I reckon not. Show that ole hombre out there what to do with the hosses. And git your ole lady to fix this gal up."

The hostler was staring at the squaw with considerable fascination. "What sort of an animal do you call *her*?" he asked.

"She's the proprietor's squaw!" Chapote laughed.

"Wow! She's some freak. I will have to sign her up for our sideshow. Put her in a cage with a couple skulls. 'The Cannibal Hoozis. Eats 'em alive!' She'll be a knockout!"

"You better show the gent where he kin put his horses, Ratty," Chapote said to the host.

Now Posey Nuggins, seated on a wooden bench on the veranda, utterly exhausted, and scarcely listening to what was being said, did not notice this last exchange of remarks. Even if she had noticed, she would not have seen anything out of the ordinary in the situation. She was not a Western girl.

She did not know that down there in the Coyotero country horses were never kept in barns. There was never any rain, never any cold, never any reason in the world to take a horse indoors from the corral. She let it pass and when the squaw waddled up to her and helped her into the posada, she had no suspicion of the fact that that humble little dwelling was a trap.

And Padin, boss hostler of the Vasto Circus, was not a man to suspect anybody. He believed that all men were liars, but that nevertheless they were fundamentally honest.

He was easily frightened. He was afraid of the desert; of getting lost; of thirst; of hunger. He was afraid of the general term “bandit.” But it did not occur to him that such humble and honest and poor folk as his guide and the proprietor of this ramshackle tavern, or his huge Indian wife, could be bandits. In fact, he felt very comfortable and safe now that he had arrived at a human habitation after the gruelling ride through those desolate wastes.

“Them are too fine a trio of horses for us to leave out in the open,” the proprietor said as he led the stock into a shake barn behind the posada. “Cain’t risk leavin’ ’em out here. Lobos is liable to git after ’em. You jes’ simply cain’t imagine what havoc these here desert lobos works with our stock.”

Being a circus man, old Padin would not for all the world have asked what sort of an animal a lobo was. Instead—according to his habit—he proceeded to tell a yarn about a lobo, showing that he knew what a lobo was as well as anybody else.

“They ain’t nothin’ in this country compared to what they are in Africa,” he said. “I was attacked by one wunst. Didn’t have my pistol—too heavy to pack around in the hot weather. Only had a Winchester—which ain’t any good for a lobo like the one I met up with——”

“You couldn’t kill him with a Winchester?” the other asked.

“Kill him! Huh! Couldn’t even penetrate him! Hit him right here, too——” he pointed to his shoulder. “It would have gotten his heart. Well, mister, I just went at him barehanded. And his hide was so tough I couldn’t grab holt. Except by gettin’ my fingers in between the plates like——”

“Plates?” the other asked bewildered.

“Sure, this one had plates of hide same as a wart hog.”

“Why didn’t you grab his fur?”

“His fur!” the circus hostler snorted. “Why, his fur stuck into the palm of my hand—like spines. Sort of a hedge hog, you know.” He was still fishing for some clew to what sort of a mammal or fowl or reptile a “lobo” really was. “When I got through with him I had to have the spines cut out. They only worked one way. See the scars in my hand?”

His host held up the jack lantern and saw an elaborate pattern of tattoo marks which the hostler had achieved in his sideshow days.

“That sure was some wolf!” the other said.

“Wolf!” the circus man cried. “I thought you was talking about lobos—leastwise *I* was.”

“Well, dad-burn my soul!” the proprietor chuckled. “Don’t you know that down here we calls wolves lobos!”

The old hostler was almost beaten. But he rallied. “You mean to tell me a lobo and a wolf is the same!”

“Why shore it is! Didn’t you know that, pard!”

“Well, mister, you’ve sure got somethin’ to learn. A wolf has two fangs here——” old Padin pointed to his missing teeth. “But a lobo has three—one in the middle, which rips yore hide before it bites you. Didn’t you know that?”

“Well, I’m sure glad to learn it, pard,” said the proprietor. “And bein’ that’s the case, I’m goin’ to put a padlock on this door. Don’t want to take no chances with a lobo which it has three fangs.”

Snap went the lock. And the key went into the Trade Rat’s pocket.

“When you’re hitting the trail agin you call on me for the key,” the Trade Rat said. “Them hosses is safe—because it’s the only key I’ve got. Otherwise I’d give you one. But we cain’t afford to take no chances with bandits and lobos.”

The old hostler was quite satisfied.

“Speakin’ of bandits,” he said as they returned to the posada, “let me tell you what happened to me once in Afghanistan——”

The Trade Rat did not hear much of the yarn. He hurried back to find out what next was to be done. His friend and master—Chuck Chapote—would probably have much to say to him.

When the girl had been taken to the little bedroom in the rear of the posada, the Trade Rat and Chuck Chapote retired to the gaming room and entered into serious conference.

“You say you are looking for the sheriff, Chuck?” said the proprietor.

“I am always looking for the sheriff. What do you ask me such a fool question like that for?”

“But you say you’re takin’ this *señorita* to Sheriff Flapjohn!”

“That’s what she thinks.”

The Trade Rat picked up his guitar, played a few bars. “I understand,” he said finally.

“You understand what?”

“You don’t want the gal to see the sheriff. Which it’s too bad. Because the sheriff he’s in a cañon not very far off with a camp fire. At sundown I seen him with a bunch of hell-bent, roarin’ mad riders.”

“Well of all the sheep-eyed, knock-kneed greasers I ever did see!” Chuck exploded. “Why in hell didn’t you tell me that in the first place?”

“You wanted me to tell you when the girl could hear?”

That alibi had to be accepted. It was obviously the truth.

“Go on then, Ratty, tell me the rest.”

“All day he’s been trailin’ up and down lookin’ for a hoss thief. I promised him I’d be on the lookout. Likewise I said to myself we won’t steal any cayuses tonight. Then what do we see but our friend—you, Chuck—you and your fair young captive!”

Chuck Chapote’s white-rimmed eyes blinked seriously. It was—as the Trade Rat intimated—a very grim situation. The Sheriff combing the cañons for a horse thief—and Chapote with a captive on his hands! It was the first time in his long and successful career as a rustler, that he had invited any such trouble. Whenever the sheriff came into the desert, Chapote went out.

Chapote made a cigarette with his spidery fingers. It was a bad cigarette. As I have recorded before he had an awkward left hand. When he lit the cigarette the paper caught fire and the tobacco trickled out. He threw it away and stamped on it.

The Trade Rat saw that his friend was perturbed. He was about to offer help by making a suggestion: “The white-haired hostler out there should be killed immediately. The girl should be taken to Mexico.

“Chuck Chapote shouldn’t take her. That would be too dangerous an undertaking. He should go off into a cañon and hide until the sheriff got out

of the locality. As for the girl—the Trade Rat himself could take two fast horses and pack her off. Then all would be well.”

That was the obvious solution in the Trade Rat’s mind. But he was not in the habit of making suggestions to Chapote. No one ever made suggestions to that master. The only thing to do was to listen and take orders.

“Go out and tell that old sheephead to come here and have a drink,” Chapote said.

The “old sheephead,” Padin, came readily enough.

Chapote might have drawn the proprietor of the posada aside and admitted that the hostler was a nuisance, and must be packed away somewhere. The sheriff was riding around up there in the mesa cañons, and in the event of his coming to the posada—which was very probable—he must not find the girl, or her hostler, or her horses.

“Might be you’re a bit thirsty after our ride, pard?” Chapote suggested.

“Thirsty?” the circus man exploded. “Wow! That’s a good joke!”

“Might be you’d like to sample some Spanish wine which mine host here has a lot of same in the cellar.”

“Wine!” the hostler snorted. “Wine after ridin’ forty miles of sand! How far do I have to ride for a drink of whiskey?”

“He’s got whiskey. He’s got *cuevo*. He’s got jackass brandy, redeye—anything you want. He’ll leave you pick it out.”

“Come on, mister, come on!” the hostler said, taking mine host’s arm.

They went down through a trap door. Mine host glancing back at Chuck Chapote saw the latter turn his thumb down. Any explanation about hiding these prisoners from the sheriff was totally superfluous.

Chapote retired to a small room in the back of the posada; a room with heavy adobe walls, a narrow barred window through which the moon, newly arisen above the cañon rim, cast an almost horizontal band of light. A candle set in a tin can gave the only other illumination. On a table made of boxes, the squaw had set hot *eñchiladas*, coffee, chile and beans.

The girl was summoned to this supper. A cup of wine revived her. Despite the fact that she was physically exhausted, she was in high spirits. And the news that the sheriff had not yet found Dave Huppert was all that was necessary for her to enjoy the whole situation as a wonderful adventure.

But when she came in she saw that there were only two places set at the table. She judged, of course, that old Padin, the hostler, was to be the other guest. But no sooner had she sat down than the ragged and unshaven scarecrow who had been her guide, sat down with her.

“Where’s Padin?” she asked.

“Where’s who? Padin? Why, he’s beddin’ down the horses.”

“He came in,” she objected.

“True. He’ll show up any minute.”

“Where’s he going to sit?” the girl asked.

“Right here—why holloa! The old squaw only set two places. How come you only set two places, Mapimi? Didn’t you see they was three of us—all dying of hunger?”

The squaw grunted, shook her head, and waddled off.

“She’s deaf,” Chapote said. “I told her to set three, but you can see she’s deaf.”

“I’m going to wait for Padin,” the girl said.

Chuck Chapote fell to his food with a ferocious zeal. He slobbered all over himself. He sucked up his coffee and sputtered because of its heat: “Why-all don’t they have saucers for to drink this stuff?”

In considerably less than five minutes he had cleaned his dish, and was operating on his yellow teeth with a bowie knife.

The romance of the adventure was dwindling.

“We must get back to the trail right after supper,” the girl said. “If the sheriff is camping up there in one of those cañons, I am going to find him tonight.”

“Why, gal,” Chuck protested, “you know perfectly well you couldn’t set in the saddle for another hour of trailin’.”

“I’m going to find him tonight,” she persisted. “You don’t mean that we’re going to *sleep* here, while that posse——”

“While that posse sleeps likewise?” Chuck said, rolling a cigarette. He rolled a very good one this time—a fat, tightly packed one, that gave him a glorious smoke.

“Any minute they might find him,” she said. “And we’ll be too late. I’m going to stay on the trail till I drop.”

“Well, you’ve dropped a couple times already,” said Chuck affably. “Why, child, I wouldn’t be so all-fired heartless as to leave you go out there in the night.”

“It’s moonlight. You say it’s the best time to trail——”

“Oh, no, it ain’t. The best time over flat ground mebber. If we was headin’ for Mexico—like your lover is probably headin’, all right. But to go up thar into them cañons, and drop into a crevice which we’d think same was only the shadow of a rock—oh, no, not me. And not you either. You are stayin’ here tonight.”

Posey Nuggins did not like the assurance that went with that last statement. She glanced up. He was a comical-looking wisp of humanity. But his chinless face, his bristling reddish stubble, his forehead, white and shining above the line of the hat band, were not so comical now as they were repulsive.

“Where’s Padin?” she burst out suddenly. This time there was no mistaking the fear that had crept into her tone.

Chuck took up the Trade Rat’s guitar and tried to imitate the latter’s recent rendition of “La Paloma.” It was like a parrot imitating a human voice.

Posey got to her feet.

“What has happened?” she barely whispered. “Why isn’t Padin here?”

“Padin? Oh, he’s out there gettin’ likkered up.”

This time Chapote had stumbled on a very plausible explanation. That of course was what had happened. Posey Nuggins might have thought of that in the first place.

“Then bring him in here!” she said.

She judged very truthfully that he would have to be “brought” in.

“Go and git the gentleman for the lady,” Chuck said to the squaw.

The squaw failed to hear the command. She did not even turn from the window through which she was looking.

Chapote went to her, tapped her timidly, and pointed to the window. He rubbed his hands and shivered. “Gettin’ drafty—savvy?”

She seemed to understand this pantomime and forthwith left the room.

The girl had no conception of what this order meant. She was obsessed with but one idea—the safety of her old hostler. Any nuance of meaning to Chapote’s remarks or signals naturally escaped her.

But a few minutes later some one was outside of the narrow window battering it down with a shutter board. The girl turned about, ashen pale. There was no doubt now. She fled to the window. Then, circling like a trapped animal, she fled toward the door. Chuck was there singing. She backed away.

A moment later she heard the squaw coming into the house again. Chapote left the door which he had been guarding and flopped into a chair. When the girl fled to the door the giant hulk of the squaw met her.

“Get out of my way—you!” she cried frantically.

The squaw’s thin lips drooped, her eyes squinted, wrinkling to a hundred crow’s feet. She did not move. Instead, her drooping lips gave her the appearance of surprise and injured feelings.

Chapote laughed. “She’s deaf!” he said.

“Don’t stand in my way,” the girl threatened. “If you try to keep me here, I’ll show you——”

The squaw seemed as if she were about to cry. Chapote guffawed. “Deef as a post!”

The girl put out her hands as if to shove the tremendous bulk of bone and muscle away. It was a pitiful and ridiculous gesture. Her other hand reached for her six-gun, but with no direct purpose. She could not have fired at the old Papago woman—and all three, the squaw, Chapote and the girl herself knew it.

Posey Nuggins sank to her knees. And old Mapimi caught her and helped her back to her chair. Her solicitation seemed, in a remote and grotesque sort of way, quite motherly.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### HOOFBEATS.

The cavernous cellar of that posada was cool without being damp. A drink of tequila from a jug rejuvenated the white-haired, red-eyed and exhausted hostler. And it inspired his narrative genius as it had never been inspired before. Besides, his host was affable, humble, and a perfect listener.

The latter was seated on a barrel, regarding the circus man with pale-blue fishy eyes, in which there was a faint twinkle either of friendliness or amusement. Certainly it did not suggest the twinkle in a cat's eye in watching the movements of a condemned mouse.

“By the time I beached my canoe,” the hostler was orating, “the whole jungle, so help me, was alive and hiss'n' with reptyles.”

His host had listened to him killing off three boa-constrictors, twenty cobras and seven scorpions, before he vouchsafed a remark:

“When you go up into these here cañons, you want to watch out for rattlers.”

“Rattlers!” the old fellow snorted. “Let me tell you an adventure of mine with rattlers——”

A few more executions were under way. “There I was—without a gun—my leg broke—and I was clinging for dear life to a ledge with a yawnin' chasm below me and three rattlers crawlin' acrost a rock toward me——”

“I don't advise you goin' up into them cañons behind here without you have plenty of ammunition. The rattlers you speak of is all right. And the way you killed them was sure ingeniouslike. But a forked stick and a penknife won't protect you ag'in' *these* rattlers.”

“If I'd only had three shots left——”

“You better figure on havin' three boxes of cartridges left when you meet up with them side-winders to-morry.”

“I reckon so,” the circus man said. “I ain't got much ammunition left. The guide told me I could get outfitted here.”

“What caliber is yore shootin' iron?”

“Forty-five.”

“Good. I got just what you want.” The host went over to a shelf which was stacked with boxes. He returned with a few rounds of cartridges. “I put a lot of grease on these special, for to protect ’em. You see I keep ’em here for months at a time without havin’ no call for same. See if they work.”

Old Padin took out his six-gun and tried to insert one of the cartridges in the cylinder. While he was fumbling with this matter, his host was thinking of something entirely apart from rattlers, forty-fives, or heavily greased cartridges. He was contemplating hitting the old fellow on the back of his head with the butt of his own six-gun.

But he had found this a dangerous proposition. It was hard to measure a blow. Besides, this little fellow was so innocuous in his appearance and deportment that it seemed ridiculous to floor him.

A blow on the head had—in the Trade Rat’s past—proved fatal for white-haired men. And Chuck Chapote was very much averse to his henchman indiscriminately slaying everybody. Much better to bind and gag this old fellow and leave him in the cellar. Chuck could dispose of him in his own way.

Of course the Trade Rat could have held his guest up. But that also was a dangerous procedure. The guest was armed. The Trade Rat had had nasty experiences in the past trying to hold up armed men. Some of them knew how to fire from the hip. Old men were often quicker in this sort of a gesture than the young.

He played safe.

“Won’t they work, pard?” he asked affably.

“Looks to me like they’re too large. And yet—they’re forty-fives all righto.”

“Then they’d orter work. Leave me take a look at ’em. I’ll show you how I fix ’em when they’re too tight.”

He put a cartridge in his mouth and affected to bite it. He then took the hostler’s gun. It was like taking candy from a baby.

Two minutes later old Padin was on the ground kicking and struggling like a roped calf. He was also as helpless as a calf, for the owner of the posada knew how to tie knots in rawhide.

The realization that she had been made a prisoner came so suddenly that Posey Nuggins was stunned. From the beginning, when her “guide” had brought her into the more desolate reaches of the Bad Lands, she had known that her expedition was a hazardous one. But she had not dreamed until now what unthinkable dangers were in store for her.

She found herself seated again at the table, her hands upon the board, palms upward in a gesture of utter impotence, defeat, despair. They felt so heavy that she thought she could not have lifted them if she had tried. It was as if they were paralyzed.

The hot flame of the candle was before her, sending shadows against the adobe wall. The shadow of Chapote was grotesque and audacious. His narrow shoulders were convulsed as if the flame were wagging. But it was not. The draft from the window, it will be remembered, had been shut off.

Posey Nuggins felt herself cooped in far underground in some deep deserted mine. No air from the outside world could ever reach her. She was going to sit there staring at Chapote forever; staring at the immovable candle flame; staring at the hulking shapeless mass of muscle and bone, down there in a corner of the room. The squaw, swathed in a Navaho blanket, was seated on her hunkers, contemplating this foolish drama of palefaces with Buddhistic complacency.

If Posey could only tell the squaw what she feared! The squaw was a woman. She would surely understand. She might be enlisted to help. How easily the savage giantess could have handled Chapote! She could have twisted that spindle neck as you twist the neck of a fowl!

“Here you!” Posey said suddenly. Her own tone frightened her. The room had turned into a cavern—and her small voice was drifting and echoing fruitlessly. “You—there. Come here. Can’t you hear me? You there! Can’t you understand—this beast has brought me to the desert and made me a captive——”

The voice trailed off to a whisper, to a choking sob. She might as well have been yelling at the breakers on a seashore.

“Deef as a post!” Chapote laughed. “Can’t hear nothin’, not even the thunder. Except she kin feel it comin’. In other words, she hears it long afore human ears kin. And she kin hear hosses’ hoofs long afore any one else. Feels the ground tremblin’, you know.

“Strange ole lady. And very reliable, too, I’ll tell yer. I kin leave you safe with her, so help me! And she’ll treat you right. Good ole soul. But I

wouldn't advise yer tryin' any buck-jumpin' with *her!*"

The girl said nothing. She did not even turn her face to him. She still sat, a frail, frightened, birdlike thing, glaring at the squaw. Chapote mistook the earnestness of that stare. He could not imagine that the girl was actually looking to that old barbarian for mercy.

"Don't make the mistake, child, of tryin' to trick her. Why, just look—she didn't even take the trouble to git a six-gun for to keep you prisoner! What do you think of that? She don't need deadly weapons. Not *that* ole lady! Her bare hands has got any six-gun beat ever invented.

"Why you ought to see her fight a mule! I seen her. Mule attackted her—and she give it a wallop on the nose. Dropped it like a short uppercut will drop a groggy fist fighter. Wow—you should of seen that mule! Stretched stiff. Never come to."

The girl was as deaf as Mapimi to his recital. Chapote reënforced the argument:

"You know how these stockmen hit a steer with the flat of a ax, afore killin' same? They employed her in that thar very capacity. Only she didn't use no flat of an ax; just the flat of her fist—that's all."

It was then that Posey deigned to turn to this dog, who was—so to speak—barking at her heels.

He recoiled somewhat from the ferocity blazing in those clear hazel eyes. In fact he thought it wise to warn her:

"This here six-gun I took from you, child—why, I just as lief give it back to yer. Because you'd still be no match for this ole she-b'ar!"

The girl broke down. Apparently she was not so ferocious, as her eyes proclaimed. She was human, weak, utterly terrified.

"I don't want that gat!" she pleaded. "How could I turn it on any of you? All I want is to know why you've done this. What good am I to you? What have I done? Who are you to pull such a dastardly trick as this?"

"What's dastardly about it? 'Tain't dastardly. What do you mean callin' me dastardly? I'm playin' a good clean, safe game—that's all. Oh, yes, that sounds phony. Well, it ain't. I'm even goin' to let you and the ol' gent free soon. You kin go back to the sheriff and tell him everything that's happened \_\_\_\_\_"

“Tell him! Do you think you could escape hanging—if any man in the God’s world hears of this?”

“Oh, I reckon so. That thar sheriff is anxious to find the hoss thief. So’s this circus owner I hear so much about. And the sheriff and his cronies are itchin’ for to lay their hands on the rustler who’s been eatin’ into their horse herds. This friend of yourn—Dave Huppert—he’s the man they want——”

“How can you tell such a hideous lie?”

“Well, maybe it’s a lie,” the other admitted with a pleasant shrug. “But it won’t look like a lie, when I’m through.”

“What do you mean by that?” she exclaimed.

“I mean this hombre, Dave Huppert, is goin’ to git strung up—for the hoss rustlin’ he’s done. That’s what I mean. And as for you—all I have to do is to tell the sheriff that I detained you and your ol’ man, bein’ you come down here for to help Huppert escape.”

The girl sprang to her feet. She was white with rage.

“You mean you’re going to frame an innocent man?” she cried. “You foul little desert rat!”

Chapote flushed. When he flushed, his face was anything but prepossessing. The yellowish skin turned color in spots. His eyes went pale. He showed his broken teeth.

“Don’t call me a rat, ma’am. No man likes a pretty gal callin’ him a rat—right to his face!”

“You are a rat—the rottenest, thieving, crawling rat that ever sneaked out of a hole! You’re the one that’s been doing this horse stealing! I can see it all now.”

Chapote got up and faced her. If he lost his temper, his whole scheme might be ruined. And he was fast losing his temper now.

“I was figurin’ you was a perfect lady,” he said bitterly. “But I reckon I was mistaken. *If* I was mistaken, I don’t see why I have to treat you as such.”

When he came toward her, she looked again—as one drowning will cling to a straw—at the Papago woman. The savage was seated there, with her elbows on her tremendous knees, her brown hands, like wooden clubs, hanging inert but eloquent of an unlimited power. Posey looked at her eyes

—little slits from which came no ghost of a sign of what was going on in that square, barbarous skull.

Posey turned terror-stricken from that last hope. She felt the flimsy hands of the horse thief upon her wrists. She screamed, shaking the grip from her as she might some reptile that had coiled about her flesh. She picked up the chair from which she had arisen. Her impulse was not to kill this hideous thing in front of her, but to escape.

