

ROCKING ARROW



B.M. BOWER

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Title: Rocking Arrow

Date of first publication: 1932

Author: Bertha Muzzy Sinclair (as B. M. Bower) (1871-1940)

Date first posted: Nov. 10, 2021

Date last updated: Nov. 10, 2021

Faded Page eBook #20211123

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, Cindy Beyer & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

**ROCKING
ARROW
B·M·BOWER**

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By

B. M. BOWER

GROSSET & DUNLAP
Publishers New York

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Published July, 1932

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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ROCKING ARROW

CHAPTER ONE

CHANCEY BY NATURE

IN the bow of the gently rocking dory a small, shrunken old man raised his head from arms folded on his knees.

“Take another look around, Cowboy. Mebby they’s a ship somewheres in sight.”

“Sure, Whitey. You bet.” In the stern a young fellow got to his feet with the deliberation that told of muscles stiffened by long inaction. Long legs braced wide apart, he stood tall, straight, slim, and stared squint-eyed out over the too peaceful scene. Look where he would, there was only a gray watery world rounding to meet the silvery rim of a gray watery sky. A rolling, dimpled world ever in motion yet always the same. Heaving upward slowly, in absolute silence, as if some huge sea serpent moved scalloping along just out of sight under the surface. Hundreds of sea serpents moving as one. Thousands—millions—

“F’r gawdsake, *seddown!*” Whitey’s querulous whine matched the querulous flapping gesture of both hands. “You make me so damn dizzy—”

The cowboy gave him a patient, surprised glance. He lifted both hands to his weather-stained Stetson, holding it against a sudden puff of wind; staggered as the boat seemed about to slide from under him and sat down abruptly and with force.

“Dog-gone! She’s treacherous as the meanest wall-eyed bronc that ever run the range. Go sidewheelin’ along easy as a rockin’ chair, and then all of a sudden she ducks sideways and just about unloads me. Darn near made me lose my hat.” Face drawn with hunger and strain, his voice yet had the whimsical drawl of the range. He grinned as he carefully resettled his hat.

It was a handsome hat, a jaunty devil-take-the-hindmost hat, as high in the crown as fashion dared go in those simple days before the movie cowboy had been born. Fine of texture, firm, shapely, with a smart little curl in the brim, even after the punishing months it had spent on the head of a reckless owner. Its first freshness was gone, its original band had been replaced with a leather one that buckled. But the buckle was solid silver and the engraving matched the trailing vine stamped upon the band itself.

It was a hat to draw a second glance even on those crowded trails along the Yukon, for just above the band in front, scorched upon the felt so that it

showed dark brown upon the gray, was stamped an emblem four inches high. An arrow standing in a half-circle, the arrow pointed upward. Neat, cryptic, arresting. Landsmen who never had seen a brand burned on a cow mistook it for an anchor. Homesick range men knew it for a “rocking arrow” and hailed the young man beneath the hat as “Cowboy.” Long, friendly conversation usually had followed the meeting. Talk of far prairies, of gun fights, sunfishing broncs, riders known only by terse descriptive nicknames; of ranches, cattle—all the colorful gossip of the range.

But all that was in another world of gravel beds, claims, stampedes, high-priced grub and gold. Always gold. This bleak world of smooth shifting water now claimed the thoughts shuttling back and forth beneath the branded Stetson.

“Man, oh, man! I’d never of dreamed there was this much water in the whole dog-gone world,” the whimsical voice drawled with an intrepid, unquenchable humor. “Whitey, you know what I believe? I believe we’ve gone and tied into Noah’s flood. In the Bible it tells how the waters rose and covered the earth. . . . Yep, I betcha this is it, all right.”

“Aw, flood be damned. We got troubles enough without no flood.”

“Sure thing. But I was just thinkin’. If it *is* that flood of old Noah’s, I sure would like to locate that ark of his. Say, I’d be willing to bed down with the lions right about now, and I ain’t any lamb, either.”

“Aw, can that damn joshin’! ’Ja see anything?”

“Yeah. Plenty water. Rollin’ and squirmin’ like a den full of snakes. . . . Like as if—”

“Aw, shut *up*! You better start in rowin’ again.”

“Where to?” The cowboy involuntarily flexed sore hands. “There’s a sea gull setting over there. I might row over to him if there was any chance of him showin’ us the way to shore. There ain’t, though. He’s just setting there takin’ a ride, same as we are. Like a hammock. Lots of motion but it don’t get you anywhere.”

“Aw, dry up!”

“I am. I’m so dried up right now I’d blow outa this boat like a tumbleweed in the first puff of wind, if I didn’t hook my toes in under a board.”

“’S your own fault,” snarled Whitey. “You oughta choke t’ death, the way you been pourin’ water into that damn Swede there. Had to even *wash his face*, by Gawd!”

“Aw, that was salt water I used for that, and you know it. And believe me, old-timer, any time I ain’t human enough to share my last drink of water with a sick man, I hope I do choke to death. Them little sups of water’s what’ll pull him through, I tell you those.”

Whitey grinned maliciously. “Like hell they will. He’s deader ’n a mackerel right now.”

The young man leaned and peered, then settled back with a relieved sigh. “Aw, he’s asleep. And don’t you start yawping and wake him up, either. It’s the first good sleep he’s had since day before yesterday; and then,” he remembered savagely, “them two crazy hyenas fightin’ with oars till they both fell outa the boat, woke him up.”

“Aw, I kep’ tellin’ Pete an’ Frisco to lay off that rotgut whisky,” carped Whitey, diverted for the moment. “They was both half-shot when they left the *Esther B*, an’ they kep’ right at it. I told ’em—”

“Yeah, they might better of filled them bottles with water,” the cowboy reflected. “They’d of been here now, if they had.”

“Killed ’em. I knowed it would. Drove ’em plum crazy. I kep’ tellin’ ’em to leave it alone—but hell, a drunk man won’t lis’n to nobody. Killed ’em. You was wise, Cowboy—”

“Say, don’t call me Cowboy. I don’t want to be reminded all the time. Not till I get on shore, anyway. My name’s Chance. Chauncey Roger Moore.” Then the flash of irritation passed as the puff of wind had done. The humorous grin returned. “Yep, I’m Chancey by name and chancey by nature. That’s why I’m in the fix I’m in now.” He shook his head, thinking of Pete and Frisco, and of the three nightmare days just gone.

“Nope, Whitey, it wasn’t the whisky so much as it was the yella in them two. All this water got their goat. Remember how they rowed? Kept the old boat going round and round like a herd that starts milling after a stampede. No, sir, them two stampeded. Never used a lick of sense, any more than a bunch of cattle, when they jump off the bed-ground and start runnin’. Look at how they rowed. Wore themselves plum out getting nowhere. Black as a pocket, couldn’t tell which way was land, and them two passin’ the bottle and workin’ all the harder. Mad at me because I’d rather set tight till I could see I was going to get somewhere.”