Chapote was backed against the door. The squaw was at the other end of the room. Behind Posey was the window, battened down with improvised shutters.

Instinctively, she hurled the chair with all her force against these boards. The boards cracked, a long piece splintered, making a vertical slit through which the moonlight shot in a cold blue ray. The squaw was up and at her, like a huge toad leaping from the ground. With one hand she covered the girl's lips for fear of her screaming.

That was a rather peculiar fear. What matter if she did scream?

Chapote understood in the next moment.

With one hand the squaw was pointing out the window. For the first time that evening she showed a slight touch of excitement.

“Cayuse! Cayuse!” she grunted quickly—but still with undeniable composure.

“What does she mean ‘cayuse’?” Chapote muttered angrily.

The gesture of the old Papago stopped him from coming toward the girl. He stood stupid and irresolute.

Again the squaw pointed to the broken window with her disengaged hand.

“Cayuse——” she said with a grunt of displeasure. “Cayuse come.”

“What and the hell——” Chapote exclaimed. “You mean——”

He did not finish. He turned abruptly on his heel and fled through the door.

Yes, there was a cayuse galloping down the trail toward the posada. Not only one cayuse—but quite a cavy. At least it sounded that way, now. Chapote had not heard the warning before. Neither had the Trade Rat. As Chapote had said, the squaw was always the first one to detect the vibration,

despite the fact that she was stone deaf. Her hearing was not acute enough, however, to detect the fact that all save one of the horses of that cavy were riderless.

Posey Nuggins, catching a glimpse of the cañon side, through the splintered window, saw a vision. It was a noble steed, radiant, magnificent in the glow of moonlight.

Although the glance was momentary and the distance great, she knew it was the white stallion. And there was no shadow of doubt in her mind concerning the fact that Dave Huppert had come likewise!

## CHAPTER XV.

### THE AFFECTIONATE FUZZTAIL.

Before Dave Huppert drove down into the Trade Rat's cañon with his bunch of cuitans, a slight altercation took place between two members of his outfit. The two members concerned were the stallion Ali Baba and the Roman-nosed, calf-kneed piebald.

The piebald mare, still saddled and bridled, had brought up the rear during most of the trailing. She was a slow horse—but she was the best desert horse of the whole remuda. While the others hit a good pace for a while, she had to trail along behind. But after a few days in the desert, the others were getting sore hoofs, and this range-fed desert fuzztail was as fresh as ever. In some ways she was fresher. She was the freshest sweetheart Ali Baba had ever received attentions from. She pestered the life out of him. She kept trotting along at the flank of the big steed, rubbing her head against his neck, giving him playful bites, nudging him over toward the pinto and his rider.

Now Ali Baba was as full of spirit as ever, but his feet were tired. And they were sore. It was not a condition conducive to love making. Besides, Ali Baba was slowly turning from a show horse into a desert stallion.

Now it is known that these desert stallions, when they become lords over their remudas, get rid of the less desirable elements in their charge. All the colts may stay with the remuda until they grow up. Then the young stallions are requested to leave. Most of the mares are retained. Others may prove for some reason or other a nuisance.

Ali Baba was desirous of getting rid of that pinto which his master rode. But inasmuch as the pinto was possessed of the dignity and danger of any horse which bears a rider, Ali Baba could not follow his impulse. Instead he vented his spleen upon the sorry-looking brushie—that piebald mare.

It did not take long for the piebald to understand that the nibbles her lord and master was bestowing upon her were not kisses, but bites. And they were bites that hurt. She scampered off, then came for some more.

Dave Huppert did not know what was happening until he felt the stallion tugging at his hackamore and rearing. He saw the big fellow forestriking

with his hoofs. The hoofs landed with glancing blows upon the affectionate fuzztail mare.

“You better get out of here, old lady!” Dave laughed. He was not at all averse to having Ali Baba get rid of his whole remuda this way. “Nothing’s keeping you. Better watch out for those feet!”

The “old lady” had already discovered the heart-breaking truth. She was not wanted. She had jilted her own master—Chuck Chapote—for this glorious beast; and now in turn she was jilted.

Well, it is the way of the world. She took this philosophically. It had happened to her many a time before. You can’t put your trust in a horse. No horse is worth it. Particularly a prancing dude of a horse like this Ali Baba. The other mares could have him. They would get the same treatment sooner or later—probably after they had worn themselves lame following him. He was a fool horse anyway. He had led them through rocky enough paths already. In fact, the piebald loathed him.

She went walking back up the trail, dejected and aching from those bites. She rolled in the sage, and after a while the itching stopped. She fell philosophically to munching rattleweed. She could take care of herself.

Dave rode on down the cañon, the stallion following, apparently in great relief.

When the Trade Rat heard the clattering of horses’ hoofs on the rocky trail outside he hurried to Chapote. Chapote was the master. Chapote had everything to lose—including his own neck.

To save Chapote meant money; it meant protection from his outlaw henchmen. To do Chapote a favor was always the first impulse of all lonely desert folk who were wise.

As he ran to the door of the room in which Posey Nuggins had been imprisoned, Chapote dashed out and met him.

“The posse, Chuck. It’s the posse! What-all are you goin’ to do?”

At the present moment Chapote was not ready to meet the posse. Let them come. Let them be told that no sign had been found of the horse thief whom they were trailing. Chuck would wait. And the girl must be hidden likewise.

“I’ll hide in the cellar,” he said. “You tend to ’em, pard. If they git ornery and want to search your house, tell me, then I’ll come out and talk to ’em and play everything above board as you might say.”

The Trade Rat sneaked out into the open moonlight. He was flabbergasted enough at what he saw: a lone rider with six riderless horses trooping along behind him!

It took only a few seconds for the truth to dawn upon the hunchback’s mind. This was not the sheriff. This was not the posse. But it was the man they were trailing. There was that white stallion, with head arched, nostrils sniffing.

“Come here hombre!” the rider commanded.

Dave Huppert had been wise enough to keep well away from the posada. The posada had a bad name. It did not occur to Dave that being to all outward appearances a horse thief he would be welcome there.

Instead he had the intuitive conviction that he was in enemy territory. Those eye-like windows were sources of deadly menace. One of them, boarded up, had a slit in the planks—an ideal space for a gunman to peer through and deal out lead to his heart’s content.

The Trade Rat hobbled up the corral toward him. He looked as if he were running on all fours.

“Where’s the sutler, hombre?” Dave asked.

“I’m the sutler here—owner of this joint. You’re welcome, pard, whoever you are.”

The Trade Rat knew enough not to ask lone riders who were taking horses south, who they were or where they were going, or whence they had come.

“I want to get a grubpack, for about five days’ trailing,” Dave ordered. “Likewise a couple of gallon cans of water.”

“I reckon I can fix you up,” the other said. He was about to ask the stranger to stay for a little chow and a drink; but he thought better of it. He must see Chapote first.

The Trade Rat hobbled back again into the shadow.

Before fixing up the grubpack—which would, for all he knew, be an entirely superfluous bit of work—he opened the trap door to his cellar and called to his *maestro*. Chapote was seated on a keg, smoking a cigarette and

chuckling at the plight of the silver-haired hostler, bound and gagged, lying at his feet.

It would be a rather melodramatic study in human emotions to consider what was going on in that hostler's mind. There he was helpless—and ready to be offered up on the altar of any cause his captors desired. What chance he had for his life he could not guess. Not very much.

To be in a cellar of a Mexican outfitting post far down in the desert was a situation that offered little hope. And still less hope could be offered for that unlucky girl—a captive—upstairs.

What champion would be sent from Heaven to save these two hapless mortals, old Padin, the circus hostler, did not dare to guess. In his most fervent and frantic prayers he would not have thought of that keen-eyed, desert-hardened gunfighter, Dave Huppert. A half a dozen angels might be sent out of Heaven miraculously to save that lovely girl—but to think that Dave Huppert should come—well that was too good to be true!

Old Padin lay there puffing through the bandanna that gagged him; choking, mumbling; when exhaustion overtook him, he would lie still until Chapote prodded him with his boot, to see if he were yet alive. He prodded him, laughing, as a cat might prod a mouse, to start him kicking and convulsing again!

Then came that voice down through the trap door. An excited, hoarse, low-pitched utterance:

“So help me God, Chuck, it's the hombre with the white stallion——”

“The what!”

“It's him, I tell yer! The hombre which the sheriff's trailin'! And he's outside demandin' a grubstake and water.”

Chuck Chapote turned color. Splotches of white appeared on his haggard face. He felt like a cornered gopher. He jumped from his keg and began to pace around on the hard earth, as if looking for another hole somewhere to hide.

“Shall I give him his pack, and hurry him off on his trail, Chuck? That's all as he wants. What's come over you anyway? You look scairt stiff.”

“Scairt!” the other exploded suddenly. “I got good cause to be scairt. I held that hombre up in the desert—and left him without a hoss! If he sees me——”

“So that’s it!” the Trade Rat said in some relief. Old Padin lying helpless on his back looked straight up at the face peering through the trapdoor in the ceiling. The jack lantern threw it into a sharp relief of apprehensive, blackly etched lines, thin whiskers, pointed nose. “If that’s all,” the Trade Rat went on, “why cain’t I just give him what he wants, and leave him hurry on?”

Old Padin squirmed. He tried to yell, but a kick from Chapote’s boot left him convulsed and trembling.

Chapote was still bewildered, too fearstricken to give any order. He would rather meet a ghost face to face than meet that steel-eyed prospector again—after the trick he had played on him. On the other hand, his whole game—which he had gone too far with now—would be lost, if Huppert got away to Mexico. Here was Huppert with the goods. Never had Chapote had such a perfect chance to frame a man.

“Don’t let him go,” he said finally.

“Don’t let him go!” the head peering over the trapdoor exclaimed.

The prisoner on the floor stopped squirming. He even stopped breathing. At least for a moment. Chapote was crazy. Huppert would shoot up the whole place in the blink of an eye.

“Give him his pack and his water,” the rash Chapote was saying. “But don’t let him go. Git his gun. If that ain’t possible, why, then plug him.”

“If I can’t git his gun, how-all do you expect me to plug him?”

“Be friendlylike with him. Don’t leave him suspect. Wait till he starts off on the trail agin and then plug him in the back.”

“What-all will you be doin’?” the other asked pointedly.

Chapote had no scruples about his methods. “I’m goin’ to just set down here and think,” he said, “and give you a chanst to git his gun.”

“That’s kind of loadin’ all the dirty work on me, ain’t it, Chuck?”

“Yes, but he don’t know you,” the other answered blandly. “And he knows me all too well. You make a try at it. Git his grubstake for him and talk to him. Then I’ll climb out of here and help you do the pluggin’—if the first trick don’t work.”

The “first trick” worked to the extent which I will now recount.

The hunchback came out into the moonlight again, this time with a gunnysack of provisions.

“Here you are, pard. ’Tain’t all. But it’s part of it. Did it in a hurry. Just threw in a few cans of everythin’ conceivable. Plenty of flour for your flapjacks. You got your own fryin’ pan, I reckon. Throwin’ in a little flask of redeye for good luck.” He handed him the drink, Dave still remaining in the saddle. “Your health, pard.”

“Thanks. Here’s to you. Now shag along there and finish it up. I’m in a hurry.” Dave pretended to drink—an easy gesture despite the brilliance of the moonlight.

The Trade Rat hobbled away again. This time he came back with the cans of water.

“Thought you’d like to try a little of this pulque. My ole lady makes it from agave.”

Dave was suspicious. He did not care to be poisoned. Again he pretended to drink.

“You don’t happen to need some ammunition—trailin’ down thataway \_\_\_\_\_”

“Who said I was trailing down?” Dave asked.

“Wall, I mean trailin’ anywheres. Down or up, east or west. It’s liable you might meet up with a band of riders and have to do some fightin’. If you got cornered, you’d need a lot of rounds——”

“What band of riders?”

“They’s a band seen up on the mesa top, horsin’ into these here cañons and trailin’ back and forth. Cain’t tell but that they’re outlaws.”

This was a delicate way of mentioning the sheriff’s posse. Dave knew very well what the hunchback was talking about. He could not, however, understand why the latter should divulge this information—unless it was because of the fact that he always warned his customers. Particularly, when they had all the earmarks of horse thieves.

“I’m thanking you for telling me that,” Dave laughed. “Although I know it already. And, speaking of cartridges, I could use a few boxes of thirty-twos.”

“I’ll get ’em for you, mister; I’ll get ’em.”

The Trade Rat scampered back to his house. He kneeled down again at the trapdoor.

“Come on up, Chuck. Stand by. Git to the window with your six-gun in case my game don’t work. But it’ll work all right. It’s worked every time I ever pulled it.”

That was all he said. He went for his cartridges and Chuck Chapote crawled out of the cellar cautiously, keeping at all times in the dark. He went to the window and stood there.

He had a good view of the rider and his horses. The white horse was the highest light in the scene. He seemed to radiate light, particularly from that silky mane which tossed as he champed. It was like a ripple in a dark stream which the moon singles out.

The Trade Rat hobbled out again.

“Here you are, pard,” he said affably. “Will three boxes do you? They’re all I got. And they ain’t overly satisfactory either. But you kin have ’em—if they fit. I’ll throw ’em in for good luck. But if they won’t fit your iron, I’ll keep ’em for the next man.”

“If they’re thirty-twos they’ll fit.”

“Sure. But I put on a bit of grease—kept ’em here so long, you know. Better see if they work before you go meetin’ up with any bandits and throwin’ on ’em promiscuous-like.”

“Well, we’ll settle that little point quick enough.” Dave took out his gun, threw open the cylinder and tried to insert one of the cartridges. As the sutler had feared, they were too thick with grease to go on.

“Here, let me have the cartridge a minute,” the Trade Rat suggested.

He took it, scraped it with his tortoise-shell thumb. “There, try it.”

Again it failed.

“Damn funny. I always get ’em to work,” said the Rat. “Here, leave me show you how.”

Now Dave wanted some more ammunition badly, and he might very conceivably have let the Rat show him a thing or two about old cartridges. These sutlers never mixed in with the affairs of bandits or prospectors. They were generally to be trusted.

But a premonition had been awakened in Dave’s mind. Why put an extra coating of grease on a bullet down there in the dry air of the Coyotero Desert? In other climes corrosion might do its work. But not in the Coyotero.

The Trade Rat, reaching out, found his hand gripped by the fiercest hold that had ever cracked his knuckles. He was drawn up, face to face with the rider. Moonlight failed to soften the two gray eyes into which he peered. Moonlight served only to throw into a mordant relief that firm, smiling mouth.

“Look here, little hombre,” Dave said. “Have you been in the desert doin’ business with outlaws and Mexes and yet have the nerve to ask a stranger for his gun!”

“Please, mister, you don’t understand—I——”

While he was gibbering he found himself spinning through the air, over the horse’s head, as if a sunfishing bronco had catapulted him off its back. He landed—he never estimated how far away—in a clump of cactus which collapsed under the force of his fall, and crumpled against him on all sides, on top and in front and in back. As he lay there with the world spinning around him the Trade Rat judged that there was not a square inch of his hide which did not bristle with cactus thorns.

Dave Huppert anticipated what happened in the next moment. He dropped easily from his horse.

Instantly a streak of fire blazed out from the dark window of the posada. A slug ripped across his saddle horn. Another blast brought a bullet whizzing through the crown of his sombrero. Two more kicked up the sand under the horse’s feet, making faint little clouds in the moonlight.

Posey Nuggins witnessed this conflict from first to last. The squaw—always to be trusted, always gentle, a giant of strength—had forced the girl to a chair, where she sat, her two hands imprisoned in one of the squaw’s; her mouth gagged by her own bandanna which Mapimi held there, seemingly without any expenditure of strength. She might have been a nurse forcing a child to drink from a bottle.

But Posey could see through that little slit in the boarded window. She saw her pet, Ali Baba, champing and sniffing the air. It was not irrational to suppose that Ali Baba knew that she was there. He might have come to her had he been free. Perhaps that was the cause for his nervous pawing at the sand.

Posey saw the hunchback running out there, back and forth, like a rat fetching pieces of straw for his nest; crawling into the dark, crawling out again; furtively appearing and disappearing.

The girl tried to scream, an effort which only resulted in gagging herself and choking. If she could only let that rider know!

If the old hostler could only get to him!

But there was her one hope of salvation—a gaunt, alert man sitting in his saddle with his arms upon the pommel, his face turned now one way, now glancing over his shoulder at the bowlders where an enemy might be lurking, now glancing up into the darkness of the cañon whence he had come.

It was maddening. One little sign—a whistle, a stamp of the foot—something to attract the attention of Ali Baba. But it was no use. The Trade Rat sneaked out again. There was a scuffle. The Rat went flying through the air like a shapeless sack of bones. The rapid barks of a six-gun. The girl even saw those little clouds of dust.

Her frantic hope was that the rider would hide behind that bowlder and return the fire. He would probably win.

But she did not realize, she could not, that he had no reason to stay there and engage in a gun duel. He had his food and waterpack. A posse was searching for him. Mexico and freedom were just beyond that sage plain.

Another rattle of shots. The cactus clump seemed alive with tongues of white flame. But the rider, taking advantage of that bowlder's momentary protection, had vaulted into his saddle and was off. He was off like a jockey, low-crouched over the horse's withers. His whole cavy spurred after him.

Whether the fugitive was hit or not the girl did not know. But one thing she knew beyond any doubt. Her last shred of hope was gone.

Chuck Chapote stood in the darkened room gazing out baffled and enraged at the moonlit scene.

Why had he not played safe? It would have been better if he had broken one of his rules and plugged that rider at first sight. Why had he entrusted such a ticklish affair with that measly hunchback? All because he was afraid to meet that gaunt, gray-eyed desert wolf again. He cursed his own cowardice.

There was a chance of a lifetime for him to load his many thefts upon a scapegoat. And the scapegoat had come to his very doorstep—with the goods! If he could have kept him just long enough for the sheriff to come!

But it was too late—the scapegoat—and the goods that were to incriminate him—had packed off to Mexico.

Chuck Chapote was cursing over this luck when the Trade Rat came crawling in. Chapote lit a jack-lamp so that it lighted the miserable little figure. The Rat looked more like a hedgehog now. Cactus spines were sticking out all over him.

Chapote was too mad to laugh.

“I’ve a good mind to mash every bone in your body, you snivelin’ little wart!”

“My bones is already mashed!” the other begged. “I’m broke all to pieces.”

“I ought to mash you to pulp, and step on you and squash you for the yaller-livered, sheep-headed hump that you are!”

“I’m already mashed to a pulp! A bronc or somethin’ kicked me over a sandhill and into a clump of saguaro. I’ll have spikes growin’ all over me the rest of the season! A fine way to thank me! Didn’t you see me throw on him?”

“Why didn’t you get him!”

“Couldn’t see him. The whole mess up thar was circling around my head. Thought a volcano had erupted! And I was floatin’ around in the lava tryin’ to swim! That thar light you’re holdin’ is spinnin’ around as it is. How do you expect me to hit a man thirty yards away under them circumstances?”

“You realize, Mr. Skunk, that I’ve lost my game? That I’m saddled here with a woman and a ole coot—same as if I’d kidnapped ’em? Do you realize rustlin’ a woman is ’most as bad as rustlin’ a horse? Only it’s a heap sight more foolish! That hellbender gets away with a whole cavy of hosses, which they’re worth somethin’. And all I git is a woman which she ain’t worth a cent.”

“And the sheriff comin’ besides!” the agreeable Trade Rat added, as he picked thorns from his skin. “What I advise, pard, is for you to hop onto a cayuse and trail after him. I got a fast hoss——”

“Trail him! After showin’ my hand like this? Wow, that’s good!” Chuck snorted.

“I say I got a fast hoss which I keep him for just this sort of a game. He kin catch up to the hellbender, I’ll bet on that. All the horses in that thar cavy was wore out; I could tell. And the pinto the hombre was ridin’—why it’s only good for hard desert trail—not for speed.”

“How about that white stud——”

“He’s the other way around—judgin’ by the lame way he was lopin’ off. His feet are all banged up with this trail. Speed perhaps—but nothin’ else. My hoss is good for both speed and desert.”

“Anyways it makes no difference. Ain’t no one to ride him—unless you want to have another go at him.”

“*Me!*” the Trade Rat exclaimed. “You’ve shore got a sense of humor, pard.”

“Just the same that hellbender’s got to be caught. And he’s got to be caught tonight—afore the sheriff takes it into his haid to come horsin’ down here askin’ us questions.”

The Trade Rat thought hard, while he was operating on his scratched arm. Finally he looked up—his little brown eyes twinkling. “How about sendin’ old Mapimi!”

The other did not answer. This joke failed to strike. But its perpetrator went on with malevolent humor: “She could shore punch him back for us! She’d have him roped and hogtied and delivered at my doorstep afore sunrise, I’d bet my last peso!”

Still the other was rapt in thought—pacing up and down the floor, his bristled jaw tightly set, his white-rimmed eyes blinking.

“The only trouble is,” the humorous Trade Rat went on, “Mapimi couldn’t ride half a mile down the cañon trail without she broke the back of any dray hoss we could find in Arizony!”

The other put up his slender bony hand.

“Some one’s goin’ to trail that hellbender—and git him back here!” he said with a peculiar assurance. “He’s goin’ to git him back here—with all his hosses likewise—and in time for Sheriff Flapjohn’s tight-rope party. And I’ve decided on just the man to send for him!”

“You ain’t lookin’ at me, pard,” the Rat objected apprehensively. He followed the gesture of Chuck’s bony finger. It was pointing to the cellar.

The Rat did not understand. “Who and the hell——”

“The white-headed coot downstairs.”

“What about him?” the other asked stupidly.

“I’m goin’ to mount him on that fast hoss you’re blowin’ about.”

The Rat laughed. “Don’t give me convulsions, pard. He wouldn’t stop till he got to Mexico.”

“Oh, yes, he would. How about the gal—he’s leavin’ here?”

“He don’t care anythin’ about the gal. Leastwise not as much as he does about his own hide. You think he’d come back agin once we give him his head? Why I tell you he wouldn’t stop until——”

“He won’t stop until he finds that two-gunman, and *then* what’s goin’ to happen?”

The Trade Rat stopped picking at his thorns. Light came to his bewildered mind—the first bit of light since the concussion he had received when he landed in that saguaro patch.

Having arrived at this truth a serious expression came over his pointed face: “I reckon the gentleman will come horsin’ back, pard,” he said dolefully.

“I reckon you ain’t far wrong, Mr. Skunk,” said Chapote.

“And we got to fight him all over again?” the other wailed.

“Oh, no! I guess damn well not. No fightin’ whatsoever. No trickin’. No palaver. Everythin’ above board, as you might say.