“Aw, you’d ruther waller around out here till we both of us starve to death!” whined the endless complaint.

“Well, dog-gone it, there’s the oars; help yourself. Nobody’s got you tied down.”

“Y’ know damn well my elbows is both swole up with rheumatiz.”

“And you know dog-gone well I rowed like a son of a gun all night, going by the stars. How the heck would I know I wasn’t losing all that ground, rowing back the way we came? She’s been hazy all day, and the boat’s been turning every whichway. No, sir. Them two left an oar apiece in the boat, and that makes a pair. Fly at it, if you’re yella as they were.”

Whitey swore aimlessly, nursed his elbows and dropped into silence, curled up again in the bow with his face hidden upon his arms. Chance absentmindedly fumbled in his pockets for tobacco, caught himself at it and gave a soundless snort of self-disgust. Then a half-hearted hope sent him exploring farther. He turned up the bottom of his sheepskin-lined coat, pinched the corners tentatively. Might be tobacco crumbs, that little lump in each corner. Might be lint too. Probably it was, but with nothing else to occupy him he decided to find out for sure.

It was a good coat built for rough usage and it had been new when he left Seattle for the North on the first boat last spring. But carrying samples in his pockets had snagged the bottoms here and there, and as he got out his knife and opened the smallest blade his eyes were eager. He slit a small rent in the lining of each corner, reached in a forefinger and pulled the gleanings into his cupped palm.

“Dog-gone!” There was some lint, of course, but the stuff was rich with tobacco dust. With meticulous care he picked and sorted, and the net result was mostly tobacco. Almost enough for a skimpy cigarette, only he had neither papers nor matches. Even so, his eyes glistened. He lifted his palm, half opened his mouth—his glance strayed to Whitey, curled like a cold dog in the bow, and to that other long figure shapeless under Chance’s wolfskin overcoat.

He called guardedly. “Hey, Whitey! Y’ sleep?”

“Naw. Wish t’ Gawd I was!”

“Lookit what I found! Good old Bull Durham. Want some?” He stared hard at the quiet man lying between them. “Wonder if it’d do Svensky any good? Maybe I oughta let him have it.”

“No, y’ hadn’t.” Whitey got painfully to his feet, clinging to the boat that tilted to his movement. His free hand reached out, clawlike and shaking. “I’m ’s bad off as the Swede. Hand it over here.” He moved cautiously to meet Chance coming to meet him, palm extended.

His greed was his undoing. As their hands almost met, Whitey grabbed. The boat lurched, Chance flung out his hand to balance himself. The pitiful

treasure cupped in his palm scattered like grain flung from a sower's hand.

“Dog-gone! What'd you do that for? Now lookit what you done!”

“Hell!” snarled Whitey, and scabbled back into his chosen place in the bow. From that retreat he glared at Chance and mouthed vile imprecations. In the stern Chance broke into sudden laughter dangerously approaching hysteria. As if aware of its import, he checked it presently and sought the safety of a scowl.

“Aw, cut out the belling. I'm glad now I lost the darn stuff. Wouldn't have done us any good, anyway.” Laughter again assailed him but he held it sternly in check. “Say, Whitey, jar loose from them secret sorrows and take a look at Svensky, will you? I'm kinda worried about him sleeping so long. That cut on his head don't look so good.”

“Whatcha worry about him fer? Us out here in the middle of the ocean with about a quart uh water fer the two of us—”

“Three.”

“Two. The damn square-head's croaked, I tell yuh.”

“You're crazy. Here, get back here outa the way and let me up there. I know you're lyin', but I'll have a look at him, anyway.”

The prejudice of the ignorant man against one of foreign birth twisted Whitey's face into a grimace of dislike as he straddled the bandaged head of the Swede and once more crept aft.

“Asleep, my foot! If he ain't dead, he will be purty quick—and I bet he gives the sharks a bellyache fer a week.”

“Oh, cut it out!” Chance admonished, as he met Whitey in the middle of the boat. “Ain't you got any heart at all?”

“Not fer him I ain't,” muttered Whitey. Before he sat down, he watched Chance slyly over his shoulder, and keeping his meager back turned to the bow, he lifted the small water keg, too light now to offer much refreshment, and drank as long as he dared. He was afraid of that tall cowboy fussing over the Swede. That it was the Swede who, injured though he was in the explosion that had wrecked the ship, had lifted that water keg into the last and smallest boat, made no difference whatever to Whitey. His only concern was to drink his fill without being caught at it.

But Chance would not have noticed anything Whitey did just then. He was kneeling, shoulders bowed, his wide hat-brim hiding all of his face except his mouth, which looked bitter. He was lifting the bandage on the Swede's head, wondering what more he could do for the man. Wondering,

too, how the Swede had managed to survive so long with that terrible gash in his skull.

“How you comin’, Svensky?”

The man’s blond lashes trembled, lifted for a dim peering glance. “In my—pocket—hardtack I been saving. Tree days—den you skoll—eat somet’ing. You take—yoost now—I ban goin’—” Labored, a mere rasping whisper, but sane and showing his gameness and his gratitude.

Chance swallowed, throat aching without reason. “Aw, you’ll be all right, Svensky. I’ll get you a drink.”

“You take—yoost now. I ban keep—for you—”

Chance looked over his shoulder, saw Whitey crouched, facing the stern. He did not wonder why. He found the pocket, a capacious one clumsily sewed to the inside of the Swede’s old Mackinaw. As slyly as Whitey had stolen the water, he smuggled six soiled sea biscuits into his own pocket.

“You’d oughta told me. I’ll soak one—” His breath caught in his throat. He leaned and stared, curved his fingers under the Swede’s stubbly chin and raised the sallow face. Empty. Somehow, so quietly he had not guessed it, Svensky had stolen out and away.

And suddenly the boat seemed abandoned, an empty shell cradled upon an empty ocean. He knelt there, solitary, forsaken, terrified by his own loneliness. Remembering something, he pulled off his branded Stetson and held it dangling by its brim, the faint breath of air stirring tousled brown hair that showed an inclination to curl over his ears. Whitey was staring at him. Chance stirred, looked back.

“Svensky’s gone,” he said.

“Sure. Told yuh he’d croak, didn’t I?” Whitey was brisker now, secretly exultant over his stolen drink. “Damn shame he wouldn’t of cashed in b’fore you went an’ wasted all that good water on ’im. Damn foolishness, nursin’ ’im along with half ’is head caved in. Oughta dumped ’im overboard long ago—”

“That’ll be about all from you!” Chance whirled on the balls of his feet. “One more peep against Svensky and you’ll find yourself sayin’ howdy to a shark.”