“You and me shags down there to the openin’ of the cañon. You stay behind that big bowlder. I stay in a patch of mesquite brush. When he comes gallumpin’ along—bingo! We pot him—not so’s we kill him. We got to hand him over to the sheriff—just a bit damaged, that’s all—but still alive and kickin’.”

The little man whistled in wonder. “It’s a right smart trick, pard,” he said, “if it works.”

“Cain’t help but work. Go out and saddle your race hoss. I’ll get the old duffer up from downstairs.”

Still whistling—dolefully and in rapt amazement at this extraordinary resourcefulness of the master mind—the Rat went again into the open. In two minutes he had his mustang roped and saddled.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### A MESH OF SILKEN HAIR.

As Huppert jogged along the level plain an immeasurable sense of freedom came over him. But if he had tried to analyze that feeling he would have found that it was not one of ecstasy.

Utter freedom—as a state of perfect happiness is something that perhaps all human beings have yearned for. If it is just beyond one's grasp, very well; it is a great dream. But when it comes——

Dave rode along with his little cavy into an immensity of moonlit space. The horizon was a flat line relieved only in the remote south by the low sierras. Above the sky was untouched by the slightest mist. The rider felt as if he were the only human being in the whole world.

Confident enough now that he could make the border before the posse overtook him, his thoughts began to hark back. He was thinking of Vasto's circus pitched somewhere in the empty lots of a cow town, crowded with stockmen, herders, miners, saloon people.

He pictured the slight, graceful form of the bareback rider, and the splendid horse which she rode. There was the horse loping along, its head lapped over the quarters of his own pinto.

He pictured the elegant human form dancing upon the silver back, alighting like a butterfly and balancing herself with slender, flashing arms. He had never lost that picture. It went along with him in his travels.

Whenever he looked at the stallion the vision of the girl was evoked. In a word, Dave Huppert did not want to go to Mexico—as an outlaw.

He wanted to go back—to Vasto's circus.

The loneliness of the desert gave him only that much freedom. The untainted air; the limitless windswept plain; the desolate stretches of sand and cactus—every mark of that wild landscape sent a pang through him. Already he was estimating the time he would have to spend as an exile before it would be safe to go back and hunt for that girl again.

Perhaps this was the reason that he slowed his horses to a walk. Perhaps, on the other hand, he was husbanding their strength, knowing that they had

had a hard grilling during the last few days. At any rate he lagged in his journey. And his spirits lagged likewise.

Something brought him to his senses, however, before he had lived very long in this new phase of his existence.

He heard the rhythm of a fast galloping horse behind him. The pursuer had come astonishingly close before Dave was aware of him. The sound of his own horses clip-clopping along muffled the distant sound.

He turned, startled, to see what had happened. Most probably some of those pesky gunfighters at the posada back there had decided to come for more trouble.

But Dave made out, soon enough, that it was only one rider. The plain for miles behind him sloped up toward the base of Sundown Mesa. It was bare of any obstruction save for a scattering of bowlders and a thick dotting of mesquite and cactus. The major part of the slope was alkali, glistening like snow under the full moon.

A rider was galloping his horse across the bare spaces, unmindful of how easily he could be seen.

Dave again put heels to his mount and continued on the same trail at a fast gallop. Looking back periodically he saw that the pursuer was gaining on him. Dave urged his sturdy little pinto to a faster pace. The stallion loped along easily; but the mares began to string out, following in single file with rapidly lengthening distances between each one.

Still the pursuer gained.

Dave reflected that his pinto was fagged from too many fast spurts since leaving Cobb's Coulee. That rider back there unquestionably had a fresh mount.

What was the best way out of this? To dismount and make a quick change of saddle and foodpack, to the back of the stallion? That was too dangerous. Dave did not know what the circus horse could do on a straight-away race—particularly out there on rough ground. The pinto was more reliable.

But the pinto, obviously enough, could not make the grade. There was a possibility of trying one of the mares. But apparently they were all slower than the pinto—with the exception of that claybank. Dave had no idea of what she could do under the circumstances. Perhaps crowhop for all he knew. Then again, if he saddled her, and rode her and was caught with her—

he would have no defence in the world: once and for all he would be a thief. The claybank was not his property. She belonged—in a sense—to Ali Baba. Dave would have nothing to do with any of those mares.

The pursuer was close enough now, so that he could be heard shouting.

What nonsensical game was he playing anyway? Shouting at a fugitive. Perhaps he was shouting at his own mount. In which case, Dave reflected, the fellow was very successful as a jockey. His horse had already overtaken the slowest mare.

There was one very simple step to take now. Inasmuch as he had to meet only one man there was no very grave objection to Dave's dismounting, jumping behind a rock, and waiting for a personal interview.

This he did, and his pursuer galloped up—totally blind to the danger of coming too close. If he came any closer—he ought to have known well enough—he would bump up sharp against six slugs of lead.

But there he came—the little fool! Dave could see now that he was undersized. He could see that he wore a small, lop-brimmed felt hat—not a sombrero. A rather hard thing to do—to bag such a rattle-brained, stove-up bit of humanity as that!

Dave waited, giving him a second's grace. The silly little wart was too easy.

“Hold on there, mister! Hold on Dave! It's me! Don't shoot! It's only me—Padin! You know me!”

By this time he was within easy range. Dave did not know him at first. If he had guessed a thousand men he would not have guessed this one.

“Drop down from that horse—and not on the hostile side either, hombre! Drop down—and claw the air!”

Padin obeyed quickly enough. He obeyed so quickly that his horse went sidling away, leaving him standing there, a bowlegged and ludicrous shadow.

“Good God, don't you know me, Dave? I'm old Padin—of the circus! Don't you believe me——”

“Who? Padin? What Padin? What do you mean, circus?”

“I'm the hostler—from the circus!”

Dave came out from behind his bowlder.

“Well of all the sheep-headed coots. You little jackass, I pretty near blew your brains out!”

He ran toward the hysterical old man, and took him in his arms.

“I suppose you trailed down here through the desert to take back your horse!”

But Padin was gulping. He was trying to say a hundred things at once.

“The girl—the girl, Posey—my little child—back there—never mind how I happen to be here. I’ll explain that. Go back and get her, I tell you. Can’t you hear me? Are you deaf? She’s back there in that Mexican hell-dive—a prisoner! A couple of cut-throatin’ bandits has got her! And a Injun woman! I tell yer. Wake up——”

“What girl—where—bandits—at the posada you mean!”

Dave was already on his horse.

Padin wheeled and caught his own mount and galloped after him. For a mile they raced neck and neck.

“Now don’t go bustin’ in there, kid, without you do some thinkin’. You ride in there hot-headed and rash, and you’ll find them shootin’ at you from every corner. Mark me, kid, it’s a tricky gang.”

Dave seemed to turn this over in his mind as he galloped his horse along. “How many?” he finally asked.

“A hunchback——”

“Yes, I saw him. Is he still alive?” He answered himself. “I reckon so. He threw on me from that cactus clump. I could of finished him. An ass I was for not shootin’ back.”

“And they’s a squaw the size of a horse.”

“Never mind her.”

“And one other——”

“Only three?” Dave asked, as if disappointed. A squaw and that hunchback could not put up much of a fight. At least, that was what he thought.

“The other’s a narrow-shouldered guy with a red stubble and no chin. A nasty customer, I’ll tell you. We hired him as guide and he double-crossed us. Brought the little child down here, the damn, cut-throat!”

“You say he had a red stubble—and narrow shoulders—and——” Dave was evoking the picture of a man—a man whom he wanted very much to meet. “He didn’t by any chance have a brown woolen shirt—and a thin spindle neck sticking out of it—and he didn’t have dirty eyes—I mean dirty with alkali as if he never washed them——”

“Sure he did! That’s the one. You know the double-crossin’ murderer \_\_\_\_\_”

“I know him. And I want to see him!” Dave answered, kicking his heels into his bronc. “But look here. How did you happen to get that hombre for a guide?”

“He was in Cobb’s Coulee. And the girl heard that a posse and a sheriff was out huntin’ you, for to lynch you. And she figgered it was all her fault—makin’ you steal that stallion——”

“Steal him! You said she——”

“I know. I said she give him to you. Well, it wasn’t hers to give. I lied. And that’s what brought her down here.”

“She came down to save *me!*”

“That’s the whole story. Now kin you allow for her bein’ made a prisoner in that hell-dive up there.”

“Look here, little hombre. Are you armed?”

“No. They frisked me of everything.”

“You don’t happen to have cartridges left in your belt—thirty-twos?”

“I was carrying a forty-five.”

“Then you aren’t much good to me. You just stay back here. There’s going to be a lot of killing done in the next half hour. I don’t want you mixin’ in.

“You’re no use to me. You stay here—and keep this stallion with you. The mares will stick with you likewise. I’m going to ride up alone.”

Old Padin considered this a very reasonable plan. He estimated quite truthfully that as soon as he came within range of that posada, a slug of lead would come singing out of one of those dark windows and lodge in his chest.

“I’ll stay, kid,” he said. “I ain’t much good as you say. Though I’d gladly give my life for that little child. But these here horses would only ball up

your game—not to mention me with my tremblin’ old hands. All I advise is that you approach that thar mud house, sort of crafty-like.”

As he reined in and took the stallion’s hackamore, Dave sped away.

The advice of old Padin was unnecessary. Dave approached that posada as “crafty-like” as any man going into what he knew to be a trap. Padin had been released, given a fast horse and told to vamose. That looked suspicious.

Dave watched every boulder, every clump of cactus, every patch of mesquite as he came closer to the cañon mouth. He gave everything a wide berth that might hide a man. Finally he headed his horse at a fast gallop directly into the cañon’s mouth. On one side was a huge boulder. On the other a thick carpet of mesquite. When I say a “carpet” I mean an interlacing of twigs and leaves which completely covered the ground. Underneath this network there was room enough for a man to crawl around, completely hidden even in broad moonlight.

Dave reined in, abruptly. He was not going to take a chance on that patch. Nor was he going to take a chance on the boulder. He might have dismounted and crawled up toward the boulder, staying in the shadow as much as possible. On the supposition that a man were waiting there to ambush him, he would have had a fifty-fifty chance.

As it happened his chances would have been much better than that. For the man hiding behind that boulder was the hunchback sutler—who was only a passable shot, whereas Dave was a crack.

But all this time there was the mesquite patch, a dull indigo blue under the moon.

Instead of dismounting and wasting his time with this hypothetical duel, Dave turned his horse into a deep arroyo which cleft the side of the cañon. His horse ran up, making a loud clatter on the pebbly stream bed.

When secure in the dark, Dave dismounted and crawled out into the open, keeping himself screened in the chaparral. He kept to the base of the cliffs, skirting the menacing mesquite patch and the boulder, and thus reached the first outlying shed of the posada. Meanwhile, his horse was stamping and sending pebbles clattering down the stream bed of the arroyo where he had been tethered.

Dave was confident that none of his movements thus far had been seen. But from now on he was taking a big chance. For all he knew his enemies had not been down there in the mesquite at all. They might have been waiting at three different windows of the adobe house with guns drawn. He

still proposed to be “crafty-like.” He covered the distance between the shed and the posada, by crawling on his belly through mesquite and sage patches, never for once venturing out where the moon would light him.

When he reached the adobe wall, he lay there on the ground for a moment, listening. He was on the dark side of the house; and it was thus inconceivable that any one could guess his presence.

But he found that he was mistaken in this assurance. He got to his feet as silently as he could and peered into a lighted window.

The place was astonishingly quiet. No sign appeared of either the hunchback or the outlaw Chapote. This in itself was ominous. Could they be watching at those windows, waiting for the first sight or sound of him before taking any action? Perhaps one of them was posted at that very window into which he proposed to climb.

He peered in cautiously, removing his sombrero. The only light to reveal him would come from the room itself. Hence he had a slight advantage; most probably he would see his adversary, before he himself was seen.

That is just what occurred.

Hurrying from another room toward the window was a big hulk of a woman, swathed in a red blanket. Dave immediately ducked into the darkness. He listened again. He heard the tread of her moccasins on the adobe floor. She was at the window, breathing heavily like a bear. Evidently she avoided exposing herself to possible fire, for Dave—protected in the dark—looked straight up at that window and saw no one.

He did, however, catch a glimpse of her shadow in the parallelogram of yellow light cast out on the sand from the window. He saw in that shadow the hooked nose, the flat-topped skull, the shape of which, it must be explained, was revealed by the manner of the squaw’s coiffure. Her hair was drawn tightly over cranium and temples.

A sound from farther down the cañon struck in upon the moment’s death-like quiet. Dave turned to see two men riding up toward the posada.

He had guessed right! They had been laying for him down at the cañon’s mouth. Most probably they had been hiding in that very patch of mesquite which he had so carefully avoided.

He hurried around to the side of the house which faced their approach. This was the side it will be remembered from which Posey Nuggins, peering

through a slit in the window, saw the recent combat between Dave, the hunchback and Chapote.

This side of the house was in broad moonlight. Hence, if he wanted to get inside, he must do it in a hurry. He was a perfect target against that moonlit wall.

Without waiting for them to gallop within range he smashed the wood of the window with one blow of his fist, and swung himself in.

It was dark in that room now. But the commotion of his entrance brought a streak of light through a partly opened door. He wheeled to meet whatever attack might come from that corner.

In the rapid succession of events in that one second, he could remember a flash of light, momentary, but dazzling to his dilated eyes—a flash as of warm light upon gold. Instantly the door slammed.

He rushed against it, prompted by a fear that some one had entered that room, which was now pitch dark. Whoever it was, it would be best to rush; to smash his adversary up against the door before the latter had time to fire.

That was a desperate enough move. The chances were ten to one against his life. If that person who had entered had so willed, Dave might have received a volley of slugs directly in the stomach.

As it was, his hand grasped a mesh of silken hair. As he pressed his weight against the door, he was not at first aware that his whole strength had been summoned to crush a frail limp body. But when he felt two soft arms clinging desperately about his neck, he knew what had happened.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### AN EMPTY GUN.

The girl had tried to scream. But all Dave could hear was a desperate moan, as she feebly attempted to squirm free. This baffled him for a moment. Why should she be afraid of him? What made her moan in that unearthly way—like one trying to cry out in a nightmare, or still more, like a dumb person trying to call out? Furthermore, so agile and terrified was she, that in the next moment Dave found she had slipped away.

He stood there in the dark completely nonplused. Somewhere in the room that unhappy little prisoner was moaning. He heard a sound as of a body sinking lightly to the floor.

He was about to grope for her, when the door behind him bulged in with the force of a great weight thrown against it. Dave braced himself, slammed it shut again, groped for the latch, found a heavy iron bolt, and shoved it into place.

There came then another crash on the door, like an ox butting against it.

“Get back from that door whoever you are,” Dave called, “or I’ll blaze away!”

The answer to this threat was rather more than he had expected. The “ox” butted against it again.

The ox apparently was deaf to any such puny threats. The ox furthermore was armed with a gun, for a series of shots banged out, the door splintered admitting sharp rays of light, slugs of lead whistled across Dave’s shoulder. He ducked into a corner of the room and there found himself in the tight and frantic embrace of that girl.

She was not so frail as he had thought. Her arms were like taut wires. They were like the arms of a drowning person clinging to a rescuer, choking him, dragging him down. Her face was pressed fiercely against his own.

It would be hard to imagine what terrific and vital emotions had gripped that girl since she heard Dave Huppert’s voice in the dark.

She had imagined, of course, that he was one of her captors foiling her attempt at escape—foiling it with brutality. She had been crushed against the wall. She had torn herself free—and then stumbling toward the window in a

frantic desire to get away—she heard that voice. Instantly she recognized it. But she could not believe her ears. The whole thing was a miracle. God had answered her prayer, and He had blessed her sevenfold!

She reached out, groping like a blind woman eager to satisfy a terrible doubt. Had she dreamed? Was it the voice of that man she had heard for just a few minutes in the hotel room at Cobb's Coulee?

She found him. She clung to him. Her hand rubbed his hair, his face, his mouth. Again like a blind woman whose sight is in her fingertips she knew that this was her own man!

"Thank God, you've come!" she was sobbing. "I'm thanking Him. He sent you!"

They clung to each other desperately for a moment, kneeling there in the dark. All fear had left her. Dave alone realized what a trap they were in.

The long thin rays of yellow light slanting through those perforations and slits which the squaw's six-gun had made, and the big band of moonlight shining into the window, bathed the room with a modicum of light.

Dave's eyes had dilated. Behind him was the warm adobe wall—probably a foot thick, as was the case with many of these Mexican built houses. On either side of him was the same fortress-like protection. He left the girl there for a moment, and then peered through the window.

Instantly the slugs from Chuck Chapote's gun whistled about his ears. There was not much chance of getting out that way—particularly with a girl on his hands.

"Tell me the lay out," he said. "We've got to take it easy."

She described to him as quickly and clearly as she could that a squaw was in the next room; that the door of that room opened into the corral. The corral, beyond any question, was guarded by Chapote. It was on the moonlit side of the house.

"As for Chapote," Dave said, "with a little luck I can silence him. I'm in the dark—so is he for that matter. But if I wait for his fire I can shoot back. But——" he added, "where in hell is that hunchback?"

"You'll get him," the girl said. "Just wait a while. He'll turn up and you'll get him. You'll get them all."

"Yes, but——"

“What are you anxious about?” she asked.

He was going to tell her that he only had five cartridges. But he held his peace.

There was a lull. A lull, I mean to say, as far as the shooting went. The smoke of the squaw’s gun came through those splintered boards. She must have fired at the door scarcely an arm’s length away.

The slow shuffle of some one walking across the corral broke the silence. Likewise there was rustling in the dry chaparral outside. Across the corral in the barn horses neighed. The girl explained that they were her horses.

“Pretty well planned, the whole dirty business,” said Dave. “Keeping your horses under cover. They made you a prisoner, all right.”

She went on to explain that the squaw who had gagged her had taken her into the next room, upon sensing some one crawling through the chaparral. The girl had heard it, but did not understand what it meant. The squaw—deaf to ordinary sounds—was alert to every twig snapping, every pebble rolling. She was uncanny; like a dog.

She had dragged the girl into the next room. Then looking out of the window, the old savage had evidently seen something that had puzzled her. She stayed there a long time, and the girl felt her vise-like grip falter.

Posey broke free, darted for the room in which she had originally been imprisoned, slammed the door, and was about to rush for the window when Dave came in.

Naturally enough, she thought that he was one of the hostile men. The force with which he threw himself upon her had terrified her.

“And you tried your best to scream,” Dave said. “But it was like a girl with a bandanna tied about her mouth.”

“That was just what it was!” she explained. “I had not had time to tear it off. Everything—my escape from that old she-devil in there, and your crushing me against the door, it all happened in a second. When I squirmed free I tore off the gag.”

This explained all the circumstances that had so puzzled Huppert during those few moments. But it offered no solution to the actual problem.

There they were in a room at one end of a Mexican posada. An open window gave out upon a scene of black shadows, of a shack or two, and

some boulders. An adversary was out there ready to shoot them down the moment they showed themselves.

On the other side was the door, partly splintered. To stand before it without so much as opening it, was to stand at the mouth of a six-gun.

In analysis, there was no certain way of escape. He would have to expose himself—and his captors had the first shot. They knew he would appear at that window, or open that door, and, needless to say, they had both spots covered; whereas he had no idea where their fire would come from.

This naturally left one course: to wait.

But just to wait there huddled together in the dark like two rabbits in a hole seemed as futile and fool-hardy as anything else. In the first place it offered no ultimate solution. They might be besieged there for days. Then again Chuck Chapote or the sutler might be reinforced. Finally, there was the danger that came with daylight. In the present situation the two captives had at least the comparative safety of the dark.

He resolved to cast the dice, as one might say, with the chances two to one against him. He approached the window.

The moon shone full into the window, lighting the sill so that it was impossible for him to look out without being seen. There was, however, a small strip of board still left on the side. It was cracked sufficiently so that he could peer through. But this availed him nothing. He must draw their fire. The flash of their guns would reveal their hiding places, then he could start his gun duel.

He resorted first to that old trick of showing his sombrero. But it was too obvious. They would not bite. No desert gunman would stick his head over that sill to be plugged.

The next trick succeeded.

Kneeling down, and still peering through the cracked boards, he thrust his arm at full length parallel with the window sill and underneath it. He then fired so that it appeared he was firing from the righthand side of the window, instead of from the left, where he was hiding. To do this he had merely lifted his gun muzzle a few inches above the sill and fired into the air.

The flash coming from that side, immediately drew a volley of fire from the two men outside. Each man must have emptied his six-gun into that

window. The slugs whistled through the open space and dug into the adobe of the wall behind Dave and the girl.

The flashes were coming from two different directions. From the doorway of a shake barn came a rapid spurt of fire. From the side of a boulder twenty yards to one side came another similar spurt.

There was a moment's cessation. The attackers had either to reload or draw other guns—if they had them. Perhaps Chuck Chapote in that fraction of a minute was changing a loaded gun from his left hand to his right. Perhaps he was merely waiting to see what had happened.

At any rate, Dave darted into the full glare of light for a fraction of a second and fired four times. He was firing at black spots where flashes of light had been.

It was a pitifully uncertain game. That is why he took two shots at each spot. He could not afford to try the same experiment again. He had no more cartridges. He had already used up one to draw their fire.

Could it be possible! Was it so easy? Had he killed them both? In that brief moment of suspense his mind was already whirling with plans. He must lose not a moment's time. He must call the girl, lift her through the window to the corral. They must flee to the barn where the horses had been hidden. Then—before that she-devil of a squaw came out to pelt them with a shotgun they must be off.

All this flashed through his mind. The moment of deadly silence seemed to have stretched to eternity.

*Then came another shot from that boulder! Two more followed.*

Dave ducked. Through the window the shots whistled again. The adobe cracked.

“I guess I've got to tell you the truth, girl,” he said kneeling down beside her again in the pitch dark.

“What truth!” she asked, astonished at the change in his voice. “You can try again. They can't take us. Only three of them—against *you*! Why I feel as safe as if I had an army fighting for me.”

“Yes—but—you see I——”

He still hesitated.

“You aren't afraid,” she asked bewildered—“if I'm not.”

“No. Not a bit afraid. I don’t want you to be afraid either. Except that—you see, I only had five cartridges left.”

“Five?” she repeated, still without any shadow of fear. Evidently she had not been able to count the rapid shots he had dealt out through that window.

“Then how many have you left?”

“None,” he said.

He felt her arms tighten about him. And then he cursed himself for telling her. It was like telling a child a ghost story, an act that was cruel as well as having no reason.

“But whatever happens,” she said in a tone strangely devoid of panic, “they aren’t going to separate us?”

“By Heaven, I’ll say not!”