Whitey’s mouth sagged open, his cheeks turned the color of old tallow. “Now, now, no use gittin’ mad! I never meant—”

“You meant a plenty. And I’m meaning plenty when I say cut it out. I never did lay hands on an old man, but—”

“No offence, no offence,” chattered Whitey. “Don’t ya lay yer hands on *me*—I’m sick—starvin’ t’ death—” All the swagger was gone out of him. He was just an unkempt old man with scared, mean eyes and a weak chin that trembled as if he were going to cry.

Chance stared, softened in spite of himself. “Aw, brace up,” he said gruffly. His glance returned somberly to the lifeless figure before him. He leaned, picked up the Swede’s cap from where it lay under his cold hand, and dropped it over the gaunt face already carved into a serene dignity it had not known in life. Chance stood up, balancing himself in the rocking boat. He put on his hat, stepped carefully over the empty seats where the two drunken rowers had sat working clumsily, frantically, until they had clinched and gone overboard yesterday. He was not thinking of Frisco and Pete. He was wondering where Svensky was now. Whitey cringed past him, getting out of his way, but already Chance had forgotten his anger.

“We’ll bury him after dark,” he said brusquely. “You don’t want to lose your nerve, Whitey. Here. Come back here. Found a cracker in his pocket you can have.”

For all Whitey knew, that solitary hardtack was the last morsel of food in the boat, but he did not offer to share it. Instead he snatched it and scuttled forward as if he feared Chance might repent his generosity and wanted to put himself out of reach. As he went, he gnawed with the frenzied eagerness of a half-starved monkey.

“Better go slow on that and make it last,” Chance gave laconic advice.

Whitey vouchsafed neither word nor glance. Huddled as far as he could get away from the dead man whose forethought had supplied this slight nourishment, he nibbled and gnawed, his world for the moment shrunk to the round sea biscuit in his hands.

Forgotten in the stern, Chance sat and stared hour after hour out over the gently undulating expanse, mechanically counting the rollers as far as he could see. Wave after wave, watery world without end.

CHAPTER TWO

WHAT DREAMS MAY COME

WHITEY pulled his knees up close to his chest, whimpering as a dog whimpers on a cold doorstep, wanting to be let in by the fire. "I wisht that damn *Esther B* had busted 'er b'ilers b'fore I ever laid eyes on 'er!"

Savoring the last crumb of the hardtack he had doled out to himself—waiting until black dark lest Whitey should see and yammer for more—Chance pulled his thoughts away from far sunlit prairies.

"You could of waited for the regular boat," he pointed out, weary of the old man's complaining.

"Couldn't either. Didn't have money enough. Luck's always been agin me. Always gittin' the worst of it. Ain't like you,—go hellin' up North with yer hat cocked over one eyebrow an' strike it rich first morning b'fore breakfast almost. Come out with more gold 'n you could pack on a mule—"

"Oh, no. Oh-h, no. Not quite that bad, Whitey." In the dark Chance's free hand dropped to his middle, feeling the weighted money belt bulging next his skin. It was alarmingly loose, he discovered, though it had been snug enough three days ago. He unbuttoned his vest and his flannel shirt and undershirt, fumbled for the belt buckle and drew the belt three holes smaller.

"All yuh c'n pack," Whitey reiterated enviously. "You'll sink like a rock with all that gold dust wrapped around yuh," he added with malice.

"Oh, I guess not. I could still give a shark a run for his money if it came to a swimmin' race." But Chance's fingers trembled at the disagreeable picture while he buttoned his clothes. "I sure aim to get home with all I got on me, and don't you forget it. I aim to take this belt I'm wearing and slap it down in Mom's lap and say to her, 'Mom, I told Dad I'd be back this fall with gold in my belt, and here she is. Ten years' wages,' I'll tell her, 'if I'd worked twelve months in the year and never spent a cent. Not so bad for your Chancey boy that was bound he'd have a whirl at gold-diggin' in the Klondyke instead of staying home, punching cows at forty dollars and his board.' That's what I aim to tell her, and give her every ounce. And no dog-gone shark or no ocean is going to stand in my way, I tell you those."

"Mebby the sharks and the ocean'll have something t' say about that," Whitey jibed. "Helluva lotta good your gold is doin' yuh now. Loaded down

with gold—and yuh couldn't buy a meal or a drink of water to save your lousy soul. That's the kinda fix you're in."

"Say, I never was in a fix yet I didn't get out of," Chance retorted. "I'll get out of this one too. You watch my smoke. Why, didn't I tell you my folks need money? My dad's dead—murdered—and Mom sure needs this gold dust worse than ever. She's going to get it too. She'll get it if I have to put over a miracle and walk on the water to get home." He gave a half-apologetic little chuckle as if anxious to make it plain his threat was only a figure of speech.

"Course, I ain't aiming to strike out and walk right now. It'd be kinda rough going in the dark. Might stub my toe or something."

"You was a damn fool to ever ride on the *Esther B* in the first place," Whitey criticized, passing over the miracle idea—probably because he failed to grasp it. "Yuh could afford a ticket on a reg'lar boat."

"Sure, I could. But I was in a hurry to get home, and the *Esther B* left almost a week ahead of the other one. I thought it'd be quicker, going on down to Frisco and taking the train from there home. Wish now I'd waited." He was talking not so much to Whitey as to himself, unconsciously using the safety valve of speech for his pent thoughts. "Couldn't see it then, though. When that letter came from Mom, telling me Dad had been shot and killed and nobody seemed to know who done it, and wouldn't I come straight on home—" He made a little gulping sound in his throat as if he swallowed a sob and tried to mask the sound.

"I'd 'a' walked, if I thought it'd get me home any quicker. Why, that letter was over a month old when I got it! Course I'd pull out on anything that looked like a boat headed south. Couldn't get started quick enough. Mom there holding down the ranch alone, and Dad's murderer riding around, bold as you please, most likely. I ain't sure—but I've got a pretty strong notion I know who done it. It won't take me long to find out, once I get there."

It was plain that he had forgotten all about Whitey, muttering his self-pity up there in the bow. In the vague formless dusk he was like an artist standing before blank canvas. He could paint what he would. The smooth, rhythmic roll of the ground swell sent the buoyant dory drifting forward on the sweep of the tide's full flow. So softly it went that he forgot where he was. He seemed to be loping slowly along in the dark, riding home to the Rocking Arrow ranch. His voice dropped to a dreamy musing.

"Dog-gone it, I oughta stayed home like Dad wanted me to. Seems like he knew something was going to happen to him. He sure did hate to see me

start for the Klondyke with Blainey Jones. But Blainey knew right where we could go and make a clean-up in just one summer. Stake our claims and work 'em till fall and then sell out and hit the trail home. Blainey said there wasn't a chance in a million anybody else would get wise and beat us to it. Only way he found it was by getting lost. Pure luck—but he marked the spot and come on home. He was headed out at the time. A cinch.

“And dog-gone it, the Rocking Arrow could sure use a little extra money, all right. I knew Dad was worrying about how he was going to keep up the payments on that Cross J deal. Hadn't oughta monkeyed with it in the first place. I knew all the time he was biting off more'n he could chew. But that was Dad, every time. Buy—buy anything on four legs. Cattle crazy, if you ask me. Bank taking over the Cross J on a mortgage when Fuller died, and offering the brand complete to the highest bidder. Handing out Fuller's last calf tally for bidders to make their estimate on.

“I said to Dad at the time: ‘Dad, there sure is a nigger in that bank's woodpile, and I bet I can tell you his name. It's that tally,’ I said. ‘If you bid in the Cross J brand on the strength of that last calf tally, you're going to burn your fingers bad. The beef shipment won't anywhere near come up to your expectations, either. Fuller,’ I said, ‘shipped his beef right down to the last three-year-old steer, last fall. I know, because I was repping over on their range, you remember, and I worked right with the Cross J outfit all fall.

“‘And then last spring,’ I told him, ‘Mart Higgins went and hired a bunch of broken-down old stiffs that he musta dragged outa some old folks' home,’ I said. ‘There wasn't a one able to get out and make a decent day's ride. They just rode around in the open and never made any attempt to comb out the draws and the canyons. Up along Porcupine Creek,’ I says, ‘I bet there's fifty Cross J calves that never saw an iron. And all them rough, brushy creeks are the same,’ I told him. ‘So if you do bid, make up your mind you're biddin' on about a third more than shows on the bank's estimate.’”

Chance's voice trailed off into silence, dreaming of the range. Up in the bow Whitey shivered and mumbled to himself, fully absorbed in his own paltry affairs. And presently Chance spoke again.

“Thirty dollars a head, calves by their side. A good bargain, at that, if Dad could of handled the deal without running himself so deep in debt. That dog-gone tally fooled him, like I knew it would. . . . Banks, they never pass up a dime—bet your sweet life they don't. Put a crew out gathering Cross J's—and Eccleson, he was a director in the bank, and he run the wagon. Man, oh, man, did they comb that Cross J range! Time they finished the round-up

and were ready to turn over the herd, dog-gone if they didn't have everything but a coupla green hides that was hanging on the Cross J fence. 'Course, Dad had to pungle up so much a head, and that first payment darn near strapped him. Never batted an eye, though. Game. . . . Dog-gone right. Paid over the money and never let on he was stung.

"So that's how come I hit the trail for the Klondyke when Blainey told me about that little creek he'd spotted, that nobody else thought was worth a white bean. Friend, that boy. He could have glommed the whole works, but he wanted me with him. I done it just to help Dad out of the hole he got into. He was so dog-gone game about it I hated to see him back down and own up they'd got the best of him. That Mart Higgins and Eccleson—that bunch—you can't tell me they wasn't framing to get hold of the Rocking Arrow, 'cause I know better. They knew darn good and well that calf tally was away off. . . . They've got Dad, and I guess maybe they think with just Mom and a gandershanks kid that ain't even there, they can run things to suit themselves. They got another think coming. I tell you those."

Chance stirred, heaved a great sigh and said "Br-r-r-rr!" at the chill of a fog creeping over the water. He reached out and got the heavy wolfskin coat folded upon the nearest seat, now that Svensky had slipped down into his deep, watery bed and could not feel the cold. Already the thick long hair was beaded with moisture from the fog. Lucky thing he had that coat. He wouldn't have, only he had been out on deck, standing up in the bow watching the *Esther B* plough its long furrow through the night when the boilers blew up. It struck him suddenly that it was his own impatience that had saved his life. If he hadn't been so anxious to get home, he'd have been asleep, most likely. And if he had been asleep in his stateroom, he never would have known what happened. Luck, his being dressed so warmly, standing forward out of the path of death. Whitey bunked forward. That had saved him too, though he hadn't stopped for warm clothes—

"Hey, Whitey! Better shuck yourself into this fur coat. Fog's rolling in on us to beat the band. Won't help your rheumatism none. Come on—I I got my fleece-lined. That'll do me."

Whitey came scrambling aft, teeth chattering audibly in the dark. Chance guided his arms into the sleeves, buttoned him up and heard him crawl back to his chosen nook. No rowing to-night. He curled himself down in the bottom, pillowed his head on his arms folded upon the seat, and slept. And a strange dream came.

He dreamed that he rode up to the Rocking Arrow stable. It was early spring, warm and sunny. Hens were cackling, bare earth was steaming in the

sun, unpleasantly like fog rising from water. On the hayrack propped up on stakes alongside the corral stood a rooster with half his tail feathers gone. Comical. He was just flapping his wings and curving his neck to crow when he saw Chance. He flew down and legged it for the barn, Chance laughing to see him dig in his claws to make it.

He dreamed that he led the horse into the stable, and that he took off his heavy money belt and carried it looped over his arm. His dream was so clear that he avoided consciously the little puddles in the path made from melting, dirt-grimed snowdrifts. He thought he went in and his mother came out of the pantry, her hands all over flour. She never thought of them. She hugged him and kissed him and cried a little, and wiped her eyes on her rolled-up sleeve and stood back to look at him.

Chance wanted to cry too, but he took the belt of gold and hung it over her neck like a stole. He said, “There’s your gold dust, Mom. Your Chancey boy has done just like he said he would. He’s brought you the raw dust he dug outa the ground himself.”

His mother hugged him again and felt and fingered the bulged chamois pockets of the belt. And she said, “Oh, Chancey, I thought till I got your telegram that you were dead and drowned. We heard that the ship went down with every soul on board—and all winter there wasn’t a word—”

“The ship did blow up, Mom. I guess I’m the only one left. Three boats full of folks got as far as the water and then upset or were smashed. I and four other fellows made it. Two drowned in a fight, one died peaceful and the last one was a skunk that tried to kill me over a cracker he thought I was holding out on him. But I’m here, Mom, right side up and with the belt of gold I started out to bring you. Your Chancey boy sure wasn’t born to be drowned. Me and the gold—here we are, Mom, ready for business.”