Chuck Chapote fired those last shots from the ground. And he did not aim very carefully, for he was on his back, and firing with his left hand. All he tried to do now was to keep some lead pouring into that open window. It might not hit anybody, but he did not care. As long as he kept those two prisoners cornered, he was satisfied. His confrere, the Trade Rat, behind the boulder could do the rest.

But his confrere seemed to have returned to the policy of watchful waiting.

“Help me out there, Ratty. Don’t soldier on me. I got to quit and wrap up this here arm of mine. I’m hit.”

While he was engaged in pouring whiskey on his bandanna, rolling up his woolen sleeve and tightening the bandanna, there was a cessation of firing.

“Go on, keep it up!” he called softly. “Keep up the shootin’. They’ll make a break in a minute and rush us!”

There was no answer.

“What and the hell!” Chapote called, a little louder this time. “I tell you to fire! Cain’t you hear me? Is it goin’ to take all night for you to load up that rusty ole iron of yours?”

A groan answered him.

“Damned if you ain’t as deaf as the ole squaw!” Chapote growled. He was engaged now in the awkward process of reloading his gun with one hand.

“I tell you I’m hit!” he called. “If they rush, it’ll be up to you to blaze away at ’em. I cain’t aim straight.”

A louder groan from the boulder.

“What’s the matter?” Chapote asked with sudden alarm.

“He got me!” a pain-stricken voice came across the sage patch. “The damned, hell-bendin’ coyote!”

“You mean you’re hit, Ratty!”

“Come over here and help me.”

“Help yourself, damn it! I cain’t git out in the light.”

“Help me in to the house, you yaller-livered skunk!” the hunchback cried. “Or they’ll be out rushin’ me—and I cain’t move. I’m hit in the laig. Two places, if I know anythin’. I got to git in where they’s light and leave ole Mapimi dig out these slugs.”

“Two times! Holy smoke! We sure are in a nice mess.” Chapote had reloaded. For good measure he fired two or three times, and then crawled out. He did not go directly to his companion. It involved getting into the light. Instead, he crept through the shadows, making a wide detour, and came to the house.

If Dave had only known then what was going on!

The Trade Rat, finding himself left alone, crawled behind the rock and managed to reload. Following his maestro’s order, he fired a few random shots.

There was no further response from the window. Although he waited, and fired again, and waited some more, and thought awhile—there was still no response.

This got him worried. Then it got him to thinking a little harder—and a little more clearly.

“Damned if we ain’t killed that hellbender!” he exclaimed to himself. “And most like we’ve hit the gal! Else why ain’t they firin’?”

He got up his nerve, and dragged himself again to the edge of the rock. There was the window, black, open, silent.

“Somethin’ sure has happened!” he thought. “I’ll blaze away agin—careful-like and see if it don’t bring out somethin’!”

He reloaded again and fired.

There was no answer, except the retort of the echoes thrown back and forth between the steep cañon cliffs.

“Dead! Both of ’em! Or all shot up. Shot up so bad that they cain’t even pull a trigger! This looks good.”

He started to crawl toward the posada, going out in the broad light. His head was swimming, his wounded leg heavy and numb. He wanted a drink. Inasmuch as he was the keeper of the posada he did not go around toting a flask on his hip. His wounds must be cleaned and bound.

His maestro, however, had foreseen the possibility of the hunchback’s forsaking his post. He had ordered the squaw out to minister to him.

The squaw, upon finding him, let out a doleful howl like a mother wolf finding her young slain. She picked the little fellow up in her arms and carried him again to the shadow of the bowlder.

Apparently she did not waste much time in doing up his wounds. She was adept at this sort of thing. Her herbs and charms she would apply later. At present she had a far more serious matter that needed tending to.

She hurried back to the posada. There, without paying any attention to Chapote, she calmly took up an ax and went to the door of the prisoners’ room. Time enough had been wasted over them. They had wounded her two companions. They had shot down her little rat-faced hunchback, the man who gave her food and shelter; the man who, years ago, had saved her from the Navahos who had captured her; the man who knew how to deal with outlaws and sheriffs, Papago chiefs, and medicine men and rustlers alike. They had shot him and hurt him! Enough of this!

With two or three swings of that ax she crashed the door. They could shoot if they wished, but she would kill them, anyhow.

Chapote was flabbergasted at this inexorable expression of rage. But he was more astounded at the fact that Dave Huppert in there did not fire to save himself.

The door was crashed down, admitting a flood of light. In the corner of the room Dave and the girl were huddled in each other’s arms, helpless— as helpless as lambs before the slaughter.

Dave sprang to his feet, picked up a chair and Hurlled it at the savage old she-devil. The ax was knocked from her hands, and she reeled back, grunting, spitting, choking. She fumbled for her revolver, although it appeared she much preferred using her ax. Chapote burst into a laugh. It was a laugh with a good ring of humor and triumph in it. He saw plainly enough now what had happened. Dave Huppert was out of ammunition!

Chapote put out his hand and held the squaw. She was strong enough to cast him aside. But by now, she, too, saw that her adversaries were helpless.

This was different. The “maestro” had stopped her from killing them. What did that mean? What did it always mean when big chiefs spared the lives of their victims? It meant that they were to be turned over to the squaws of the tribe for torture.

Well and good. This suited the old barbarian. It was a very satisfactory culmination. She stood back, trembling in every muscle of her giant hulk, still grunting, puffing, not so much with the outburst of her exertion as with her spent rage. They had hurt her little pet, the Trade Rat. Well and good. They would be hurt. And the pain they were to suffer would be sevenfold.

Chapote stood by her side, leering into the room. His face was gray from his wound, his eyes drained of color. But aside from that he seemed malignantly powerful.

“Mr. Huppert,” he said calmly, “I reckon it looks like you’re ready to talk this over, gentleman-like.”

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### THE SCAPEGOAT.

Padin, the boss hostler of Vasto's Circus, found himself in a very strange situation. To be surrounded by sand dunes, cactus clumps, bowlders, and the shadowy gloom of Sundown Mesa, was a new experience for him. Death lurked in the blackness of those arroyos.

Every saguaro seemed like a man standing with upstretched arms; every barrel cactus was an animal squatted—or rather crouched, ready to spring. There were bandits no doubt in those gulches; there were rattlesnakes in the sage patches; there were those unknown beasts called lobos biding their time.

And, worst of all, there was a most astonishing tattoo of gunshots up in the cañon where poor Dave Huppert had gone to what seemed certain death.

Perhaps the one thing above all else that made old Padin nervous was the fact that he had in his possession a very valuable horse, and a herd of mares which a posse of fierce Western ranchers was hunting. For awhile he was glad enough to have Ali Baba's company.

Ali Baba was a powerful horse. He could kill a man with one blow of his forestriking hoofs. Old Padin knew Ali Baba and loved him. But, taking everything into consideration, Padin was rather uneasy at keeping such company. They were going to lynch Huppert for having these horses in his possession. They would lynch him without asking any questions. So Padin had been given to understand.

These were the thoughts that raced through the hostler's mind as he listened to that gunfight going on in the cañon. These were the thoughts that tortured him when he saw a string of riders silhouetted against the moon, high up on the mesa top.

Those riders were coming down toward the cañon rim. They were riding fast and furiously. They seemed unnaturally large—as anything will when viewed on a crest or a horizon. Padin, in short, was terrified.

“You get along, Ali Baba!” he exploded suddenly. “I don't want you around me! No, sir! Get along with you. Do your stuff. Amble away! Git back to the gal—and to your new found desert friend. You ain't no acquaintance of mine!”

He cast off the hackamore from the pommel of his saddle and gave the white stallion a kick. Ali Baba looked around at his circus trainer and feeder. It brought back the sawdust ring—this harsh kick. The old hostler was trying the ringmaster's tricks.

The desert man—his new lord and master—had not done this. The desert man had no tricks of the sawdust ring; he had no odor of the “big cats” about him, or of the candy butchers, or the sweating tent-peggers, or the con men. This fellow had the taint of the circus about him. The desert man had no such taint. He had the fragrance of sunbaked domains of sage and desert flowers.

Ali Baba ambled off, then feeling once again an untrammelled mouth and the soft sand, and the softer sage, he broke into a gallop, whistling a loud joyous call to his mares. Padin saw them—a wild, high-spirited herd, for all their rough life of the past days—cantering off helter-skelter to the open plain.

With an enormous sense of relief Padin rode his own horse—that is to say the horse that had been loaned to him—to the mouth of the draw, from which point of view he could see what was happening.

Not far away was the posada, now silent and ominous. Its windows were lighted, but the low eaves overhanging them prevented him from witnessing the drama that was going on inside. All he knew was that the girl was still there—and that Dave Huppert was there.

He did not know whether Dave was dead or alive. The fact that the gunfight was over and that Dave did not immediately come out seemed to prove that he had lost, that the girl was again a prisoner.

If that were the case the old hostler knew he himself would have to go down unarmed and virtually offer himself up as a sacrifice. The girl was captive! He could not hide in the chaparral and save his own worthless, gin-sodden carcass while his beloved little mistress was in that Mexican hell dive.

It must be recorded, however, that old Padin temporized somewhat with his honor. He intended firmly to go down to the posada. They could shoot him. He would go down anyway. That was definitely decided. But—*he would wait until that troupe of horsemen came down from the cañon rim!*

A younger man—particularly a man like Dave Huppert—would not have waited a moment. He would have horsed right in—been shot down like a dog—and that would have been the end of it. Not so for Padin. He was

experienced, crafty, judicious, and he loved his miserable old carcass. The girl's danger was imminent and horrible. But in order to be saved at all she would have to wait.

She would have to wait—just a few brief minutes. The riders were already zigzagging down the moonlit facade of the mesa cliffs. It looked as if they could have cast a stone right down on the roof of the posada. A few minutes and they would arrive, and the girl would be saved. A dramatic and splendid *dénouement*. Just the sort of thing that Vasto's Rodeo & Circus Co. had staged many a time under the big top!

Padin was not good at judging desert distances. It might be said that no man is good at judging them. But the circus hostler most certainly missed his guess by an astonishingly long time. And in that time a *dénouement* came to pass which was entirely different to any that old Padin had dreamed of.

Chuck Chapote sent the squaw out to fetch her wounded pet. There was no more necessity for the Trade Rat's staying there in the moonlight, guarding that window. Chapote could handle the prisoners now. And he would handle them in his own peculiar way. He did not want the squaw hanging around. She made him nervous, standing behind him. No telling what she might do. There was an ax. And a Papago squaw is an unknown quantity. When she was gone Chapote entered the room where the two prisoners were waiting whatever doom he chose to hand out to them.

Chapote sank into a chair, resting his left arm, which held the six-gun, upon the table. He was haggard, ghastly. His recent swigs of redevye had failed to bring any color to the yellow skin, but it brought out a sweat. His forehead looked like wet soap. It was a dead face on a live neck—a neck gaunted and wriggling with veins.

The girl watched this specter, her face like a sheet, her trembling hands clutching Dave Huppert frantically.

Dave was standing—staring into that gun muzzle on the table, which was pointed directly at him. He stared at it with a fierce intensity, as if trying to hold it back with his eyes.

“Now then, pard,” Chapote repeated, “let's me and you be gentleman-like.” He smiled, showing his broken teeth. “I've got terms which I figure you'll be glad to hear.”

“Do you think I’ll come to any terms with a stinkin’ horse thief?” Dave said calmly. “Plug us both—if you dast. A posse is up there scouring the mesa top. They’ll ask you to explain a thing or two.”

Chapote laughed again. He was much more hideous when he laughed. His narrow shoulders shook as if he were coughing. “Who’ll ask any questions if I shoot *you*? I’d admire to know that.”

“The girl here will tell everything—if you let her live. If you don’t they’ll lynch you—no, by God, they’ll burn you!”

This seemed to have no effect on those convulsed shoulders. The hyena saw humor in everything—even in the possibility of being burned.

“It’s kind of funny for *you* to be callin’ any one a hoss thief, Mr. Huppert. Still and all, I don’t want to quarrel. I aim to be friendly. I’m easy to git along with! Which I mean in plain terms—I accept the nomination: I *am* a hoss thief.”

Dave waited. What did this have to do with the situation? He was going to ask, but he realized that the conversation was entirely in Chapote’s hands. It was not easy to talk with a gun muzzle bearing on his breast. Particularly when the gun was held by a ghastly shell of a man whom Dave himself had wounded.

“We’ll admit first of all that I am a hoss thief. And we’ll admit more’n that: we’ll even specify the hosses which I’ve stole in the past few months. And of which Sheriff Flapjohn will be suspectin’ me sooner or later.”

He tapped the muzzle on the table like an auctioneer about to recite an inventory: “They was seven hosses with the Lazy G brand run onto ’em. Which same disappeared from the Lazy G a few months back. Me—Chapote—rustled ’em. They was three geldings from the Tumbling S.” The muzzle tapped three times.

“They was a cavy from the Rex Sand and Cattle Company. Me——” again he tapped. “A blooded pacer rustled from the hitchrail in front of a saloon in Rawhide. Me—— Chapote!”

“What do we care! What about it!” Dave asked, tortured with this suspense. “What’s it got to do with us!”

“A powerful lot!” said the ashen-faced outlaw. “A damn powerful lot, Mr. Huppert. Leave me explain: Sheriff Flapjohn knows that them nags was brought down into Coyotero Desert. After every theft he comes horsin’ down here.

“And every time he horses down, some friend of mine tells me he’s comin’ and I horse up to Cobb’s Coulee. But each time he gets a little madder and he narrows down to fewer possibilities, as they say. And just about now I reckon he’s goin’ to pick on me and check up.

“He never leaves a single theft go by, but carries ’em around like festerin’ sores. If he pins one on me, he pins ’em all. That’s his way. But I don’t aim to have ’em pinned on me whatsoever. You, Mr. Huppert, are elected for that thar job!”

Dave grunted at this. He was already “elected” for a lynching—for having supposedly stolen an assorted cavy of mares. This announcement that he was to be blamed for a few more did not ruffle him. It was a sentence that dwindled into insignificance compared to the danger of that gun muzzle and that scrawny yellow hand on the table.

“All right, hombre,” he agreed. “You can tell the sheriff I stole every horse in Arizona. If that’ll help your conscience any, do it. But what’s your game? What am I stuck up against this wall for—with this girl? What’s your game, I say?”

“Just this: I ain’t goin’ to tell the sheriff that you stole nothin’! You’re the one that’s goin’ to tell him!”

“When I see the sheriff, my life is worth about ten minutes,” Dave said.

“You don’t have to see him. You kin write to him.”

“What the hell do you mean by that?”

By this time the squaw had carried her wounded pet into the house. She had laid him out on a bunk in the next room and was administering to him out of her witch bundle with cupping horn, turtle bones and various other sanctified implements.

“Are you in thar, Ratty? Do you hear me, Ratty?” Chapote called, without taking his eye from the alert and dangerous figure whom he was holding at bay.

A groan answered him. The Trade Rat seemed to be in a parlous state.

“Send your ole woman in here with paper and pencil.”

There seemed to be some difficulty in complying with this order. No one ever wrote anything in that posada. After some delay, however, the squaw waddled in with a piece of brown wrapping paper and some plumbago.

“I reckon this will do,” Chapote said. “I’d admire for you to write what I tell you, hombre.”

“Write what?” Dave asked.

“A confession.”

“A confession to crimes that he has not committed!” the girl intercepted. “No! He’ll never do that!”

“Now, pretty lady, you stay out the way. He’s goin’ to write what I tell him.”

“You mean I’m going to confess stealing those horses?” Dave exclaimed. “You might as well pull your trigger, hombre. We’re through with this palaver.”

Chapote laughed dryly. “That’s a good card, Mr. Huppert. And you play it damn well, and at the right time and in the right way. But I got a card that’ll beat it: If I shoot you what’ll happen to the gal?”

“If anything happens, so help me God, you’ll answer to that posse for her.”

“They don’t know she’s here. All as I have to do is to hide her!”

It was here that Dave’s face turned color for the first time. He was pale—not with the whiteness of the girl, but with the gray pallor of the wounded Chapote. After all, was he to be sacrificed for nothing? Was he to be shot down, gotten out of the way—and the girl left?

The room seemed to darken for him as he focused his eyes on that hideous grinning face. All about was darkness, with the one splotch of unsavory light—the bristly, chinless face, the parchment drawn tightly over the temples. It was like a skull grinning at him out of a dense shadow.

Finally Dave groped for his voice. It came tight and hard, scarcely audible:

“Very well then, if I write this ‘confession’—what will happen to—to her?”

“She goes with you down to Mexico.”

Dave swayed as he stood. It was as if some one had dazed him with a blow. He felt the girl clutching to him, as though she were in quicksand. He put his arms about her and held her. It was she who was able to speak first.

“You aren’t going to do this, boy! He’s crazy. He’s loony to think you’d do it. Sign your name away like that! And for *me*! No, sir! Come again, mister, play something else. What other cards have you?”

“No other cards, pretty lady. No other cards. I’ve played my hand out. He takes you and shags out for Mexico—I’ll let you have your hosses. Yours is in the barn. And this gent’s—we found his hoss tethered up there in the draw.

“But he writes a confession first. If not, then this here six-gun——” He checked himself, realizing that his barter was not with the girl, but with Huppert. “What-all are you figurin’ on doin’, Mr. Huppert?”

It was not until now that Dave was able to speak. He had had no conflict. He knew what he was going to say. But the solution of the problem seemed so simple, so miraculous, that he had not been able to believe it.

There was of course only one answer for him to give. The girl’s objections amounted to nothing. Apparently she was glad enough to die for the sake of Dave Huppert’s name. Or—to put it still more succinctly—she was willing to lose everything, rather than have Dave lose what there was left of his honor.

But to her everything was left of his honor. It was unsullied. If he wrote a confession, it would be a lie that would make an outlaw of him.

And yet—looking at it from Dave’s point of view—what a priceless thing it would save! It would save *her*!

“All right, hombre,” he said, taking a step forward and picking up the bit of lead ore and the paper. “What shall I write?”

## CHAPTER XIX.

### THE CONFESSION.

Chuck Chapote called again into the other room, where the Trade Rat was lying in his bunk, sipping a hot herb drink proffered him by Mapimi.

“Tell your squaw, Ratty, to saddle two hosses,” Chapote turned to his prisoners. “This here paper you’re goin’ to write I’m goin’ to show to the sheriff. But I’d admire to show it to him before you find him yourself and do any explainin’. If you want to find him *after* he’s seen the confession—well and good. Though I’d warn you against any such fool proceedin’s.”

The squaw went out, saddled the horses and returned. She came into Chapote’s room, and pointed out the window, grunting excitedly. “Umph, woof, woof!” That was about all that any one could make out of her grunts, but Chapote, Dave and the girl turned to the window and looked up at the cañon side.

They saw the moonlit facade of cliffs, banded with strata of quartz and sandstone. On a steep trail that zigzagged down that cañon wall, they could plainly see the black silhouettes of horsemen.

“I reckon that’s your sheriff now,” Chapote said. “We better make this ‘confession’ of yours quick, or you’ll have your Adam’s apple punched in by that posse afore you kin sign your name.”

“Don’t write it!” Posey Nuggins cried. “What’s the sense of it now? Let the sheriff come and I’ll explain a thing or two to him! This hobo here won’t have a leg to stand on when I get through.”

“They’s all kinds of time for me to pull this here trigger—afore Sheriff Flapjohn gits here!” Chapote reminded them.

“Go on, hombre,” Dave said. “What shall I write?”

“Wall, now, leave me think this out. You kin start thisaway:

*“To who-all it may concern:”*

Dave scrawled this down on the brown paper.

The other went on:

“I’ll leave it to you to stick in the commas and dots and such-like.” His eyes blinked. The degenerate face was screwed up in thought that seemed alien to it. “Go on writin’ this:

*“The sun’s got me, which I’m shrivelin’ up with thirst.”*

Dave looked up. The dictator was speaking as if he actually felt the words. His breath came with difficulty. He forced it in groans.

“Go on and write it!” Chapote said, shaking the gun muzzle at him. “Write it down. And then write this:

*“Bein’ I’m about to kick off I want to make a deathbed confession. I ain’t exactly in a bed, but I’m lyin’ in sand dunes surrounded by cactus and such.”*

Again there was strange illusion as though the man were speaking the truth.

*“My hoss bucked me here and ran away. The hosses which I was rustlin’ ’em from up yonder, they ran off likewise. You’ll find my bones here and know that I am the hoss thief which has done the rustlin’ hereabout for the past three months. The horses from the Lazy G and the Tumblin’ S outfit and the Rex Sand and Cattle Company. And the pacer from the Last Chance Cantina at Rawhide. Me—Dave Huppert—rustled ’em all.”*

Chapote was exhausted. He sank forward, but caught himself, his face set and ghastly. His trigger hand tightened convulsively, as though a galvanic current gripped his body. As if fighting an unknown posse he struggled and went on barely whispering: “Write this:

*“I figure in burnin’ in hell. No sheriff’s ever goin’ to get me. But bein’ Sheriff Flapjohn has the trick of hangin’ strangers and findin’ out later that they was innocent, I’m makin’ this here confession so’s it’ll save the pore muckers and desert hombres in these parts from suspicion.*

*“(Signed). DAVE HUPPERT.”*

Dave finished writing. Then:

“Spread it out in front of you so’s I kin read it,” Chapote said.

Dave obeyed. The outlaw read the document, keeping one eye, so to speak, on his prisoner.

“It’s satisfactory,” he said wearily. “You-all kin go.” He slumped back in his chair like a deflated pigskin, wrinkled and shapeless.

Dave took the girl’s hand. He was smiling quizzically. He was reflecting that if he showed himself to the sheriff it would take all the sense out of the confession.

Chapote’s game seemed to be a complicated one. Perhaps to prove the authenticity of the document, Chapote would kill Dave and leave him out in some sand dune with the letter in his pocket. That would have been a safe way of playing the game.

But evidently the girl worried him. What could he do with her? He could murder her and bury her in some cañon perhaps. But that was a left-handed way of going about the whole business.

And there was that old circus hostler. It has been pointed out already that Chapote was averse to indiscriminate murder. He was particularly averse to it when he had an unknown quantity like that Papago squaw to deal with.

He preferred to play his game in his own way. He would send the two prisoners away, and then deal with the sheriff.

“All right, you two,” he said, “git to your hosses.”

Dave drew the girl to him. She seemed bewildered, incapable of action. Her face was pale, tragic. She looked at Dave’s face, then at the parchment-covered skull of Chapote. She was like a child in a forest of rapacious wolves.

“Are we—free?” she asked in an incredulous, wonder-stricken voice.

“Yes—come on, child—we’re free! Can’t you understand that? We’re trailin’ to Mexico.”

She drew back.

Dave looked down at her. Could it be possible that she would refuse to go with him? Yes, perhaps that was the trouble; he was an out-and-out fugitive from justice now.

“Look here, child. The posse will take care of you—if you don’t want to come away and rough it with me.”

She shot back quickly: “I’m thinking of poor old Padin.”

“He’s safe enough. He’s got a good horse—plenty of good horses. He’ll stay away from here——”

“You can bet on that!” she said in a lighter tone.

“He’ll find the posse later and go back with them.”

This seemed to satisfy her.

“Come on, then, pard,” she cried. “I’m going to Mexico with you!”

She seemed incredibly gay of a sudden. The fear of death had gone. She was like a kitten that had been chased by a big dog—finding itself again in the protection of its master.

They went out to the corral together, Chapote following. The posse was almost at the bottom of the cliff. A few moments more and the riders would be galloping their horses down the stream bed toward the posada.

Dave and the girl mounted the two horses which the squaw had brought to them. Chapote stood, leaning his frail weight against a hitching post. His gun was still in his hand, an imminent danger.

He saw that the two fugitives were headed down the cañon—and keeping under the lee of the cliffs. Then when he had satisfied himself that they could not possibly get in touch with the sheriff before he had his own interview with him, Chapote sank to his knees. The squaw came to him with water.

By the time Sheriff Flapjohn and his posse reached the posada, the two fugitives had rounded the cliffs and were heading westward in deep shadow.

## CHAPTER XX.

### CHAPOTE SCORES.

The manner of Sheriff Flapjohn's picking up Huppert's trail and following it to the Trade Rat's posada was as follows:

It might never have happened if it had not been for that disappointed piebald mare. It will be remembered that Ali Baba cast her off, as being unworthy of his select remuda.

Throughout history we may trace many tragedies to the jealousy of a woman crossed in love. The malefactions of a disappointed mare merely offer a variation on the old, old theme.

The piebald's act after being discarded by her lord and master, cannot rightly be called a malefaction, however. What she did was prompted by the very natural tendency of any horse to seek out company.

Wandering over the sage patches on top of the mesa, she got to leeward of Flapjohn's posse. The smell of horses was very pleasant to her dejected soul. She galloped across the high, moonlit plain and by a friendly neigh announced her desire to "belong."

The sheriff took hold of her reins, which were divided and dragging, and his men gathered around.

"What do you make of this, gents?"

A saddled and riderless horse roaming alone on the top of Sundown Mesa was not an ordinary occurrence.

"She's run away from her master," said one of the men. "But what-all does that mean?"

"She's saddled and bridled, and ain't just wandered out to forage for herself. And her saddle's hangin' to one side. But what-all does *that* mean?" said another.

"Looks like she's been rollin' and feelin' bad. And she's a friendly hoss, and wants company, but what-all does *that* mean?"

Flapjohn thought for awhile.

"It mayn't mean much, then agin it may mean a whole lot. Ain't no one has any diggin's on top of this mesa, so fur as I ever heard. And further and

more they ain't no one has occasion to crost it to get anywheres. But, even so, where-all does that lead us?"

The chulo guide vouchsafed the only reasonable conjecture:

"That mare is one of the horses rustled by the thief!"

"Mebbe so," the sheriff admitted.

"Might we kin trace her back to where she comes from," said Shank Boskin. "You can see those tracks in the sand."

"Yes, till we come to some lava. Then where are you at?"

"By then we may get a clew," said the other Boskin.

"Bein' we've lost track of our man temporarily," Sheriff Flapjohn admitted, "it ain't goin' to do us no hurt to follow these tracks."

They followed the tracks, tracing them backward across the plain. When the piebald saw that they were heading toward the posada—a place where she had been given bed and board many a time—she took the lead.

The sheriff noticed this. Some of his men wanted the old piebald kept in the rear, for she was making the tracking harder, but Flapjohn preferred to go on this supposition, that she was taking them somewhere. A few miles of loping along and they found the tracks of a cavy of horses.

Here they dismounted and discovered the footprint of Ali Baba, which every man knew. This cavy had galloped off toward a cañon on the southern side of the mesa—the cañon where the posada was.

"Come on, men!" Flapjohn cried. "I've got the answer. Huppert went down to the Trade Rat's posada. Didn't think he'd be fool enough to do that. It means he's out of grub and water.

"And bein' we seen the Trade Rat only yesterday and told him about the reward for Huppert, daid or alive, I reckon we'll learn a thing or two when we git down thar!"

When the riders reached the posada they saw at a glance that something unusual had been toward.

A frail, shapeless thing was lying on the ground near a hitching post; something else, just as shapeless, but by no means as frail, was squatted close by. The lamps in the adobe house were lit, sending out warm, yellow

rays which crossed the bands of blue light and black shadow made by the moon. From the interior of the posada came the sound of a man groaning.

“What-all’s happened?” Flapjohn asked.

The shapeless thing on the ground gave answer:

“What-all’s happened! Plenty’s happened, I’ll tell you. I’ve been sage-brushed—that’s what! Look at me!”

“Who hit you?” the sheriff asked.

“A tarnel, hell-bendin’ hoss thief! That’s who! And after I saved him from dyin’ with thirst out thar——”

“Where’s this horse thief now?”

The man on the ground crumpled up again as if in a swoon. The squaw tried to hold his head up and put a flask to his lips.

“Help this hombre into the house, men.” Flapjohn said. “Fix him up a bit so’s he kin talk coherentlike.”

Two of the men dismounted. In a moment they had Chapote up.

“Careful now, gents,” he moaned. “It’s my arm. I got a bad crease in my arm. Don’t hold me there. Leave me walk.”

They all got to the door of the posada, where they heard the groaning of the Trade Rat.

“What in tarnation happened to *him*?” the sheriff asked.

“Same hellbender got him!” Chapote replied.

“Where is this hellbender?” Flapjohn cried in feverish impatience. “Which way did he go?”

“Don’t know,” Chapote answered weakly. “But leave me git a swig or two more, then I’ll tell you what happened, which you may git a clew or two from what I have to say.”

The sheriff went to the bunk where the Trade Rat was lying.

“I told you to watch out for that hombre,” Flapjohn said. “Didn’t I?”

“You did,” the Trade Rat moaned. “And I didn’t watch out sharp enough. He shot me all up! Don’t figure on ever bein’ the same man again when I get up from this here bunk. Shot me—a poor defenseless cripple that I am!”

“You get him, chief! If it’s the last act you ever do! You get him—he’s been killin’ and rustlin’ and murderin’ for months! If you don’t get him \_\_\_\_\_”

“All right, you,” the sheriff said to Chapote. “Tell us what you got to say. Who are you—and how come everything?”

“Chuck Chapote—that’s my name, chief. I’m a poor mucker—doin’ a little pannin’ down here in the desert——”

“I know him,” said one of the posse. “Drops in for a drunk every once in awhile to Cobb’s Coulee.”

“I was in a gulch a few miles from here, this afternoon——”

“What-all doin’?” the sheriff demanded. He eyed Chapote suspiciously. Chapote was a hard looking character. For the last few months the sheriff had checked up on everybody who trailed around in those gulches. This man was a stranger to him.

“If you must know, chief,” Chapote said, “I’ll tell you. I’ll tell you all. I was taken on as a guide by two tenderfoot circus folk.”

“What in hell are you talking about?” Flapjohn exclaimed.

“A little gal—name of Posey Nuggins. Her and an ole man—a mozo who keeps the circus hosses. Him and the gal got me to bring ’em down here. They was trailin’ the white circus hoss—so they told me. But I found out different.”

The sheriff was too flabbergasted to interrupt again. He listened in rapt amazement to the rest of the story.

“When we was in a gulch back there a ways I was ridin’ ahead and found a man lyin’ in the sand, his tongue all swole and black and hangin’ out. His hands clutchin’ the air. His eyes like a barroom mirror which is sketched all over with lard.

“I give him a few sips of water—knowin’ he was dyin’. Then waited and give him a few more sips, pourin’ it on his black tongue. Then I seen that he had a cavy of hosses corralled in a side draw.

“This made me suspicious, because one of the hosses I seen was a white stallion—the like of which I never seen in Arizony nor Mexico nor anywhere else I ever been.”

“Why didn’t you plug the man?” Sheriff Flapjohn asked.

“Plug him? I thought he was already daid. Why, he didn’t flicker an eyelash for awhile. Then when I was growin’ more and more certain that he was the hoss thief every one is after I seen that he’d been scratchin’ something on a piece of brown paper which same he’d most like wrapped around some tobacco or cans in his duffel-bag.

“And with a piece of lead ore he had wrote on that paper that he was dyin’. And, like most every one in the world which is about to face hell’s fire, he got scairt for his soul and wrote out a confession.”

“A confession about what? Where is it? Didn’t you keep it? What-all did he confess?” Flapjohn and his men asked.

Chapote, sitting flopped and shapeless in a chair, fumbled in his pocket with a groan. “I sure did keep it, gents; and here it is!”

The men crowded around Flapjohn as he held the paper to one of the lamps and read it aloud.

They looked at one another. They nodded. Flapjohn pulled at his whiskers and breathed an oath of triumph.

“But how come this gun wound of yourn?” he asked. “And how come you didn’t glom onto that rustler? You ain’t specified concernin’ that point as yet!”

“Well, gents,” Chapote said, “when I seen what kind of a hell-divin’ killer I’d caught in my loop what should happen but that little gal—the one I was actin’ as a guide for—she tumbles to her knees and takes the hombre in her arms and breathes sweet words to him, and cries all over him, slobberin’ somethin’ awful.

“It seemed like this was the kind of medicine he needed, and sure enough his eyes begin to flicker. She gives him a sip of water, and begs him to wake up and look into her eyes. And shore enough he does that same thing!”

“Go on,” said the sheriff, “specify what-all happened then.”

“Plenty happened!” the narrator wailed. “Look at me! Look at the poor Trade Rat over there. A little hunchback all shot up.”

“How did *he* get in on the game?”

“How?” Chapote was thinking hard. It was not easy for a man with a wounded hand to make up such a complex and consistent yarn—a yarn that

was being listened to by a posse of eager and fighting bad men. “You ask how, well, I’ll tell you.”

This part of the narrative came with more difficulty. Chapote was making it up as he went along—although the general plot of the story had evidently been brought out beforehand. It was the details that troubled him.

His listeners attributed his hesitancy and stammering to the fact that his arm was giving him trouble. They suffered the old squaw to strengthen him with a big swig of redeye.

He then went on, his imagination resuscitated.

“You see gents, I ought to have plugged that hellbender while he was lyin’ there. Though which one of you would have done that same? Plug a man who’s more’n half daid with thirst? Plug him when he was so near hell’s fire that he’d wrote out a confession?”

“Gents, I’ll have to admit I went at it too slow. I sort of waited till he had a bit more strength so’s I could plug him gentleman-like, and not be blushin’ with shame the rest of my days. Well I waited till too late. The ole circus hostler—and the gal—they fooled me!”

“What do you mean this gal ‘fooled you?’ ” the sheriff demanded.

“She and her circus mozo, why they turned their guns on me, and ordered me straight from the shoulder to vamose. You see they knowed right away that I’d try to hold that bird and turn him over to you, chief.”

“Well, if you’d used your fool haid,” Flapjohn snorted, “you’d of come in for a good reward. As it is——”

“As it is I got into a gun fight—all for the sake of tryin’ to uphold the law. This is what I get for it.” He pointed, wailing to his bandaged arm.

“It happened like this,” he went on. “I dropped out of the procession—like any man with sense would of done. But I trailed ’em. You see, when the hoss thief got his water and come to and felt spry agin, why they lit out for the south—I follerin’.

“And they fetched up at this here posada. I dismounted, crawled through the brush, climbed into a window—that very window there. Meanwhile the Trade Rat, at the point of their six-guns, was givin’ ’em a grubstake, which you’ll find his goods in their pack if you catch ’em.

“I snuck up on ’em, and while the hoss thief was waterin’ his hosses I grabbed the ole mozo by his neck, dragged him in here and throwed him

into a cellar.

“He ain’t there now, but if you find him he’ll tell you all about it, makin’ out that I kidnapped him. Likewise the Trade Rat thar, why he grabbed the gal throwin’ her into that thar room.”

“It’s a lie!” the Trade Rat snarled, seeing that he was being blamed for the worst part of the fight. “I didn’t touch the gal. It was the squaw who stuck her into that room. Me touch a gal! Do I look like it, gents? I didn’t lay a finger on her, honest to God!”

“All right, it was the squaw.” Chapote let this point go as immaterial. “Leastwise we got her out of the way so’s she wouldn’t be shot up when we fought the gunmen. That was fair and square, waren’t it?”

The rest of the men—despite the fact that they had a Western sense of delicacy in the treatment of womenkind—seemed to concede this point. The girl was helping out a horse thief.

Horses were also important factors in the Western code. In some ways they were more important than women. Chapote—as far as the posse believed—had done what was right.

“Go on,” the sheriff commanded grimly.

“Why, they ain’t any more,” said Chapote, breathing freely now that he had explained that point about the girl. “The hellbender came back from waterin’ his stolen hosses. Put up the hell of a fight. Shot us both up. Like to kill us—exceptin’ that I fell—right where you seen me out thar. And then he rescues the woman and the ole circus mozo and hops to the trail.”

“The hosses is all watered and rarin’ to go, chief,” one of the posse called from the corral outside.

“Hombre,” the sheriff said to Chapote, “you sure was up agin the trickiest hell-bendin’ cut-throat that ever rode in this here desert. But I reckon you and the Trade Rat thar will git revenge for your wounds afore mornin’. The country between here and Mexico is flat, and I don’t figure we’ll be up agin anything harder than an out-and-out race.”

“Good luck to you, chief, and I hope you git him.”

“I’ll git him all right—and he’s goin’ to look up the nearest tree we kin find—and I mean pronto!”

The men thumped out, swung up to their mounts. A moment later the troupe was clattering down the cañon on the rocky trail.

Chapote was left slumped in his chair, exhausted from the gruelling cross-examination. His imagination, as well as his strength, was drained.

For awhile he waited, ashen-faced and trembling, as if in a violent ague. The squaw had gone over to the bunk and was continuing her witchcraft on the Trade Rat. The groans of the latter and the echoing hoofs of the galloping horses were the only sounds.

Despite his wound, Chapote's mind was in a whirl. If that posse did not find Dave Huppert they would come home and cool off. It was very probable that Dave could prove, if given a fair trial, that he had nothing to do with the thefts which had been committed by Chapote. If he were caught now—with that stallion and those mares—he would be lynched without having a chance to say a word in his defense.

Which was the safer for Chapote? To have this scapegoat, who was carrying his sins, put irrevocably out of the way, or to have him off there in Mexico, biding his time to get revenge?

That little old hostler, roaming around in the cañons somewhere, would probably return to civilization and tell his version of the story. He would tell how he was imprisoned in the posada—and how the girl was imprisoned likewise. But this testimony would not break down Chapote's story.

The girl might return also and give her version. But Chapote had already explained what had been done to her. She would try to explode that yarn about Chapote's finding Huppert in the desert, dying of thirst. But had not Chapote shown a "confession" in Dave's own handwriting to prove this?

Now Chapote reflected that if Dave were lynched any stories the girl and old Padin told about his innocence would be hushed up. They would only tend to show Flapjohn had made another bullheaded blunder.

These thoughts began to breed a terrible fear in the wounded outlaw's mind that Dave might not be caught. If he were caught and lynched the sheriff would forget—would *have to forget*—the whole business. If he were not caught——

*If he were not caught!*

This was the fear that wracked Chapote. What if that steel-eyed sharpshooter got away free to Mexico and bided his time! He would come back for Chapote—and he would not have a girl to complicate his revenge. It would be simple. Chapote's life would not be worth a snap of the finger from that day on.

The answer was easy. Dave, with the load of guilt he was carrying on his shoulders, must be lynched—and forgotten!

Chapote stood up. He was weak, very weak. But he had a grave duty to perform. It was the one thread left to spin in this web of treachery and deceit.

He made the squaw help him out to the corral. He motioned her to saddle a horse. He made her lift him into it.

Slumped securely between the high horn and cantle of the Mexican saddle, he was able to keep his seat as he gathered the reins and thrashed the cayuse into a fast gallop.

The posse was out on the open plain, clearly visible in the moonlight. They were losing time hunting for tracks out on the open plain.

Chapote knew that Dave and his girl had not tried to make a break for the south. They had gone west, clinging to the shadow of the mesa. It took Chapote only a short time to get within calling distance.

The sheriff rode back to him.

“I’ve got news for you, chief!” the renegade said. “Right after you left a Papago horsed in and said he seen Huppert and a gal and a cavy of broncs skirtin’ them cliffs to the west.” He pointed back to the black shadow of Sundown Mesa. “You come along with me, gents, and I’ll show you where they was last seen.”

## CHAPTER XXI.

### HER MAN.

Posey and the self-confessed outlaw, Dave Huppert, were trailing under the lee of the giant mesa. A sense of glorious freedom thrilled the girl. She felt as care-free and joyous as a child, riding along with the keen, sage-scented breath of the desert upon her face.

One discovery more than anything else delighted her. They saw the posse which had almost arrived at the posada in time to catch them, heading off across the plain. Obviously they had gone on the supposition that Dave would cut down immediately for Mexico.

Dave began to wonder just why Chapote had not double-crossed him. Why hadn't he told the sheriff that the fugitive was still keeping to the mesa cliffs, where there was plenty of shadow?

"Are you still worried, pard?" the girl asked as she rode stirrup to stirrup with him.

"Certainly not. We're free," Dave said. But he still continued to doubt. Just what was Chapote's game?

Posey was singing. She cared no more about that dreadful conflict. She was responsive only to the thin bracing air, the glow of the moonlight on the breast of the desert, the limitless horizon, the low jagged sierras over in Sonora County, Mexico, whither they were to trail.

"He could use that 'confession' of mine," Huppert was musing to himself. "He would not have to show it right now. He could wait until the sheriff got on his trail and suspected him. Then—to save himself—he could show it. He might say that he found my body with that damned confession in my pocket—or near by. Yes, he could use it."

The girl went on humming blithely. But she stopped. Intuitively she knew that her companion was not in her mood.

"That's the answer," Dave continued to himself. "He was a slick hombre, and made use of me. Too slick to kill me with a posse right on top of him. He got that piece of paper to fix his future up—and that was all he wanted of me."

“Can’t you get that place out of your mind?” Posey asked finally. “Aren’t we free now—to go wherever we want?”

“Of course. Don’t you worry about anything, child. I was only figurin’, you know, now that that posse has headed off there on the plain. It’s pretty light out there with the moon shinin’ on alkali. Too dangerous for us to head south yet. We better hide in one of these cañons till the moon sets. There’ll be an hour or two of pitch dark, afore dawn. Then we can make a good big break.”

“Anything you say goes, pard.”

They rode up into a barranca. Although the moon did not reach this narrow gorge, there was an imperceptible glow, reflected from the cliffs higher up which were of dazzling sandstone and quartz. They found themselves in a dry stream bed. There were a few sand mounds, some boulders, some cactus trees.

“We’ll sit down here and eat,” Dave said. “You need a bite after that rumpus in the posada. And a drink, too. And a little breathing space won’t do us any harm.”

They sat down in the warm sand, while the horses foraged for themselves. The sound of their munching at the weeds a little way off, and a wind sweeping up through the gulch, rustling the chaparral, was the only break in the universal stillness.

Dave and the girl, rummaging in the duffel-bag, took stock of the provisions they had for the journey. It was what was left of the foodpack with which the girl had set out from Cobb’s Coulee.

“There’s not much,” Posey said. “Just a few cans of chili beans and bacon enough for three meals. And a few pounds of dried vegetables. How long are we going to be outlaws, pard?”

“No telling.” Dave was lost again in thought.

They waited in the dark for awhile, the girl trying to find what they could eat cold. Dave opened a can of beans. They had a drink or two out of his flask. A fire, of course, was not to be risked, but he made a cigarette for her. They rested on a mound of sand, their heads upon the duffel-bag, staring up at the clear blue ribbon of sky high above them.

Again a sense of boundless freedom and security came over them. Life had burned into an ecstasy. Every scent of desert flower, of sage, of sycamore—every sound of the wind in the gulch, of the horses munching

peacefully, of the squeak of the saddles as the critters heaved sighs of contentment—all these thrilled the two fugitives. There was no scent that was not like perfume; there was no sound that was not a melody.

And even in that deep gloom all line and color seemed to have assumed a beautiful shape. The barrel cactus was not a fat, squat hulk of pulpy vegetation off there in the sand. The saguaro was not gaunt, thorny, grotesque like a thin ugly man. The boulders were not shapeless gargoyles of granite.

The two fugitives were surrounded by forms which merged harmoniously into the line and shade and mass of the cliffs and stream bed and deep indigo sky. A glow, filtering down from those dazzling masses of quartz hundreds of feet above them, permeated the whole scene, giving it depth and life.

Finally Dave harped back to a question the girl had asked some time before. It was a little idea that had bobbed up in the current of their intercourse, and had been swept along, lost for awhile in the swift, strong flood of this newly found life.

“You asked how long we’re going to be outlaws,” he said. “I’m going to be one till this business blows over. Then I’ll come back and square myself. As for you—where do you get the idea you’re an outlaw at all?”

“If you’re one, I’m one.”

“Oh, no. As soon as daylight comes you’re going back to that posse, and they’ll take you to your circus where you belong.”

“I belong out here, pard.”

“If you stick with me any longer you’ll get into a heap of trouble, child. If you go back—why, then, everything’s all fixed for you. No one’s goin’ to blame you for anything.”

“Let the trouble come,” she replied readily. “I’m sticking with you.”

“All right—until sunrise.”

“Until always, pard.”

The scene changed once again. I mean to say that it changed from Dave’s point of view. As for the girl, the world still remained a blissful harmony of color and sound and feeling. The wilderness was a paradise.

But Dave thrust his hand out to her and drew her to him with a strange feeling of anxiety. He was no longer afraid for his own life. He had

something now, to protect—something that belonged to him, that was worth more than a gold mine, worth more than the world. He had to fear now for a possession, the price of which was beyond the estimate of any mortal man. The gulch turned into a dangerous trap; the horses wandering in the dry weeds, breaking through bits of chaparral, made sounds that startled him; the black crevices in the gulch walls were lurking with terrible danger. For the first time since Dave had been hounded by the law he was afraid.

And there was the girl, like a trusting child, tightly clasped in his arms. Her cheek was against his, her warm silken hair pressed against his temple, the palm of her hand upon his face.

If she had had an army of guards picketed about her with loaded guns, watching those shadows, listening to those nerve-racking sounds of cracking mesquite twigs, she would not have felt more secure. Instead of that she was in the arms of a man who had no weapon, no assurance of safety except that his hiding place was unknown.

Suddenly the girl felt his hand grip hers tightly. He shoved his cigarette into the sand, extinguishing it.