His mother’s embrace tightened. Tall woman though she was—half a head taller than his dad—she tilted her head backward to look into his face. And she said mournfully, “Oh Chancey, if you could only find where they hid him and give him decent burial! All winter long, to think of him lying out in all those terrible blizzards we had—and who knows but the wolves—” She dropped her face against his breast where he could feel his heart thump with the rage that surged over him.

“Laying out—Mom, you never said a word about that in your letter I got. You just said—”

“I know, Chancey, I know. I didn’t want to worry you any more than was necessary. You had a long ways to come and I didn’t want you all worked up over it when you couldn’t do anything. I wanted to save you all I could. But,

Chancey, we've never been able to find him yet. They killed him, we know that. His horse came home with blood on the saddle. It had run all down over the stirrup leathers, showing he must have stayed with the horse quite a while after he was shot. He was riding Smokey, and they never would be able to catch him unless they shot him down, and they'd hate to do that—he's too valuable a horse. They'd want to get hold of him. You can see the saddle, Chancey, with your father's blood—and the cantle rim is scored by a bullet. Jim thinks it's the same one that killed your father. The furrow is ragged and stained—" Sobbing halted her disjointed speech.

Chance was patting her shoulder, his face against her hair, black and glossy as a crow's wing. "There, Mom, quit thinking about it. I'm here now, safe and sound. I'll find him—I'll find them too. I tell you those. Don't you worry any more about it. Let's not talk about it any more. Got any pie? Dog-gone! I'm so hungry, Mom, I could eat a raw dog. Say, you ain't said a word—how's Nell? She know I'm coming? She—she's still waiting like she said she would, ain't she? I'll ride over, soon as I eat. . . . *Is she waiting for me, Mom?*"

"Why, Chancey—"

It seemed to Chance as if the door slammed then, shutting him outside in the cold and rain. His mother's words were swept away on the howling blast. He fumbled for the latch, battling the wind that drove sheets of water down upon him from the eaves. He gasped, opened his eyes to murky daylight seen through misty rain. The boat was drifting broadside before the wind, rocking dangerously. Already the water they had shipped was swashing over his feet. He drew himself up to the seat, lifted the oars into place, swung the boat about. Tail to the wind, that was the way horses and cattle weathered the storms. The dory acted a lot like a horse. Tail to the wind. Range instinct told him that.

"Hey, Whitey! Wake up and get to work here!"

The huddled heap up forward stirred sluggishly. Whitey's head emerged turtlewise from the collar of the wolfskin coat. What words he spoke Chance could guess well enough, though the wind smothered his voice. One hand flapped disgustedly. The head withdrew into shelter.

Chance watched the waves, risked a ducking and pulled a hardtack from his pocket. "Hey, Whitey!" he called over his shoulder, "don't you want any breakfast?"

"Aw, f'r gawdsake!" But again the gaunt ugly head poked itself reluctantly into sight, impelled by a faint hope.

“Here. Crawl up here into the stern and eat this cracker. Then take the bucket under the seat and bail, dog-gone yuh.”

Awkwardly, snatching the cracker as he passed, Whitey crawled aft and set to work, bailing between bites. Chance rowed, watching each wave as he would have watched a tricky bronc, trying to guess each move in advance. The squall passed, leaving a chill blanket of fog. Almost as if a giant hand were patting them down, the choppy, foam-crested waves smoothed into rollers that rocked the boat but did no harm.

Oars crossed upon his thighs, keeping his place because he would not trust the weather, Chance drew a hardtack from his pocket and set to work upon it, biting hard with his strong white teeth. Crouched in the stern, dipping the last of the sloshing water and emptying it overboard, Whitey looked up and saw Chance chewing hardtack. A queer glitter sprang into his eyes.

CHAPTER THREE

CHANCE GOES WITH THE TIDE

“YOU been holdin’ out on me, you dirty thief!” Whitey leaned forward, hands working like claws. “Gimme them crackers!”

Chance swallowed the last bite, dipped the oars into the water and pulled a lazy stroke.

“Y’ heard what I said!” Whitey stood up, threatening.

“Better hobble your stirrups, old-timer. She’s liable to start sunfishin’ again any minute.” The oars dipped, rose, dipped.

“Hand ’em over here! Let a man starve t’ death, would yuh? Set an’ grin an’ watch ’im die b’fore yore eyes. Damn you, gimme them crackers!”

“Aw, set down, you chump. I’ll give you a cracker when I get good and ready, and not before. You had one, I had one. What you bellering about?” Scum of the earth, Chance added mentally. Looked like he was bughouse already. Couldn’t stand anything. Things sure would be a fright if Whitey lost hold of himself. Best way was not to let him know you took him serious.

Whitey’s fur-bundled shoulders hunched forward. He stood spraddled grotesquely in the stern, bailing bucket on its side between his feet. His eyes were no longer human. “Y’ better—hand ’em—over,” he panted, scarcely articulate in his frenzy.

Chance’s glance strayed to where a line of whitecaps flying little plumes of spray showed suddenly like grinning teeth under the fog.

“She’ll be buckin’ four ways at once in a minute. *Set down*, you darn chump!”

The command was not out of his mouth when Whitey hurled himself, snarling and clawing. Trained to split-second emergencies in the taming of wild horses, Chance gripped the oars, leaned back and kicked out with both feet. He caught Whitey in the middle, and the impact threw him off balance, jerking both oars out of their rowlocks as he went over backward. Then wind, wave and madman merged in one wild turmoil.

Chance never did know exactly what happened first. He felt the dory lift and lurch under him, and as the water poured in upon him, he had a flashing

glimpse of Whitey like a circus bear turning a somersault into a glassy green hillock flecked with foam.

For his life Chance clung to the oars. He went down, down, bobbed up again, spewing salt water. A wave bore him along under the gray blanket of fog. Fifteen pounds of gold strapped around his middle—Whitey's prophecy nagged at him. Lose an oar and he was a goner. In the momentary lull between two rollers he pulled the oars closer, lapped them handle to blade and hung on. His hat was jammed down over his eyebrows and kept spilling brine from its streaming brim. Through the thin waterfall he looked about for the boat, and in the trough of a wave some little distance away he caught a brief glimpse of the dory's bow sliding down out of sight. Almost as suddenly had the *Esther B* vanished beneath the water. So had Frisco and Pete gone down; Svensky; and just a minute ago Whitey's hot rage had been quenched. Chance shivered. His grip on the two oars tightened convulsively.

"I've got to get home. I've *got* to!" Whether he shouted the words or only thought them in silence, they stiffened his courage, steadied him to cool thinking. He was right down to cases, he told himself grimly. It was up to him—and God. But God wasn't going to put Himself out to help a fellow if he didn't help himself all he could. He had two oars and he had his wits. It was up to him how he used them.

In the next sheltered hollow he managed to untie his big neckerchief of black silk. He rode a wave holding the cloth fast between his clenched teeth. When he slid down into comparative quiet he wrapped the two oars tightly together and tied them, working with the swift precision of a roping-and-tying-down contest. The two ends of the neckerchief floated free, and with somber forethought he fastened them firmly to his belt. He might get too numb to hang on, but he meant to float just the same.

His coat, water-logged and heavy, next claimed his frowning attention. No good. It couldn't keep him any warmer than his wool shirt. He pulled it off and watched it float sluggishly down a green incline, at the bottom of which it too sank slowly from his sight.

There were his boots, full of water and dragging at his legs. It took longer to work them off his feet than it had done to shed his coat, but the exertion warmed him a little. The right boot dropped, then the left. He could not even see them go. His lips tightened. Bit by bit, the sea was robbing him, snatching, clawing, just as Whitey had snatched and clawed for a cracker. It wanted him and his gold dust, the sea did. It was the sea that had taught the sharks their grisly ways. The sea loved to swallow ships and men at a gulp;

ships and men and the gold men worked their hearts out to find. He guessed he was the last gulp—

“Not on your life!” Chance shouted at the top of his voice.

“Queer? Queer?” a gray gull inquired shrilly, flying low to see if he could be eaten.

“Aw, skiddoo!” cried Chance, clinging to his sense of humor as he clung to the oars. “Holler your darned head off, if it does you any good—but set you afoot on the prairie, forty miles from nowhere, and you wouldn’t have so much to say. I’d be the one to ride around you and holler ‘Queer,’ I tell you those.”

The gull still thought it was queer, and said so many times, circling and peering down, head tilted sidewise. After awhile he wheeled and disappeared into the fog.

“Dog-gone! I bet he’s headed for shore!” Chance exclaimed aloud, for sake of the human sound of his voice. “He sure would be a chump to head out for China on a day like this. Much obliged, old socks. Do as much for you sometime—maybe.”

He started swimming, sternly controlling the impulse to swim frantically after the gull. No use getting excited and tearing a bone out swimming, he told himself over and over. You couldn’t bank on any bird heading for home this time of day. He had to keep moving, though, or he’d be so cold he’d be plum paralyzed. Take it easy. That was the stuff. Take it easy, so he’d have some strength left when he needed it the worst.

There was that dog-gone gull again. Flew in a circle, probably. No telling which way he was going. Still, a fellow had to keep moving his arms and legs a little or they’d be numb before you knew it. He guessed he wouldn’t get so far out he couldn’t get back—swimming at this rate. *Queer? Queer?* Darn right, it was queer! Who at home would ever have thought Chancey Moore would wind up with a couple of oars and no boat to go with ’em, out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Man tell you that a year ago, you’d have said he was crazy.

Chancey Moore wasn’t wound up yet, though. Dog-gone right, he wasn’t! Look at the way things had worked out so far, just to save his life, looked like. Up in the bow of the *Esther B* at midnight, just because he wasn’t sleepy, somehow, and couldn’t lay still. Got up and dressed, mind you, and walked up in the bow not more than fifteen minutes before them rotten boilers blew a hole plum through the middle of her. That was queer enough. Tell you those. Queer, too, how he happened to hang back for the

last boat there was left, and it was the only one that floated. Then if he'd put that fur coat on himself, instead of lending it to Whitey, he wouldn't have had a chance when the boat upset. Look at Whitey, drowned like a rat. Plum yella, that old man. Yella and mean. Treacherous as a snake. Wonder where they all went to—him and Svensky, and them two drunks, and all the folks on the *Esther B*. Didn't seem reasonable you just quit and that was the last of you. Too much of you that wasn't body; love and hate and all your thoughts and everything—there was more of them things than there was meat and bone and blood. They couldn't just quit in a second because water got inside your lungs, for instance, and stopped the works. What was that song Mom was always singing when she was working in the pantry? "*Kind words can never die—*"

Sure funny, that dream about talking to Mom. He could see that rooster yet; must be a young one hatched about the time he left. He sure didn't remember it. Mom had some little chicks she was keeping in the granary—must be one of that bunch. Mom saying all that about Dad—sure was funny he'd go and dream it out like it was real. Smokey coming home with blood on the saddle—sounded crazy like.

Chance was padding listlessly along, his body supported by the oars, his rambling thoughts clinging to that brief vision. A band of silver light was broadening above him but he didn't notice it. He was wishing he could have hung onto that dream long enough to hear what Mom was going to say about Nell Shirley. Of course she was waiting. He'd bank his life on Nell's love for him.

"I've got to get back to her and Mom! *I've got to!*" The shy diffidence of a youth who feels deeply and who hides his inmost self, ashamed to confess his finer thoughts lest they be laughed at and belittled, broke suddenly into tearful supplication.

"Oh, God, I never asked You for anything since I was a kid. I hate to holler now, but I've plum reached my limit. I *can't* go under this way, when Mom hasn't got a soul left but me to depend on. I wouldn't care so much for myself—but will You help me outa this for her sake? She's a Christian, if ever there was one. She's always practised what she preached, and if she knew the fix I'm in, she'd be down on her knees to You—I *know* she would! She trusts You absolutely. Help me, for her sake!"

The uprush of emotions dropped him suddenly into doubt of God's personal interference with fate. He stopped praying and started swimming. "You'll do it, if You're the kinda God Mom always took You to be," he muttered.

He had not taken more than a dozen weak strokes when, like a stage curtain, the fog rolled slowly up off the water. Yellow sunlight shone through a ragged rent in the mist and set the sea asparkle. "*Dog-gone!*" Chance ejaculated, blinking against the dazzling light. "He sure got quick action that time." Gratitude and a certain awed belief surged into his heart as he looked. For just ahead he saw a rugged shore line backed by dark, wooded hills. So close it seemed that he was tempted to shout for help. But it looked too wild and lonely. Instead, he swam with a new energy. He failed to reckon with the grim, sardonic humor of the sea. For hours it had borne him on its flowing tide straight for the shore, and then at dawn its mood had changed to one of petulance. Though it still carried him along, it let the wind and waves play their rough game with boat and men. Like the paw of a huge and cruelly playful cat it had slapped the dory down beneath the waves and then had settled itself to watch what this persistent, struggling man thing would do. And to keep him hopeless, it had drawn the veil of fog between him and the shore. Grim humor, that.

Perhaps the land reached rough fingers to the sea and tore the fog curtain to bits. The land is always kinder to strong men than is the sea. It stood there close and smiling under the warm sun of midmorning. Chance could see the jagged rocks thrust up a little way from the tip of a blunt point, and the frothy foam where the sea lunged boisterously against the barrier, smothering the rocks in spray.