“Throw that cigarette of yours away—quick. Put it out.”

She was frightened by the soft tense command. She knew that something was wrong, and without asking any questions she obeyed. Then she whispered:

“Why—why did you make me do that? What’s happened?”

“You see that space down there—sort of white at the bottom of the cañon wall? Look sharp.”

She looked across the sand of the stream bed to where a strata of quartz in the cañon wall showed up in the gloom like a smirch of white mist.

“Do you see anything in front of it?” he whispered.

“There’s a cactus there—just like all these other cactus plants—or else perhaps it’s a rock. But it’s too thin and tall for a rock.”

“Just like a saguaro cactus,” he admitted. “Well, it wasn’t there a few minutes ago.”

Her arm grew taut about his shoulders. He could feel her heart beating. In fact, the discovery had sent a qualm through his own frame.

“It isn’t there now,” she said.

“No, it’s dropped to the ground. It’s crawling through that bear brush—toward us. Don’t say any more. Just flatten out in the sand and crawl behind this boulder. They can’t see us now. It was those cigarettes that gave them the clew. If they’d seen only one they’d have blazed away—thinking they had me.”

“Where are you going to hide?” she asked, before obeying his command.

“I’m going to crawl over there in the brush and meet him. I’ll be back to this rock.”

They separated now; and the girl crawled inch by inch to the protection of the boulder.

Terror overtook her now that she was without her man. She lay there under the warm shoulder of the rock like a bird cornered and stupefied before the advance of a snake.

All about her the cactus plants seemed to have come to life. Another appeared against the strata of quartz—dim and hovering and with scarcely a semblance of human shape. It was a form—that was all. Other forms arose from the ground. The horses neighed. One trotted off, frightened, crashing through the dry chaparral.

Down there in the brush into which her lover had crawled there was a breaking of twigs. Then there was a muffled burst of light, a deafening report.

The light had come from the heart of that patch of bear brush where Dave had disappeared.

It was not the ordinary streak of white fire that you will see going from a gun muzzle in the dark. It was completely masked, giving out merely a flash that created a confused and instantaneous vision of thick chaparral and the forms of men.

The girl had no idea what that shot meant. All she knew was the one terrifying bit of knowledge that her lover had no gun.

## CHAPTER XXII.

### SILHOUETTES.

It had all happened in a moment; a single cast of the dice; a man of unlimited strength, speed and courage, against a weaker man who was tricky and armed with a gun.

Dave Huppert crawled over the sand mounds of the stream bed without making a sound. His adversary—whom he had remembered seeing in the open just beyond the patch of bear brush—had already entered the brush, and he could make no move without causing a crackling of a twig or dry leaf.

Dave traced his course by the sound—a stir over on the other side of the black mass of bushes; another stir a few feet closer; still another. It took an ear well trained in the sounds of the wilderness to detect that man's course.

When the attacker came within a few yards of his prey, Dave crawled under the shadow of the chaparral, got to his knees and peered over the interlacing of leaves.

His enemy, hearing the first strange sound, stood up and looked about. In that gloom he seemed a frail shapeless form—an apprehensive ghost peering futilely into fathoms of darkness.

He could not see Dave—but Dave could see him faintly outlined against the background of quartz.

It was now the time, or never. Dave leaped from the brush and crashed through.

His enemy had not expected the attack from such a close quarter; he had been going entirely on the supposition that the two fugitives were over there on a sand dune where a moment before the lights of their cigarettes had been clearly visible—the only points of bright light in that black universe.

The ambushed man whirled about to meet that crash—which came, as he rightly estimated, from the flank. Immediately a human body, hurtling through the air, smashed him to the ground. Both men fell in the tangle of brush. And in that same instant the gun was fired.

It was fired automatically. The armed man had virtually pulled the trigger as soon as his fright at hearing the noise in the brush permitted his

trembling hand to do its work. But that time he was on his back, with Dave on top.

There was, of course, no aim. He had fired without a thought—with the frantic hope that he might stop that onrushing enemy. But the enemy had already flattened him to the earth—and flattened his arm—which happened to be a left arm, called into service in this emergency—against his abdomen.

It might be said that that shot was fired not only automatically, but against the gunman's conscious effort *not* to fire. For the slug actually ripped across his own abdomen and dug into his hip.

Dave Huppert got to his feet. In his hand was a gun—and the gun was loaded. It flashed through his mind that he had the power in his hand to kill five men.

This was the victory that was offered him. It was within his reach—a complete and ultimate victory. And it is fair to suppose that he—or any other man—would have taken it. But something happened to snatch it from his grasp in the very next moment.

That rash and willful little girl was the cause of his defeat. But in the complicated pattern of Dave Huppert's destiny, it was perhaps a God-sent prevention.

Unwittingly she made him lose, and unwittingly she prevented him from a murderous climax to the series of adventures he had passed through since she first sent him out to the desert with her beloved horse.

In a word, Posey was the first to arrive at that spot where the gunfire had flashed. She threw herself into Dave's arms—finding him standing there—and gave a gasp of joy at discovering that he was not hurt.

At her feet in the dark mass of brush was a man groaning in pain. All around her were the voices of other men, intense, frightened, baffled, and calling to one another.

“Come over here, chief!” some one called. “He's in this patch.”

“Surround it, men. Quick thar. Keep low. He can't see us.”

“I cain't see nothin' either!” said another. “Where are you all at?”

“I see him!”

Dave realized that in this maneuver of his, he himself was now standing up revealed against the quartz wall a furlong away. He felt helplessly vulnerable, waiting there with the girl in his arms. He knew he could fire in the direction of those different voices, but he reflected that the flash of his gun would draw a rain of lead upon both of them.

At his feet the groaning man squirmed. “It’s no use—he’s got me—come here, somebody—quick!”

“Chapote—he’s hit——” some one said.

“He don’t count——” said another. Indeed all they had wanted of the desert rat were his services as a guide. The sheriff’s voice came out louder than the others:

“Blaze away at that patch all of you, when I whistle!”

“No, no for God’s sake, men!”

They had expected Chapote to call out for mercy. In the fusillade he would be riddled. But it was not Chapote’s voice that had spoken.

“Who said that?” the sheriff asked.

“I said it! I—Huppert!”

“Well, for hell’s sake!” the sheriff snorted. “You think you kin stand up and give us orders not to bump you off!”

“I’ve got the girl in my arms,” Dave said quietly. “Do you want to shoot her down—you sniveling skunks! Put your guns up—and I won’t fire.”

“No, don’t shoot the gal thar——” one of the posse shouted. “Call it off, chief. He’s givin’ up.”

“Give us a light then, some one. Light a branch of this chaparral. Give us a fire so’s we kin see where we’re at.”

There was a moment of tense silence. Presently a light sprang up a few yards from the patch of brush. A few bunches of dry sage sent up a thick smoke. A smell of turpentine pervaded the gloom, then there followed a blaze.

It was a small flame, but it cast wagging beams from wall to wall of the narrow gulch. It revealed the sharp crags; it cast long moving shadows of cactus and men. The desolate place seemed alive with many restive spirits.

The men stared, blinking, their eyes dilated from the long period of eager scrutiny in the darkness. They turned from the fire and looked

scowling at one another, at the patch of bear brush, at the tall gaunt man and the young woman standing together.

Sheriff Flapjohn was the first to break the silence. He came toward Huppert, his face grim and sternly etched by the red glare of the fire.

“Huppert,” he said, “I’d admire to see you drop that thar weapon, and put up your hands.”

Dave obeyed.

“All right, men,” Flapjohn went on. “One of you see what you kin do for this hombre on the ground. It’s Chapote, and I reckon he’s done for.”

One of the posse came forward, and knelt down by the recumbent figure.

“And you others, come on around. Git your lass-rope ready. And bind his hands, likewise.”

They went about this methodically, silently. Dave found plenty of time to put in his plea:

“Gents, I want you to take this girl back to where she belongs. She doesn’t know what she’s doing. Been hankering to get herself into trouble, and she’d have been shot down if Flapjohn had had his measly way. Take her home, one of you gents—and keep her out of this mess.”

The girl clung to him.

“What are you going to do!” she cried as the men flipped a loop of the lasso around his head. “Before God, he’s innocent! If you go on with this hideous thing you’ll all get what’s coming to you for the murderers you are!”

“Git away thar now, gal!” Flapjohn ordered. “He’s right. You ain’t to mix in with this. Get her away thar.”

She fought off the man that tried to tear her from Dave.

“I tell you he’s innocent!” she fairly screamed. “He’s never stole a horse in his life! I’m the one that begged him to save Ali Baba from Vasto’s whip—that’s the whole story.”

Flapjohn paid no attention to this, but some one called out:

“How about that thar dockyment he wrote concernin’ his past his’try, gal?”

Flapjohn was impatient. It was not the right procedure to listen to a girl when a lynching was being accomplished.

“One of you pack her off thar. We cain’t be bothered hashing this all out. Are we here for a palaver, or for to give this here rustler his medicine?”

“That trash he wrote is all a fake!” the girl cried. “He wrote it under the nose of a gun! Back there in that Mex dive. The man you want is this gunman lying in the brush. *He* made him write that confession.”

The men smiled grimly. One or two looked at Flapjohn and shook their heads. “Better get her out of the way, chief.”

But one of the older men—the raw-boned, gray-haired Tim Boskin cross-questioned her:

“How about that thar claybank mare which she belonged to me and my brother here?”

“And how about my three mares?” the map-maker demanded.

“And how about Duffle’s snuff-brown which we’ve trailed her along with the rest of the cavy?” one of the Boskin brothers added.

“It wasn’t this boy who stole them!” the girl said. “It was Ali Baba. They’re all mares, aren’t they? Ali Baba is the one that’s been chasing around the country looking for mares. He’s got the habit—ask anybody in the circus; they’ll tell you I’m not lying! And you’re blaming it all on this poor kid!”

The sheriff shouted her down. “Get her outen the way thar men—if one cain’t do it, then two of you tear her off, and stop her yowling.”

“Flapjohn, you’re going to pay for all this one of these days!” Huppert said quietly. “Maybe not by me. But there’ll be a man somewhere who’ll call you to a showdown——”

“Put a gag on her!” the sheriff went on, as if he had not heard Huppert’s threat. “And get this hombre down the cañon a ways where they’s that sycamore on the bank. We’ll git this business over without no more palaver.”

Two of the men tore her away, and as she screamed and kicked, the rest turned their attention from her to the man who had been shot.

“Chapote’s done for, chief.”

“What do you mean done for? Where’d he git hit this time?”

The sheriff went to him, knelt down, examined him then got up.

“I reckon you cain’t do anything for him now,” he admitted. “Leastwise one of you birds stay up here and watch him, and keep the gal here till we git back.

“After we finish with Huppert, she kin go free. We’ll take her out of the desert, if she wants. But till then keep her where she won’t ball us up.”

Old Tim Boskin remained to accomplish this work. The sheriff turned his back on the girl, on the dying Chapote, and the guard, and then led the way down the gulch. They passed out of the flickering world of light created by the blazing brush, and entered a region of pitch darkness, from which later they came again into moonlight.

Their horses were down there, corralled in a side draw with reins tied. Above them was a sycamore tree trunk.

The girl could not see what was happening. She heard the footsteps of the men receding from light to darkness and into light again. From then their activities were muffled.

Coming suddenly to herself—as one awaking from a hideous nightmare—she struggled with the wiry old Tim Boskin. He was somewhat awkward in handling this sort of a creature. And she was as slippery and agile as anything he’d ever laid his wrinkled old hands on.

She freed herself, but he stood arms outstretched blocking her path down the gulch. Instead of trying to rush past him, she turned suddenly upon Chapote.

She threw herself down upon him, and shook him by the frail narrow shoulders, and screamed to him, as if she were trying to awake some one from a deep sleep.

It was a strange gesture, hysterical, crazed.

“Wake up, you hideous little fiend!” she screamed. “Come to—open your eyes! Open your foul mouth—and speak the truth—before you die! If you hope for any mercy in hell, wake up and save my man!”

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### BY THE SAGE FIRE LIGHT.

In the dying blaze of that sage fire, old Tim Boskin and Posey Nuggins saw the drawn gray face of the dying thief. The whitish eyelids opened, showing slits of glazed and colorless eyes.

Chuck Chapote writhed before the fierce gaze of the girl. His weak shoulders collapsed under her grip. His head lolled over so that he could look at the gaunt, wiry frontiersman bending over him. Perhaps Tim Boskin would save him from this harpy plucking mercilessly at his carcass.

But Tim said inexorably: "Go ahead, hombre. Tell us everything. You're dying, and we won't do you any hurt."

He held his flask to the man's lips. Chapote did not drink. He choked on the fiery liquid—a weak series of gasps, that were very near his last.

"Go ahead, speak, hombre! If you know anythin' about Huppert, speak and git some mercy for your soul in hell's fire—like this gal said. He plugged you—but he was defendin' hisself—forget that and tell us what you know."

"Plugged me!" Chapote said, gasping in a sort of laugh. "Oh, no! It wasn't him that got me, I'll tell yer that! I been shot a dozen times and no man was ever slick enough to do the trick. I did it myself! With my own shootin' iron. *He* wasn't heeled.

"You didn't know that, did you? Wall, he warden't. I got his gun. The gal will tell you that! I got his gun and made him write that thar note——"

"You did what?" Boskin cried. "You mean you been lyin' to us——"

"Lyin'? Yes, but I ain't goin' to lie now. What cause have I got to lie? I'm tellin' the truth so's I kin go to hell laughin' at you all—and at that fool sheriff who hangs every mucker he finds on a lonely trail!"

"Go ahead then, speak!" Boskin commanded.

Chapote sank back. It seemed certain now that he had settled into the sand a dead man, so gray and hideous he was.

But the girl shook him again, and screamed into his ear. Her breath was hot upon his gray skin. He recoiled as if from a fire.

Then without opening his eyes, he murmured almost automatically. It was a strange voice.

It seemed as if he knew those words by heart. He had thought them all out carefully long before. The girl had heard him recite them in that little room in the Trade Rat's posada.

When he spoke them then, he did so with great difficulty and pain, for he had just been wounded. Each word seemed to have taken his life breath.

And here they came again, issuing from the tight parchment lips. It was uncanny. It was an echo from the past. It was precisely as if a dead man were speaking:

"Bein' I'm kickin' off—want to confess. You'll find my bones here. The stock from the Lazy G—the Tumblin' S, the Rex Sand and Cattle—all of 'em. Me—Chapote! I am the hoss thief!"

Old Tim Boskin uttered a string of oaths. The truth dawned upon him slowly. He was slow to think, and slower to act.

He had a tragic vision of a youth being framed and put to death for crimes he had not committed. But he could not understand. It was all too complex—those stolen mares, that stolen circus horse.

Old Tim stayed upon his knees, amazed, dumb, breathing oaths and staring at the gray, immobile face.

Presently he saw the girl release her hold upon the thin shoulders and recoil.

Tim Boskin knew what had happened. He drew the bandanna upward across the man's face, then with creaking joints got up.

The girl had already clutched Tim's wiry arm and was pulling the old fellow down the trail. He followed obediently and broke into a run. It flashed through his slow old brain that there might yet be time to save that boy.

In one of the cañons of Sundown Mesa not very far from the gulch in which the above events were taking place, another drama was moving to its climax. In some respects it was a drama just as replete with passion and cowardice, outlawry and hate, as the one which I have been attempting to chronicle.

The actors, however, were not human beings, but horses. A white stallion had “gone bad.” Ali Baba had changed from a cowed and spiritless circus horse to a fighting desert king.

Followed by his obedient remuda of mares, he wandered up into a cañon, from which a night wind came down bearing the message that water could be found up there—and likewise wild horses.

The tang thrilled Ali Baba’s soul. He was worn out, foot sore, his silvery mane was knotted with burrs and thorns, his long flowing tail was tangled, his shining satin skin scratched and ruffled.

But every bruise and ache was pleasant to him—as they are to a powerful and athletic man who has been long pampered and has gone out into the forest.

Ali Baba’s kingly spirit had been awakened again. He was born anew. He was like a colt finding new pastures in a desert land. He was like a colt in spirit, but in body he was a powerful stallion who has been kept in perfect health.

He got well up toward the band of wild horses, being to windward of them, before they caught the curious and dreaded scent. He saw a huge drove of them, brushies of every color—pintos, roans, piebalds, black mustangs.

It was a wonderful sight to see all those beasts—which the hand of man had not touched, which a snaffle had never tortured, which a saddle had never disfigured.

Ali Baba’s heart leaped within him, he threw up his heels and danced up toward them. He whistled joyously. He neighed with a vim, announcing himself their new king.

But a stocky, shaggy beast with a Roman nose and ears askew, ran out to meet him.

Ali Baba paused, stamped upon the ground, snorted. This hideous imitation of a mule and jackass would be the first one to be dismissed from his kingdom.

A shaft from the low moon slanted between the cliffs of the gulch full in the face of the critter. It showed a pepper and salt skin, with black dots growing larger and thicker about the eyes, so as to make him look more sinister.

One eye was completely white and glared like a cat's eye, cold and impassionate. The other was red, flashing a venomous flame. A lip curled upward in a snarl, revealing long, yellow nippers.

Absolutely a disgraceful looking specimen, Ali Baba thought. No horse could bear to have such a thing hanging about. And besides he was not a mare. Nothing to do but chase him out of the cañon first.

Ali Baba went to him. He was surprised to find that the stocky, mule-like thing was not standing there with calf-knees spread out. Instead the beast was standing on his hind legs like a man, with hoofs poised on a level with Ali Baba's head.

Ali Baba did not wait. He was in no sense afraid. He was disgusted. The wild cayuse was an offense to any respectable horse's sense of decency.

In a word, Ali Baba stepped right in—and two hoofs, made as hard as flint by running for ten years over desert rocks, crashed down on his face.

The white stallion went to his knees.

His mares held back, trotting now to one side, now to the other. The wild horses in the upper part of the cañon came drifting down to see what the trouble was.

The older mares among them knew what was happening. The pepper and salt stallion with the white eye was going to tear another hapless victim to pieces.

But Ali Baba was up. His iron shod hoofs struck sparks from the cañon floor. The cliffs rang.

The white stud buried his teeth in the brushie's coat. The brushie closed on his neck. They were both on their foreknees now, biting, screaming.

The brushie was tricky—as all animals turn tricky in the desert. He was as much of a horse as a coyote is a wolf; as a desert Indian is a man.

His coat was harsh and wiry and he was gaunt; the desert, in other words, had put thorns on him as it does on its lizards and its plants. He was cruel, wary and mean.

Ali Baba was courageous and of unlimited strength. They pommelled each other mercilessly, they kicked each other, they tore each other with their teeth. They bled. They screamed with rage and pain.

And the white stallion went down, his flanks heaving, his satin skin darkened with sweat and blood.

He rolled, threw back his head in a frantic gesture, fell and tried again to rise. And now he succeeded in a measure, swinging himself to his feet, balancing himself with widespread hoofs like a stove-up, overworked cow-horse. For a moment he stood puffing, snorting, ready for another beating.

The desert-hardened brushie felt a qualm. Why didn't this white giant he had beaten run away? Why did he stand there, looming, with eyes rolling?

Why was he majestic even though he had to spread out his shaking legs to keep standing? Was he a horse, or was he a devil—a devil with the ferocity of a puma and the uncanny power of a man?

Surely enough he smelled of both. The taint of the big cats had not yet worn off.

The brushie—despite his better judgment, felt a current of panic go through him. That strange scent of the circus, that dazzling and terrifying silver mane, that courage were too much to cope with.

The brushie tensed again for another charge, advanced, then as Ali Baba flung up his gorgeous mane and whistled in frantic hate and pain, the attacker wheeled.

He wheeled “on a dime,” as if his fear were a merciless rider yanking at his mouth!

Off he galloped, his feet beating upon the rock slabs, his nostrils distended and snorting in terror, his head stretched out low so that he smelled the ground as he ran. Ali Baba stood upon a rise of rock slab, puffing and stamping. He tossed his head and waved that mane of glowing silver. He was supreme now. He was the monarch of the desert.

All that cavy of wild horses knew it. They stood about gazing up at him; pintos in the boulder wash, mares with their colts, wild fuzztails in the chaparral; the wilder fillies off under the shadow of the cliffs—all watched him and knew their lord and king.

The king is dead! Long live the king!

But the “King” had a sudden yearning for the touch of human hand upon his itching hide. He had been curried down every night and morning for all his circus life, and he knew the pleasant warmth and tingle of his blood coursing under the friction of the brush. If the truth were told Ali Baba was not yet a full-fledged desert outlaw.

He came down from his perch and limped through the cañon. The tame mares followed him. As for the others—well he would come back for them

after awhile. But first he wanted to find a man and feel the soft and soothing lotions that only human beings knew how to mix.

The newly anointed king, in other words, wanted some horse liniment!

And he wanted some real oats for his hungry belly, and no more of these husks, this thorny cactus, or this sickening rattleweed.

It was thus that Ali Baba, after his greatest adventure, went limping back to Dave Huppert.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### ALIBIS.

Dave did not know—as he stood in that group of men, with the lariat about his neck, and a dry sycamore tree projecting from the cliff overhead—that two agencies had been appointed by Heaven to work for his deliverance.

One was the girl.

She came running nimbly down the cañon with the fleetness of a deer; and behind her came the gaunt old Tim Boskin like a wolfhound in pursuit. But Tim was not actually in pursuit. He was following the girl as quickly as his rheumatic old shanks would carry him, in order to intercept that lynching.

“Hold on thar, men—all of you! And you, chief, listen to us! Don’t throw that lass-rope over the tree! Wait!”

The girl was the first to come, flinging herself between Dave and the sheriff. The latter swore. Would this little sage hen ever be got out of the way? Flapjohn had officiated at a lot of hangings down in this bandit country, but he never knew a woman to be so utterly pestiferous in balking him.

“That old duffer knows everything!” the girl cried. “Listen to him. I won’t say any more! He’ll stop this party with what he has up his sleeve! Go on, mister!”

“She’s right!” Boskin said. “I’ll stop it all right enough. Leastwise I’ll tell what I know. This here boy has been sage-brushed. That’s the long and short of it.”

“I reckon *you* been sage-brushed by this gal!” Sheriff Flapjohn shot back disgustedly. “Cain’t I even leave you guard a fool little hen like this without she works you over, with her wiles!”

“She ain’t the one which I learned the truth from, chief!” old Tim shouted irascibly. “It’s that snivelin’ coyote back thar—which just now shot hisself.”

“Shot hisself? That’s a good one. It was this gunman shot him.”

The expression on Dave's face could not be seen in that moonlight, but his voice showed that a life-giving surge of hope had awakened him.