He lifted his longing eyes and stared at the friendly hills. People lived there, maybe. He watched from every roller top and saw, when the last streamers of fog vanished among the tree tops, a thin blue drift the sun could not swallow. He traced its course down to the lower rim of forest, and his heart hammered so that it choked the breath from his throat. The blue streamer was smoke rising from a house so hidden among the trees he would never have discovered it but for that telltale blue ribbon floating upward through the forest. Smoke from a fireside! Heavenly warmth within sight of him; almost, it seemed, within reach.

All at once Chance felt as if he would die unless he got beside a fire. Hunger, thirst he might endure a little longer, but not this deadly numbing cold. His teeth began to chatter as Whitey's had done when he came crawling after the wolfskin coat that had at last shortened his life by a minute or two.

"Dog-gone! I'm showing the yella as bad as Whitey did!" he told himself roughly, and swam furiously for a few strokes to get himself in hand again. But he had to stop that. He could not whip himself to much further

effort. If he didn't look out, the sea would get the best of him. He had just so much strength left—darned little, he was forced to admit. He would have to make every move count from now on.

He studied the shore line, knowing that here was his last card; play it wrong and the sea would have him. That point—it was the closest land, but he never could make it. Let those waves slam him up against the rocks a time or two— He set his teeth and turned and began swimming toward the south, hoping to avoid that rocky trap and find quieter water beyond.

He did not know that a hidden barrier running out from the point set the current southward, or that it carried him slowly, surely, out of the danger zone. He thought he was making pretty good headway swimming. He thought he was planning things just about right and using his head right up to the last minute. He thought a good many things that had no substance in fact.

He did not know it, but the tide was playing with him just as it played with driftwood washed down from the wide-mouthed river farther north. It played that it was going to hurry him straight up to the nearest rocks, where it would use him for a club to batter that age-old promontory it had never been able to shake. It took him close, then changed its mind and dragged him back and out and into a bay all jagged with little hidden coves.

Chance thought he was mastering the situation. The truth was that he was doing nothing more than hold his head above the lapping of the waves, moving his long legs listlessly as the current and tide impelled him. He had told God the bald truth; he had about reached his limit.

The tide plays roughly when it gets into the bad company of rocks that never fail to excite it to a thrashing fury. Just now it was gentle enough, while it had Chance all to itself. It was whispering *push—push—push-sh-sh* while it floated him quietly toward a favorite little cove, where for no man knows how long it had played a little game of its own. Whenever the incoming tide got hold of a log or a tree or any kind of floating debris, it loved to bring it in to this cove and try to push it into a cave. Usually it failed in the attempt and ended by casting its missile upon the tiny beach and leaving it there, while it withdrew into the sea, whispering to itself. Three times within the past year it had succeeded in pushing thirty-foot logs into a ten-foot mouth, which was a difficult feat to perform.

The trouble seemed to lie mainly with the entrance to the cove itself. There a rock stood squarely in the path where no rock should have been. Seen from the cliff above the cove, it looked exactly as if some goddess of forgotten days had come in from the sea and in stepping ashore had lost her

slipper there. A high-arched, modish slipper, with slender heel pointed disdainfully toward the open sea, constantly fretting the tide that snarled and pushed and worried it and never had made it yield an inch—since it had turned to solid rock in eons long since past. There it stood, directly opposite the hungry mouth of the cave, plaguing the busy tides that came and went into showing their teeth as they passed.

To-day the tide had a more supple bit of flotsam for its cave. It had Chance with his two oars, and rounding a point it had picked up a gnawed and rootless stump and brought the two close together. Sheer instinct to clutch at anything within reach made Chance throw out an arm and hook it desperately over a snag where a root had broken off. He rode higher after that and the chill water no longer kissed him on the mouth.

So the tide brought them in, Chance half-riding the stump and hazily inclined to mistake it for a horse. They were almost inside the cove, serenely floating along with a gentle rocking motion, when an oar blade slipped and struck the slipper's heel. Their progress halted. Chance, desperately clutching the snaggy stump and with his belt loosely attached to the oars, was the unconscious pivot upon which they turned.

The tide withdrew them, held them until a heavier swell rolled in, and dashed them full upon the slipper's heel. And it was Chance that took the impact of the blow.

CHAPTER FOUR

CHANCE TRIES LIVING

CHANCE opened his eyes and closed them again because the light hurt intolerably. He was conscious of a dull, throbbing ache that seemed to encompass his entire body. Then it seemed to him that he was a log being rolled and battered by the tides.

Another time—how long after the first he did not know—he again became hazily conscious of his aching body. Some one lifted his head and set the tip of a spoon between his teeth. A warm fluid was in his mouth and he swallowed it. This was repeated several times before he drifted down into soft blackness.

Then one day he opened his eyes and saw big, dingy red roses and green leaves mathematically spaced. He knew them for paper on a wall in some room. Where, did not especially concern him. His head ached and his brain was dull and tired, and nothing seemed to matter except that he dreaded to get up. He thought he had spent a bad night and that he faced a worse day, but he seemed to have forgotten just why he hated to get up and tackle whatever disagreeable job lay ahead of him.

“Would you like a drink of water or anything?”

Chance blinked, turned his aching head upon the softest pillow he had ever felt, and stared in the direction of the voice. Sitting very straight and solemn, with her hands primly folded in her lap of pink-and-white checked gingham, a little girl stared back at him with round blue eyes. Her hair was combed smoothly back from her forehead and tied with a pink bow, and yellow curls that looked like tubes of softest silk lay upon her shoulders. When Chance did not reply she gave a deep sigh and tried again.

“Are you a foreigner or something? Aunt Kate thinks you have a romantic Latin look. She went by your eyebrows and eyelashes mostly, and the way your mouth is curved up at the corners. And you *are* pretty dark complected, aren’t you? But Jack says you’re American. And your eyes are—I *think* they’re gray and blue mixed.” She caught her breath at a disquieting thought. “Do you understand what I say?” she asked very distinctly.

“Sure.” Chance was startled to hear his voice come out a dull, croaking whisper.

“Oh, goody! You’re American, the way you say ‘sure’ for yes. Aunt Kate won’t let me say ‘sure’ unless I put other words in with it. Aunt Kate says because we live in the savage wilds of Oregon we needn’t talk like savages. She’s deaf. You’ll have to holler if you talk to her, unless she remembers where she put her horn. Most always it’s lost.”

She gave an adorable little knowing nod. “Sometimes I hide it when I haven’t got my spelling lesson or grammar. She has to hunt high and low for it then.”