"Chief—that's a lie. I jumped him in the dark, and he fired before he could aim. I must have knocked his gun in toward him the same second, because I swear by God that this is the truth, I had no gun. If I'd had a gun I'd have bumped you all off first——"

"And that's most like the truth!" some one assented.

"Chief, that coyote back thar, callin' hisself Chapote—he's the thief. He's the one stole all these hosses," Tim Boskin declared excitedly. "He confessed just now as he was kickin' off. He's daid now—which saves us the trouble of hangin' him. But we ain't punishin' him now by hangin' this unfortunate kid."

"How about the letter this here hombre wrote?" Flapjohn asked. "Might we'd better see if it tallies up with his handwritin'?"

"Oh, no. It's in his handwriting!" Posey Nuggins said. "The outlaw made him write it. He said he'd abduct me if he didn't write it."

"The boy here wrote it to save me. There's the truth—all you boneheads! Get that straight first—and believe it. The old man here will vouch for it. How about it, old man?"

"I sure do vouch for it, gents. And you listen to me vouchin', chief—and don't go hangin' no more suspects without you find out what they done."

"It's for the sake of that mare of yours!" Flapjohn retorted hotly. "I'm doin' this for your mare as well as for my reputation. Didn't he steal that white stud? And didn't he have the mare and other hosses followin' when we trailed him back there in Pete Duffle's cañon? Pete Duffle said so? Was *he* lyin'?"

"No—the young hellbender stole the stud all right—and the mares, too!" said one of the posse. "He ain't denyin' that. As for the hosses which is mentioned in that thar document he wrote—well, we'll take the dead rustler's word for it, that he ain't mixed up in them thefts. But how about the circus stud—and the mares?"

"It was the circus horse that picked those mares up—from your ranches and your diggings," Dave said in his defense. "Maybe that's hard to believe—yes—it won't be believed when you're set on lynching some one. But it's the truth, so help me God."

"Hard to believe!" Flapjohn snorted. "It's impossible to believe!"

“Leastwise *I* ain’t goin’ to believe it!” said one of the Boskin brothers, old Shank. Tim Boskin scratched his gray head. He could not understand.

It was beginning to dawn upon him that the dying rustler had merely confessed to crimes which were not a part of the present category at all. The mares, after all, had been stolen. And this youth was to blame.

“That thar rustler didn’t say nothin’ about no mares,” he mumbled. “Reckon we might as well go on with the tight-rope ack!”

“I reckon so!” said another.

“No! You will not—you poor dupes! Can’t you understand?” It was the girl’s shrill, excited voice that interrupted them. “Can’t you get it through your heads that Ali Baba stole those mares! He’s a bad egg when it comes to that—you’ll find that out if you ask any of the circus gang. The mares all fall for him! That’s the whole truth. And he knows how to unlatch gates—and untie knots.”

Dave, still inspired with the flush of hope that this interruption had engendered, hastened to add his testimony:

“Gents, that white stallion got away from me each night and went chasing around gathering his remuda, and the next morning he’d show up. The mares have trailed him ever since I got down here to the desert. I couldn’t shake ’em off.”

Sheriff Flapjohn scoffed. “Wall, I must say, hombre, that you’ve got the best alibi that any rustler ever worked up. Why, from now on any Mex that wants to make off with a good remuda of mares, all he has to do is to git a stud and blame same on *him!*”

“If the white stud has been trailin’ him all the time,” Shank Boskin said, “and leadin’ the mares along likewise, where are they now? I don’t see that his story holds good anyway!”

“I gave the stud to Padin, the circus hostler,” Dave said. “He’s got them now—corralled in some cañon maybe.”

“Oh, yes, maybe. Wall, maybe that’s another good alibi, too,” said the sheriff.

“It ain’t no use, hombre. Alibis don’t generally go with a hangin’ posse. You’d orter learned that afore goin’ into this rustlin’ business,” one of the Boskins said.

“I reckon since the circus hoss ain’t comin’ to ack for his defense,” the sheriff announced, “might we’d better proceed with the business at hand. All right, gal, git away.”

The girl stepped away from Dave Huppert and looked down the cañon. Dave was surprised at her giving him up this time so calmly.

He looked at her—as the moonlight made a halo about her golden hair. Even in that tragic moment a thrill passed through him, as he saw that beautiful picture.

He would keep his eyes on the radiant sight until the last. It would help him—very much as a condemned man keeps his eyes upon a cross held up before him. If he were to die he could die calmly with that glimpse of happiness within his vision.

It was his own girl. She had breathed that vow. And she had made a big fight for him. That at least was an inspiring thought.

But as he looked he noticed that the head was tilted in an attitude of eager listening. The men who had taken in the slack of the lariat did not pull. They, too, turned and listened. Sheriff Flapjohn listened attentively.

“What-all’s happenin’ now?” asked old Tim Boskin who was slightly deaf.

“A bunch of wild brushies,” some one replied.

“And a big white horse leadin’,” said another.

“It’s Ali Baba!” the girl cried.

“And there’s my claybank!” said Shank Boskin.

“And my roan——” said the map-maker—“and my skewbald and filly!”

“Looks like the circus stud’s come back for to act in this kid’s defense, eh, chief?” old Tim Boskin mocked, borrowing the sheriff’s ironical simile.

Ali Baba trotted up to the group.

The men stood off, for the big stud looked like a changed horse—an outlaw. There was fire in his eyes and his ears were flattened.

But Posey Nuggins ran up to him and threw her arms about the bruised and ruffled neck.

“How about it, chief?” old Tim said. “Reckon you kin cast off the lass-ropes from that thar kid’s neck.”

## CHAPTER XXV.

### SAGE-BRUSHED.

Sheriff Flapjohn loosened the rawhide riata.

“They ain’t goin’ to be no lynchin’,” he said. “But before I take off this necktie of yours I want you to hold out both your hands.”

Dave stared. Flapjohn was still to be appeased.

“You mean you’re taking me to trial, chief?”

“I mean that same.”

“Very well then. I’m satisfied.” He put out his hands. The manacles clicked.

The men stood about in something that approached dumb surprise. Their expressions could not be seen in the moonlight any too clearly, but suppressed exclamations broke out.

“If you men ain’t satisfied,” Flapjohn said, “I’d admire to have this posse disband. You’ve got your hosses. They’s to be no lynchin’. If you’re goin’ to buck my judgment, well and good; I’ll have to do what any sheriff would, tryin’ to tote back a prisoner out of the Coyotero—that is to hang him.”

“No! No more talk of hangin’, chief,” Tim Boskin shot out. “We’re disbandin’. Me and my brother is satisfied.”

“So are we all,” said the lumbering map-maker. “We got our stock back—and we don’t blame this kid.”

“Well and good. We’ll leave it thataway,” said Flapjohn. “But in consideration of that thar white stallion, you gents will bear me out when I say he ain’t yet accounted for any too satisfactory. Looks to me like this particular case of hoss rustlin’ needs a court—and not a posse.”

“We agree to them sentiments, chief,” one of the posse said. “From now on we’re out of it. If you take him back for a fair trial we reckon it’ll be satisfactory for all concerned—for us, for Vasto, for the gal——”

Vainly the girl tried to explain to Sheriff Flapjohn that she wanted the horse taken into the desert, that the old circus hostler had tricked Dave Huppert into taking the steed. But it was to no avail.

The horse had been stolen. In other countries perhaps this story might have been accepted. In Arizona—even if it were believed—it could not be taken as an excuse.

Dave Huppert had stolen a horse. That was the unvarnished truth.

“You mean to tell me, gal, that you ain’t even satisfied with my totin’ this gent back to town for a fair trial? You busted up the lynch-party and now you’re objectin’ to legalities. What in tarnation *will* satisfy you!”

“It’s best as it is, girl,” Dave remarked. “Take me back, Flapjohn. I’ll go with you.”

“All right, gents, the posse breaks up here and now. You kin go back to your ranches,” the sheriff said. “And I’d admire if you two Boskins would take this gal under your wing and see that she gits out of the desert—and stays out.”

“I’m going with you, sheriff,” Posey said resolutely.

“I don’t reckon you kin prevent that either,” Tim Boskin laughed.

The sheriff was strapped. What reason could he give the girl—or that band of witnesses—that he did not want any one trailing north with him—except the prisoner?

He could think of none. He merely swore—mumbling a long tirade about these flossy women-folk tryin’ to run a sheriff’s job for him.

Thus it was that the posse disbanded. The sheriff and his prisoner—and his prisoner’s sweetheart—took a direct trail for Mule Town. It was there—in a deserted ranch not far south of the old frontier gambling town—that Sheriff Flapjohn had arranged his rendezvous with the owner of Ali Baba—Vasto of the Vasto Circus & Rodeo Co.

Vasto’s aggregation of men and beasts had remained at Mule Town for two reasons. The loss of Ali Baba and the man hunt thus engendered, had been good advertising. Miners and stockmen patronized the show’s various functions, including the gambling games of the con men and the enticements of the palmist, the candy butcher and the small menagerie.

The other reason was Vasto himself.

In order to understand fully how the problem of Dave’s fate was solved, it is necessary first to consider the nature of the man Vasto. A barber in Mule

Town characterized him so succinctly that I will use his delineation instead of attempting a more literary analysis.

“He had,” so said the barber, “the dirty mind of a Wallapai, the treachery of a Navaho, the snivelin’ fear of a Mohave. And combined with this he couldn’t no more forgit that first beatin’ Dave Huppert give him—than if he was born and bred an Apache.”

Vasto’s reason for staying in Mule Town was, of course, his desire to settle up the Dave Huppert score. He had never been known to take a licking while his little domain, over which he ruled as a tyrant, looked on. His fear-sway had been broken. That is to say, it would be broken if the man who had licked him were not punished in a very spectacular manner.

Vasto remained for the most part in his ticket wagon which was his den. That ticket wagon should have been in the cage train, for it contained the fiercest animal of the whole menagerie—Vasto himself.

On the outside it was the usual gaudy circus contraption, its gilt speckled, its little cupids with their cornucopias, cracked and warped, one of them headless, another with a broken wing; its red varnish bubbling and peeling in the desert heat.

The interior was bedecked with various trophies of Vasto’s picturesque past: Whips of all sorts, quirts, lass-ropes. Boomerangs—which he had learned to throw with some skill in Australia. Bonepoint arrows from Borneo, with poison in the sinnet whipping.

A capper who worked with the show had once been found with that poison in an ugly wound. But he was afraid to take the affair to trial. Vasto’s fear-sway knew no bounds.

The two or three days that the organization remained in Mule Town, crowds flocked to see the ring master’s exhibition with his whip. He gave it in a side tent, standing a man on a platform, and cutting cards or envelopes which the latter held; blindfolding him and cutting his cigarette in half; wrapping the end of his whip about the assistant’s wrist or neck.

The crowd exhibited a morbid curiosity in this, for they had heard of that little exhibition he had given in the main street of Cobb’s Coulee, at which time his victim was a gaunt young stranger from the desert. From the performances which he was now giving the crowd could not for the world see how that same gaunt young stranger had escaped without being cut to pieces.

Indeed, during those few days while Sheriff Flapjohn was trailing the said gaunt stranger in the desert, Vasto appeared to enter into his act with a curious and venomous pleasure. The tent-peggers and clowns who saw his exhibitions averred that he had improved remarkably.

He was cutting a card down to half an inch of his assistant's fingers. When putting out a cigarette, a quarter of an inch aberration would cut off a lip.

They advised his assistant to quit. The boss—like an elephant was “in musth.”

“Damned if we oughtn't put him in a shiftin' box when he comes out of his wagon to go to the tent. He's gone bad—that's what!”

One of the elephant keepers who professed to know about these things announced to the gang:

“I kin tell when my bulls are goin' bad by stickin' straw under their tushes and smellin' same. Damned if I can't *smell* that man goin' the same way! 'Tain't only elephants. These yokels here say hosses do it. And I tell you every livin' thing may do it—not excludin' man hisself!”

It was during one of Vasto's extra vicious exhibitions with his whip that a rider came into town from the desert. He was a bleary-eyed, sunbaked sheepman—a top-heavy fellow with a mushroom-like sombrero and a tremendous grinning mouth.

Vasto, learning that this rider wanted to speak to him, stopped the performance and retired from the tent.

“Not here,” the top-heavy sheepman said humbly. “If you'll be so good, I'll tell yer all about it, somewheres where we cain't be heard.”

“Tell me all about what?” Vasto said. “Is he caught?”

The sheepman blinked, as if fearing he was to be accused of a crime. “Sheriff Flapjohn—he caught him.”

“Dead?”

“No! No! Hell, no! Not by no means!” the rider cried quickly and fearfully. “They was a posse—but they all backed down. Sheriff stuck to it and he's got his man—but leave me tell you——”

They went into the ticket wagon. Then:

“Mr. Vasto, if you’ll be so good,” the messenger said, “I’d admire for you to git your ridin’ togs.”

Vasto already was dressed in formal equestrian habit—cordovan boots, spurs, riding breeches. But the sheepman did not recognize this outfit as a bona fide costume for trailing.

He was right. Needless to say Vasto dressed that way for show purposes only. He changed to corduroy pants, boots and puttees.

“He’s down to a rancho on the desert rim—only about seven mile from here.”

“And who’s there with him?” Vasto asked.

“Just the sheriff—and a gal——”

“A what?”

“The circus gal—you must know her. Gold hair—and freckles—and powder——”

“All right. I know her. Go on,” Vasto said quietly.

“The rest of the posse—like I said—backed down. They let the sheriff take the prisoner. Sheriff—he said he wouldn’t stand for no lynchin’—he saw that they wouldn’t back him up.

“So he said he’d take the hombre into custody and bring him here to Mule Town. So the rest of the posse took their mares and went home.

“But the sheriff—he took the white stud, and likewise this fellow Huppert. Said he’d bring him to trial.

“Huppert seemed satisfied. The gal she seemed satisfied too—so I heard. And she trailed along after ’em.

“Sheriff couldn’t git rid of her—no more than Huppert could git rid of his mares. These here females—whether they’re human or horse——”

“Where are they now?” Vasto asked softly, taking up the whip which he had just used in his exhibition.

“They’re at this rancho I told you of. A deserted rancho in a gulch. The sheriff met up with me on the trail leadin’ up from the desert, and he told me to keep it a secret or else we’d have the whole of Mule Town down there ready to lynch the boy.

“You see he’s protectin’ the boy—although it’s my opinion he’d orter be lynched anyways for rustlin’ that thar white stud—which he’s the finest lookin’ stud I ever seen this side of——”

“You take me to this ranch, mister. And right away. The show’s over as far as I’m concerned.”

“What I don’t understand is why he don’t bring the man to trial maybe under cover of night—lodgin’ him in some hoosegow or other which he could rig up same, and protect him from a lynch mob. I cain’t figure why he should send for *you*——”

“You’ll figure soon enough, mister,” Vasto remarked.

What had once been the Martinez Cattle Company outfit was now a desolate gulch with a few tumble down shacks given over to sand dunes, coyotes, owls and bats. There was nothing left of the corrals, but a half buried trough and a hitching rail.

To the latter Sheriff Flapjohn had tethered several mounts—and the stallion Ali Baba. He had then taken Dave Huppert, who was disarmed and manacled, into the main ranch house. One room, the broken puncheon floor of which was heaped with sand, was the only apartment left in the whole outfit which could boast of four walls.

The wily old Flapjohn had let the girl follow without any further objection. Not until they arrived at the ruins of the Martinez Cattle rancho did Posey Nuggins realize that the sheriff was up to some sort of a game.

“What are we stopping at this deserted farm for?” she asked.

“I don’t exactly recall who elected you to cross-question a sheriff, lady,” Flapjohn retorted. “But just to be gentleman-like I’ll answer you: I’m afraid to take this boy to town in broad daylight, because a lot of drunk stockmen is liable to make an example of him as a hoss thief.

“I’m actin’ fair and square. And we’ll wait for nightfall afore makin’ our triumphal procession into Mule Town.”

This satisfied the anxious and ingenuous little circus girl. She had had enough taste of this frontier lynch law. Her only duty now was to stick by her lover.

As for Dave, young and supremely optimistic, he had no conception of the extent to which the sheriff was tricking him.

“Bein’ I’d like to go out and loose the cinches on our poor wore-out mounts and feed ’em,” Flapjohn said to Dave, “I’d admire if you’ll permit me to slip these here handcuffs around this stanchion.”

“You’re crazy, Flapjohn. Haven’t I given you my word I’d come with you without any shins?”

“Still and all I’ve been tricked thataway before.”

Dave consented. He made the mistake of believing Flapjohn to be a fuss-box and an ass.

The end came rapidly. It held far more in store for the girl and her lover than either had dreamed.

Late in the afternoon two riders entered the gulch. One was the bleary-eyed shepherd whom they had met on their trail northward. The other was a long haired man in khaki and puttees, mounted on a fresh saddle horse from the circus stock.

The girl paled. She came from the window, went to the sheriff, faltered, wrung her hands, and went to the door, but as he intercepted her, she wandered back as if without a will toward Dave.

“Come here,” Dave said consolingly. “Come here, child. What are you so white about?”

“The sheriff’s double-crossed you, pard!” she cried breathlessly. She gained her voice, finding that she could speak. She did not try to hide what she was saying. “He promised you a trial. Well, you aren’t getting it. He’s sent for Vasto—and that fiend’s coming down here.”

Dave did not reply. He must have turned color—either from rage or utter bewilderment. But he kept his peace.

Vasto entered.

He saw three persons: a frail slim girl with blood-drained face, clothes tattered and dust-whitened, eyes dilated in fright. He saw a man manacled with arms about a stanchion. He saw a fat rusty-haired individual seated on a sand mound.

The tableau pleased Vasto immensely. It had all the elements of exciting drama. It was a plot conceived by the devil—or at least by some maliciously humorous power to suit Vasto’s own taste.

The sheriff arose.

“All right you, hombre!” he called to the sheepherder who was hitching his horse outside. “I’m thankin’ you. I reckon we kin hide the prisoner from any more hot-headed lynch mobs. You savvy?”

He went to the window and lowering his voice so the girl could not hear, he said: “All as you have to do is to keep your own mouth shut about this hidin’ place. And likewise vamoose.”

The sheepherder turned from the hitching post. “I understand, chief,” he said, but his voice seemed to belie the words.

Vasto came to the rescue. He handed a bill through the window.

The sheepherder took the reins of his horse from the rail.

Before Posey Nuggins or Dave knew what had happened they heard the receding clip-clop of a horse’s hoofs. The next moment they realized that they were alone with Vasto and the sheriff.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### THE SHEEPHERDER'S STORY.

"I reckon you can see, Mr. Vasto," Sheriff Flapjohn announced with some difficulty, "that I done my best to keep this business within the law."

"What's your game?" Dave interrupted, "calling this coyote in?"

"This 'coyote' as you call him is the owner of the horse you stole," the sheriff said, making a bluff at anger. "Do I have to defend my acks? Me—the sheriff? When a hoss is stole the rustler generally gits a necktie party. Well, I saved you from that. Didn't I—answer me that?"

"You save him for Vasto," the girl shot back, hitting the mark with a bull's eye.

"Oh, yes. Well, he owns the hoss. It's up to him what becomes of you \_\_\_\_\_"

"Up to him. Why, he'd kill Dave—he'll torture him!" the girl cried.

"Look here, Mr. Skunk," Dave said to Flapjohn, "you told the posse down there that you were taking me to town. Why did you lie?"

"Me lie?" Flapjohn exclaimed in a tone of injury, "why I figured on takin' you to town—but cain't you see, boy, that I'd be takin' you right plumb into a lynch-party if I rode into town with you—and that thar white stallion? I been protectin' you."

"Buncombe!" the girl cried. "And lies!"

"All right," Flapjohn shrugged his shoulders. "Vasto—you kin be the judge. It's your hoss. They seems to be some question about the boy's actually rustlin' same. The gal had somethin' to do with it. Looks to me like you three better argue it out yourselves."

"That suits me," Vasto said with a laugh at the crassness of the whole game.

The sheriff winced at Vasto's tone, as if a hideous discord had struck his ear. He stopped at the door.

"Mind you, Mr. Vasto. I'm the law. I don't aim to see no murder committed. I'm washin' my hands of the business. I'm sort of appointin'

you a deputy. You kin judge this case and ack according. It's to be a final settlement——”

“It will be a final settlement, Mr. Sheriff,” Vasto declared mordantly.

“And when it's settled it'll be considered by me, a legal ack, which it means that the prisoner kin never agin be put in jeopardy. You understand that, Huppert? Vasto's the court. Your settlement with him wipes out the score. Never again will I call you to account for stealin' this hoss.”

Vasto smiled. He knew that the sheriff knew what this “final settlement” was to be. He cast a sidelong, knowing glance at Flapjohn and was surprised at the expression on the latter's face.

Their eyes met for a moment. The brown muddy eyes of Flapjohn faltered. His lids dropped. He looked to the ground.

It was an easy matter reading that look. Easy for Vasto. He took out a roll of bills. He had fortified himself against this contingency.

The reward was for the return of the horse—and the arrest of the culprit.

“Good, Mr. Sheriff! It's yours.”

The sheriff reached out for it.

“You said somethin' about washin' your hands, Mr. Sheriff?”

Flapjohn looked down at his leathery, wrinkled paw. He drew it back as if it were dirty. He was ashamed to hold it out so that Dave and the girl could see it.

“Wash my hands?” He repeated in confusion. “Oh, yes, I get the point, Mr. Vasto. Sure. I wash my hands—as they say.”

“Here's your reward, Mr. Sheriff.”

Flapjohn took it—reaching this time with a faltering gesture as if he were putting his hand toward a flame. His look went up to the manacled Dave Huppert.

Dave's eyes scorched him. Judas was betraying an innocent man. Judas was taking thirty pieces of silver as the reward of his treachery. Judas was about to go away and think this business over and say: “*I have betrayed the innocent blood!*”

Sheriff Flapjohn's forehead was wet. He wiped it with one hand. With the other he held the bills Vasto had given him, as if uncertain just what to

do with them. His eyes dropped again to the floor. For it was more than any mortal man could have endured to meet the look Dave Huppert gave him.

Against the sky, standing there on the rim of the mesa, the sheepherder looked like a mushroom, because of his top-heavy Mexican sombrero and his puny legs. Closer to, he lost the fairy-like touch of a mushroom and became a gnarled human being who smelled of sheep-dip. He peered down over the rim of the cliffs and saw the sheriff riding up toward him.

Flapjohn, no doubt, was heading back for town—where he could make another one of his triumphal entries. The sheepherder reflected that Flapjohn always got his man, and whenever he returned to town from the Coyotero there were congratulations, there were drinks, there were cheers.

The sheepherder—in a word—decided to ride home with him. He would bask in that reflected glory.

Flapjohn saw the man waiting for him, and he cursed him. Flapjohn wanted to reflect. Perhaps he was going to reflect just how much could be bought for a thousand dollars.

Perhaps in reflecting how many head of cattle he might buy, or how many good horses, or how much of an addition to his sheriff's office, he found that after all a thousand was an astonishingly small amount. If put away at interest in a Tucson bank he could get five dollars a month—enough for a good round of drinks at the Rex Cantina.

“I reckon you're goin' my way, chief. I'm headin' back for Mule Town,” the sheepherder said genially, as he mounted his cayuse.

Flapjohn dismounted. “I ain't goin' nowhere. I'm breathin' my hoss after this here climb.”

The sheepman agreeably dismounted again.

“Ain't in no hurry, chief. I'll wait.”

No answer. Except that there was a grumble from the bull-necked throat of the magistrate.

“You ain't never went on a hunt yet, chief, have you, without you come back successful?”

Another grumble.

“You give him right into the hands of the hombre he rustled the hoss from, didn’t you, chief?” the wizened sheepman said proudly.

Flapjohn turned upon him. With an unwonted anxiety to defend his reputation, he snapped: “Vasto’ll do the right thing. I didn’t want to take the rustler back to town—and have him lynched. That’s right—ain’t it? Ain’t it, I asks you?”

“Why, of course, it’s all right, chief. Everything you do is right. Would I be the one to question that? Me—a pore ole sheepman. A sheepman questionin’ a sheriff—wow! That’s a good one!”

Flapjohn, by this, recalled the fact that he represented the highest pinnacle of caste in the cow country, and the sheepman represented the lowest.

The latter stood at a respectful distance looking at the man with the star, and a light came to his eyes as of a small boy worshiping a hero.

Flapjohn winced. Despite himself he could not help blurting out in his defense: “Consarn the whole business to hell’s fire! What could I do? I asks you! It was too complicated.

“I could have lynched the hombre down there in the Coyotero when I first caught him. But I didn’t figure it was a clear case. And furthermore, I wasn’t goin’ to be the judge. Who was I to judge? It was Vasto’s hoss. It’s up to him!”

“*If* you’d lynched him, chief, we’d of backed you up—every stockman and mucker on the range!”

“*Lynched* him, you say!” the sheriff put up his hand in a gesture of torment. “Hell, no! Not me! I wouldn’t do it! If you want to know the truth of it, little hombre, I’ll confess to you: I don’t believe that boy deserved lynchin’!”

The sheepherder’s eyes widened. But there was still the fire of worship in them.

“You wanted to be fair, didn’t you, chief?” he said. “Sure, I can see that!” But his bleary eyes began to blink as if he were trying to see this hero of his in a fading light. “You ain’t saying though that he didn’t really rustle that stud? How come you to intimate anything like that?”

“Damned if he rustled it!” Flapjohn burst out with a new ferocity. “If that boy ever rustled any stock in his life I’m a tarnel son of a coyote!”

The sheepman looked bewildered. He was scowling at the sheriff, and his bleary eyes now seemed devoid of the last vestige of light. They stared, fish-like. A fish may evince plenty of bewilderment in his gaze, but no worship.

“What and the hell’s got you now?” Flapjohn barked. He found it much easier to face this look—than that look of adulation.

“I was just thinkin’, chief!” the man faltered. He went humble again. “Couldn’t believe it at first, because it sort of meant that you’d pulled a boner. But that was impossible! Far be it from me to say you——”

“Out with it, consarn ye! What’re you drivin’ at, for hell’s sake?”

“Why, it’s this way, chief,” the other said, still in a tone of abject humility. “When you sent me up to Mule Town for to git Vasto, I stopped to wash my salty mouth with a slug or two. Went into the Frontier Palace.

“And there they was a crowd gathered round a white-haired hombre which he had bow legs and a boiled shirt front, which same was torn to shreds like. And he was tellin’ a funny yarn about bein’ separated from the little circus gal—the same as we left down yonder with Vasto and the rustler.”

“You mean old Padin, the hostler?” Flapjohn asked.

“Don’t know his name, but they said he was hostler to the show. And he said he’d trailed back alone through mesquite and cactus. And he was cryin’ that they would lynch a innocent man for stealin’ that white stud.

“Course no one would believe him. Nor did I, because I’d seen the stud with my own eyes—and I seen you with the rustler handcuffed, which same was responsible for the loss of that stud!”

He did not notice the effect this had on Sheriff Flapjohn—even though he was staring straight at him. Flapjohn seemed able at this point to contain a very violent upheaval of emotions.

“Go on, hombre; what else?”

“Well, the old gent looked daft and they tried to buy him drinks—but he kep’ beggin’ them all to believe him. Which they only laughed the more. In fact, he was so sunstruck that he even said it was he himself was to blame for the rustlin’ and they could hang *him*, but let ’em go down first and save that young coot from the sheriff!

“Imagine that, chief! *Save him from you!* Could any one believe a drivelin’ ole fool that talked thataway? Besides, some one who know’d about his bein’ the circus hostler said he was the biggest liar ever lived.”

“How-all do you mean ‘to save him from me?’ ” the sheriff asked. His face had turned color now. He took a flask from his hip and tried to restore his circulation. The sheepman, thinking that he had angered this dread magistrate, went on placatingly:

“When he said that, of course, I just went on about my business, chief. I couldn’t bear hearin’ you slandered thataway. If he hadn’t been a dodderin’ heat-struck ole man, I’d of floored him, so help me!”

“He waren’t heat-struck, and he waren’t dodderin’, nor lyin’, nor daft,” Flapjohn announced. “He was tellin’ the honest-to-God truth! Dave Huppert told me about it when I was bringin’ him and the gal up from the Coyotero!”

“Oh, now listen here, chief. How can that be? The ole fool was mumblin’ somethin’ about tellin’ this man Huppert that the hoss belonged to the little gal—and that she was *givin’* it to him. Well, if any one would believe an alibi of that thar nature—well, I must say, chief, they’re locoed!”

“It’s the truth, the honest-to-God truth!” Sheriff Flapjohn was moaning in despair. “The boy’s innocent! I knew it! And I’ve give him up to that hell-bendin’, yaller-livered coyote! Innocent, so help me God! That’s what!”

“Anyway, chief, you done your best! You got out of it! You done right!”

“You lie! You’re lyin’ because you’re afraid of me. You know I’m crooked, and you know it’s dangerous to git in wrong with me! That’s it, you snivelin’ pup!”

“No, no, chief. You’re workin’ yourself up about nothin’. It waren’t your business mixin’ with Vasto and that hombre. You done right—by your star!”

Flapjohn turned upon the cringing little man as if to rend his tongue out. “My star, you say! *I did right by my star!* Good God!” His big, red face was racked in misery. “I double-crossed him. His blood’s on my hands! I did worse than lynch him! That’s what I did by my star!”

He yanked the rust-speckled badge from his vest and hurled it at the terrified little mozo. “There you are, you rabbit-livered breed! Take my star. You’re more fit than me to wear it!”

He jumped to his horse. “You witness to this, hombre. You come with me. You’re to witness. It’s my last act as sheriff. I may have to kill a man. But I’ll do it to save that innocent boy!”

They both hit down for the deserted ranch. Sheriff Flapjohn was resolute. He would stop at nothing in saving Dave from that fiend incarnate. His one fervent hope was that he would not be too late.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### BACK TO THE DESERT.

When Vasto was left in that shack with his two victims, Dave turned to him and saw him leering. Vasto's mild dark eyes were inscrutable. His long hair falling over his shoulders and those calm eyes gave him an aspect that was actually patriarchal, benignant. He was satisfied. He had what he wanted. He was not eager.

The girl and the manacled prisoner, standing there facing this power, were silent for a space of time that seemed like hours. It was excruciating.

A horsefly caught in a web in the corner of the room gave one long frantic buzz of its wings. That prolonged vibration of agony seemed to Posey like time that no human mind could measure.

Finally she burst out almost voicelessly: "It's your turn to lead, Vasto. What are you doing?"

Vasto showed the gold in his teeth. With both hands he brushed back his long locks so that they fell down toward his back, leaving his face clear. He seemed hesitant in going about his business, for the simple reason that he hated to have it too soon over.

"I've nothing in store for *you, mam'zelle*," he said. "What's your white face mean? Fainting? Don't faint. Buck up. You can get out if you want. If not, well and good.

"I'd like to have you see what's going to happen. I want some one in my circus to see; some one who will go back and tell them all what I done.

"They saw this gent beat me up back there in the street of Cobb's Coulee. The whole circus saw it. And the whole town—only they don't count.

"It's my own gang that counts. You kind of represent that gang—the gang that saw my defeat!"

He laughed. His deep eyes glittered with the merest touch of red fire. He tossed his long curls. They seemed to be bothering him now.

"Defeat! I wonder! *Me*—Vasto—trimmed without a comeback! I sure do wonder!"

He laughed and turned to pace up and back across that short sand-covered floor. “Oh, yes—they was all afraid—my men. They thought this gent was safe. A Westerner, they thought. The West would protect him. The cow town, the stinkin’ herders, the skies above, the desert—those bucking ratty horses—they was all on his side, includin’ God!”

He grunted. “You think so!”

The assurance, the utter complacency of that grunt sent a shudder through the girl.

“God’s not on his side now!” Vasto stopped pacing. “Nor the West either. Nor nothin’. The West beat him, didn’t it,—eh, my man?”

“Didn’t the West beat you? Where are your horses and your men? Where are your Western deserts and plateaus and all that stuff? Who beat you? It was *them*! Horses and posses and your Western laws. They was all against you!”

The girl put her hands to her ears. “Don’t go on raving!” she begged frantically. “You’re making me looney! I’ll scream—I’ll howl! I’ll tear your eyes out!”

She threw herself upon him, but he tossed her aside—chuckling again with that maddening assurance. “Do something, for God’s sake!” she pleaded frantically.

He took a coiled whip from his belt, and this silenced her. But he began to thwack his boots with it.

“Punish us both!” she cried. “Don’t stand there grinning like a Cheshire cat. Don’t talk. Don’t laugh! Don’t drool like an idiot! Punish us, I beg you, Vasto—and have it over with!”

“Why do you say ‘us’?” Vasto asked. “Where do you come in?”

This nettled him. He was accustomed to have all the women of his outfit at his knees. Here was one recalcitrant child who had always bucked him. And now she was siding with this horse thief.

“Get out, damn you!” he yelled at her suddenly. “Get out before I cut you to pieces with this here whip.”

This outburst had a curious effect on his victim. It came as a God-sent relief.

Dave Huppert, tense and waiting, seemed to relax. He was not dealing with a fiend from hell, after all. He was dealing with a mortal.

“Get out, I said!” Vasto roared. “You filthy little bat! Siding in with this tramp. Just like you—like you all! Every woman is born rotten! Can’t keep ’em straight without you flog ’em!” He cracked his whip and the sound was like a gunshot in that little room.

Dave for the first time gave a fierce tug at the stanchion to which he was chained. The roof of the old house moved under the force. The walls creaked.

Vasto paled. He turned upon his prisoner with the sudden fear and revelation that he was dealing with a man of unlimited physical power. He remembered those mallet fists that had dropped him fathoms deep in limbo that day in Cobb’s Coulee. He must not—he could not forget that.

He cracked his whip again. Again the sound as of a pistol shot. The black rawhide flipped about Dave’s throat opening the skin.

The girl screamed and threw herself upon Vasto, as he raised his whip again. He hurled her off with scarcely more violence than it took to flip that rawhide. She was slim—a bit of down. He was a man of big stature.

But she leaped upon him again. He was evidently puzzled at the ferocity of her attack. She was not like a woman fighting for some newly fancied lover. She was like a tigress fighting for her young.

She came at him a third time, leaping from the corner of the dark room like some wild wounded thing at bay in its cave. She gripped his throat.

“Look here, damn you for a little hell-cat! I’ll fix you once and for all!” He grasped her two wrists and dragged her into the open. He dragged her, screaming and kicking, to the hitching rail where the white stallion and the three other horses were tethered.

“You’ll stay here this time, you minx, till I’m ready for you! You spittin’, scratchin’ catamount! And don’t forget what I said about women needin’ the whip themselves to make ’em behave!”

He fastened her wrists with a hackamore, then as he turned, he saw the roof of the shack where Dave was imprisoned, caving in. The stanchion had been torn from its rusty nails. Rafters tumbled down with it.

At the doorway Dave emerged, crawling, dragging the stanchion with him, like Samson with the gates of Gaza.

Surprised as he was at this outcome, Vasto lost nothing of his equanimity. The picture of Dave Huppert on his hands and knees, dragging the post with him, struck him as something tremendously humorous.

There was time enough—before Dave could reach him—for Vasto to have a little fun—the sort of fun he had been dreaming of in fevered dreams ever since his first combat with this victim.

“Come on, mister, come on! Right over here. We’re in the open now and my whip will sing better. There you go! Zip! That’ll cut a piece of your ear off!”

Dave’s shirt was blackened with blood. He sank to the ground with his own frantic expenditure of strength. The rawhide whistled and cracked and screamed. The girl saw the hideous picture as of a man whipping a wounded dog.

The incarnate devil went at it with a new outburst of fury—his second outburst. This time it was not a relief.

He was like something belched out of hell in human form, ravishing all the decency and mercy of the world. The whip and the girl shrieked in unison.

Dave moaned. He crawled forward as though advancing under a rain of bullets. Little by little he drew his manacled hands toward the end of the stanchion.

Here the rust-broken nails anchored the handcuffs. He burst the nails with his last ounce of energy, and then tried to struggle to his knees.

His strength was gone. He sank, a pitiable and bleeding figure. But the girl saw that he was free.

If she could only get a horse to him! If his strength could only come back, then he could raise himself, perhaps mount a horse!

He looked to her—as if with a mute dreadful plea. As their eyes met, he seemed to get back a thrill of energy. She was the goal. He was not fighting for himself—but for that frail girl tied to a hitching rail. He struggled to his feet.

Vasto rushed upon him.

Dave met the onslaught with an uppercut of both his manacled fists behind which he had balanced all his weight. Vasto fell forward into the sand, and rolled over. His hands worked convulsively as if partly paralyzed. He fumbled for his gun.

Dave hurled himself upon his torturer. He would finish him now! The handcuffs binding his wrists would not prevent him from choking the life

out of that throat! But in the very act of falling, a white light blazed from the hand of his prone enemy.

It felt to Dave as if someone had given him a dull, heavy blow on the side of his head. The lead slug, as a matter of fact, scarcely more than singed his hair, but it dropped him nevertheless. No perfectly timed jab on the chin could have dropped him as neatly.

He found himself clutching—not the throat of his enemy, but instead a handful of sand and weeds. Vasto, dazed and awkward, rose to his hands and knees.

It appeared to him as if he had felled his man. With that one pressure of a trigger he had put an end to the whole glorious drama—the drama in which he had played such a soul-satisfying role!

He cursed himself. He had eaten his cake. It was his no longer.

He looked across the sand to Huppert and a yearning transfixed his face—a yearning that his victim might live for just a little while longer!

Yes, he still lived! He moved! He lifted his head and the blood-stained eyes were focused on Vasto like the eyes of a wounded wolf.

Dave scowled. Just beyond his reach he saw that hated visage framed with long black locks, circling, wavering—as a boulder will waver under terrific heat.

Heat played about Dave's head. Tongues of flame seemed to be licking his throat. He tried vainly to collect his thoughts. The late afternoon sun slanted into his eyes, turning the universe a shimmering and ghostly red.

Off there beyond a little space, at the hitching post, he saw the girl like a radiant vision of light, a dazzling wraith, with a halo of red sunbeams about her hair.

She herself was tied, but she could free the white horse. The white horse, if he played true to form, would go to Dave. Dave could pull himself up and be off.

Vasto would fire again by that time, perhaps, but his ability to fire had proved itself inconsequential. He was manacled. He was good only for tearing into the fight like a mad dog. The fine gesture of gunshooting was beyond his power. There was, in a word, a chance for Dave to escape.

What a train of thought! What an illogical series of deductions; innocent, optimistic, impossible, child-like.

In the first place there was not time for Dave to climb aboard and be off. Vasto—in his right mind—was a perfect shot. In the second place—what a childish deduction to imagine that Dave would have left the girl there and fled off to save himself!

In the third place Ali Baba did not play true to form.

Ali Baba was stamping. He rolled his eyes. He tossed his silvery mane. If Posey had been watching him she might have seen that he was more nervous than he had ever been before.

The pampered circus horse, soft, broken-spirited, had been born again into something else. Flecks of foam had broken out on his neck where the hackamore rubbed him. He had in a few moments worried himself into a sweat without running.

It would not be hard to conjecture what was in Ali Baba's mind. He had had a taste of the desert. He had been in Paradise, and here of a sudden he scented a menace in the air—a menace that his sojourn in Paradise was transitory.

He scented in the air something that told him that he must return to the present world; to the purgatory of the circus; to the endless round of the sawdust ring; to the cooped up box-wagon; to the whip; to the pinching fingers of Vasto.

His nostrils quivered. He snorted angrily. He felt every pinch Vasto had given him, torturing his nose. He still felt the whip. His wounds were smarting—they felt as if Vasto's whip were eternally laid upon his back.

And there was Vasto now on the ground.

Ali Baba tugged at his hackamore. A new yearning was in his soul; a new passion, greater than any yearning of hate or love or ecstatic freedom he had indulged in during those glorious days. Ali Baba had not forgotten! If he could only burst that hackamore, he would repay his old enemy a thousand fold. He had become king of the desert and here was one who encroached.

He had known what victory meant in a fair fight. He would show what victory he demanded in this ancient unfair feud. Then as he champed fiercely, and threw up his magnificent head, and whistled in rage, the girl cast off his hackamore knot.

Vasto looked up from the patch of black sage and sand in which he was lying. The sky was radiant with sunset; the granite walls were a blinding scarlet. And then precipitously the light was blotted out by a gigantic form.

He saw a big head with ears flattened back and a mane that seemed blood red, tossing against the sky. A bone-crushing blow—a mallet—the crunching of ribs. Teeth buried in his shoulder.

He felt himself lifted—an airy sensation, vertigo, sickness, as if he were sailing to a great height. A whistling and snorting of rage deafened him; foam mixed with his own blood upon his face. And then a crash as of a frail bark hurled upon a rock.

As Vasto sank fathoms deep in darkness, all pain left him.

Dave struggled to his feet. The terrible aspect of that stallion awakened a fear that the girl might be the next victim. Here was a demon-horse—a champing mankiller, one of Pluto's steeds digging his way back into hell.

Dave picked up a rock and was about to hurl it.

But Ali Baba was through with mankind. He wheeled and fled down the cañon, and was racing madly for his wild Paradise again, far down there in the uncharted Coyotero.

Dave turned to that shapeless bundle of clay which had been Vasto. A moment later he had found the key to his manacles—the key that Flapjohn had given to the ringmaster.

Freeing the girl, he was himself freed, and on his knees before her.

She reached down, caressing his face. Tears streamed from her eyes. "We can go now—free—and together," she said.

He shook his head. "You put up a game fight, girl. You've tried to get me out. But luck's running hard the other way. I want you to go back. You'll be following an outlaw for the rest of your life.

"They'll blame me for that——" He pointed to the carcass in the sage. "No one will believe if we tell them the truth. And it's all between us two—and the dead hombre there——"

"I'm going with you, pard," she said. "And you aren't an outlaw any more. You're cleared of it all. The sheriff let Vasto settle the account."

"When they find Vasto here with the buzzards——"

She shook her head. "They won't find him then. They've found him already. Look!" she pointed up the gulch.

Dave saw the sheriff and the shepherd. They had reined in their horses—for Flapjohn was evidently afraid to come any closer. But the trail

down which they had been riding for the last five minutes was in full view of the occurrence in the bottom of the gulch. Dave knew that they had seen.

“All right, girl,” he said in an altered voice. “Some sort of a miracle has changed my damnable luck. Let’s get to our horses.” They went hand in hand, and untethered their mounts.

“I guess we can stick together from now on, child,” he said. “And it looks like easy riding.”

“Count on me, pard, whatever the riding’s like. I’m used to a merry-go-round and a trail of sawdust. If you’re leading me to rocks and cactus, I’m there!”

The sheriff and the sheepherder watched them go out toward the open plain. He watched them silhouetted against a gigantic red sun. They dwindled to tiny specks, heading off for the western mesas. The specks went out, and a purplish smirch of alkaline dust marked their course.

Flapjohn watched this, thoughtfully tugging at his rusty mustache.

The sheepherder looked up at him, wondering and ever respectful. “So you’re leavin’ him go scot-free, chief?”

“You saw what happened. It was the white horse killed that man——”

“But I thought——”

“You back me up on this, hombre, and don’t do any thinkin’. We’re ridin’ back to Cobb’s Coulee and reportin’ accordin’ to what we seen. Vasto was whippin’ that boy—while same was manacled and lyin’ in the sand.

“When Cobb’s Coulee hears that they’ll be itchin’ for to git Vasto—and forgit all about Dave Huppert’s takin’ Vasto’s hoss. And now Vasto’s killed by his own hoss—which event terminates the whole hist’ry.”

“I’ll back you up—and say whatever you say, chief,” the sheepherder avowed humbly and genially.

“Just say what you saw.”

Ali Baba, as I have written, was through with mankind. He had broken the one inviolate law of the kingdom of beasts. That is to say he had killed a man. From thenceforth he was a true outlaw.

There was no barrier between him now and the desert horizon. He had no rival. He had the speed of an Arabian; he was born to the desert. And yet he was bred to understand the ways and cunning of mankind.

But a little while and he would know where the pastures were; he would know the water holes; he would know how to follow the mule deer trails. He would know that trails which scattered and lost themselves in the sand led the wrong way. He would know that those which grew more compact led to water.

He already knew where a herd of wild mares was waiting for him. He would defend them against all comers.

He was the monarch of the Coyotero Desert. And from that day on no man or horse or puma ever disputed his royal claim.

Riders from the line camps strung out to prevent the Cobb's Coulee herds from drifting too far into the desert gulches, caught sight from time to time of a magnificent horse who raced across the crests of divides like Pegasus flying the clouds. They could never get close enough to see what his brand was. But they never forgot how gloriously the moonlight shone through his tangled mane. It made him seem fashioned out of pallid flames.

He was always seen with a herd of wild brushies and his gait was more like theirs than like a horse that had once known men. That is why it was said that he could not have been a revert. He was not the circus horse—for he was rangier and wilder than any of his breed.

In Cobb's Coulee, however, the tales of this monarch of the Coyotero always created an immense interest, but never any speculation.

They knew well enough that it was Ali Baba gone back again into his wild Paradise.

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled 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 *Wild Paradise* by Kenneth Taylor Perkins (as King Phillips)]