Chance’s mouth curved even more at the corners. Vaguely he liked the child’s roguish giggle.

“My stars, I’m glad I’m the one to be here when you come to,” she began again. “Aunt Kate thought you’d die and just be another mysterious tragedy of the sea, but I never. Jack didn’t, either. Jack said after all that work and trouble of swimming from Cave Cove around to Arch Rock and dragging you back around, where we could get you up the bank, you’d better not go and die on our hands!

“I expect you would, though, if Ma wasn’t as good as any doctor. Jack went to work and walked all the way to Newport and back after a doctor, and then he was down sick in bed and couldn’t come. It was raining too, and black as a stack of black cats all the way home. So I expect Jack would be mad if you died, after all that trouble.

“Anyway, Ma and Injun Jim set your leg and your arm and your ribs and head and everything. They had you all fixed up before Jack came and said the doctor was sick himself. Aunt Kate says it’s the greatest mercy in the world you didn’t know how you was being pulled and hauled around. They laid you on the kitchen table—Ma wouldn’t let me stay and watch. They made me go upstairs and Aunt Kate stuck a fork over the latch so I couldn’t open the door. But I don’t care. There’s a crack in the floor and I peeked.

“They waited and waited for the doctor to come and do it. But when he didn’t come and *didn’t* come, or Jackie either—’cause it takes a long while to walk to where there’s a doctor lives, and Jackie says bears don’t care how much they wind around and climb hills, or deer either, and you’ve got to follow their trail through the woods or else make a trail of your own. Well, Aunt Kate told Ma she better get right to work on you ’fore you died. And Ma said she didn’t have any ess-perience with folks broke all to flinders. And Aunt Kate said Ma couldn’t learn any younger, and anyway, you was just about dead and it was a good chance for Ma to practise up on broken bones. Aunt Kate said if Ma didn’t do the best she could, you’d haunt her the longest day she lived.

“ ‘Course, I don’t s’pose you’d be mean enough to do that. I told Jackie what Aunt Kate said. And Jackie said a good-looking ghost would be a pleasant ess-perience after Pa and his gang, and she wished you would haunt the place. She liked to look at you. And Ma told Jackie to hush up and not be so dis-respectable about her parents. And Jackie said Pa wasn’t her parent, thank the Lord, and then Aunt Kate scolded Jack good, because she pretty near said a swear word. Oh, dear! You’d oughta seen the fur fly then! Jackie don’t get mad very often, but when she does!”

“Hazel Freeman, where are you?” From another room a voice with the carrying quality of a whistle called guardedly.

“Oh, my goodness, there’s Aunt Kate! If she catches me talking to you —! She just said I could keep an eye on you while she put her bread in the pans.” She slid from the chair and went on tiptoes, chubby finger to her lips. A cute little devil, Chance thought wearily. So he had a broken leg and arm and ribs, did he? He sleepily wondered if they were all that ailed him. Judging by the way he felt—

“Well! You thought you’d try *living* for a change, hmm? Hazel says you’ve had your eyes open for as much as ten minutes. You better not try to talk. Your head’s in a terrible condition and there’s nothing a body can *do* about it, I guess. I’ve been putting my bread in the pans or I’d have been here myself when you come to. If Hazel bothered you, just say so!”

Chance achieved a smile. Aunt Kate was a tiny woman with bright blue eyes, a red button of a mouth which she drew in to an unbelievably small pucker when she finished speaking. He was to know that pucker better, but even in his foggy state he read in it unpleasant things for Hazel. With a birdlike quickness she perched upon the straight-backed chair and adjusted an ear trumpet covered with black velvet neatly shirred into a ruffle around its elbow. Its bell-shaped funnel mouth looked at Chance inquiringly. Pushing the pipstem tube into her right ear she waited, head tilted.

Even a sick man must obey that silent summons. “I’m—all—right,” Chance haltingly mumbled.

“No, you’re not! The very idea! You come as close to the pearly gates as you’ll ever get till you pass through—if you’re worthy, and I hope you are. You’re better, but you’re a long ways from being all right, I can tell you that.”

While she proceeded to tell him, Chance dropped once more into sleep, lulled by the pleasant murmur of her voice, which merged somehow into the babbling of a brook running over bright pebbles.

When he awoke it was night. A candle burned in a brass candlestick on a walnut bureau standing beside the door. Somewhere in the house voices were raised in angry altercation; at first a disturbing racket which he did not identify, then taking shape and significance as his cloudy mind cleared.

Aunt Kate had the floor when Chance first reached full comprehension. "I'll have you to know, Walt Freeman, that *I* put him in that room. It's the only place in the house that's fit for a sick man, and he's going to stay as long as I'm a mind to have him. So *there!*"

A heavy voice mouthed oaths and threats. The gist of the man's diatribe was that no this-and-that sea scum was going to die in his bed, and the damned cuss was comin' outa there right now. The shed was good enough for him. The man was going to be boss in his own house or he'd know the reason why.

Chance did not like that voice. He tried to lift himself up and go tell the dog-gone bully where he got off at, but his body would not respond to the impulse. One hand groped weakly for something it could grasp. The rest of him lay helpless.

Hazel's childish treble pleaded, "Oh, Pa, he's a *nice* man! He's awful sick and *please* don't throw him in the shed-d!" The wailing note of anxiety rose to a scream of pain and fright. A loud smack struck a new note in the argument.

"Walt Freeman, you *dare* strike that child again and I'll brain you with this horn! I will so! Hazel, you go right upstairs to bed. Your father ain't going to touch you again—I won't let him."

Chance heard the child climb the stairs, sobbing as she went. Walt Freeman's loud-mouthed abuse continued as he trod the bare boards heavily. "Git outa my way, you damn fool—"

"Don't you swear at Mary! *I'm* responsible for whatever is done around this house!" Aunt Kate was standing her ground.

"I got a right to sleep in my own bed, and I'm a goin' to! I don't care who—"

"Well, I care, and that settles it," snapped Aunt Kate. "I paid for that bed, I'll have you to know, and it's for me to say who's going to lay in it. It won't be a great drunken, profane hulk like you, I'll tell you that much!"

"You needn't think you can step in here and run my family—"

"Who was it stepped in here and fed your family, I'd like to know? You, a great hulk like you, off scurruping around where you'd no honest business to be with that miserable cutthroat gang of yours—"

“You be careful, now—”

“—and your wife and child at home without food or a decent rag to their backs! They could have starved, for all you cared! They would have starved, if it hadn’t been for the Indians. You’re a pretty one to talk high and mighty to me, Walt Freeman! I’ll tell you one thing. As long as it’s my money that keeps this house, I’m going to have the say of who shall stay in it and who sha’n’t, and I’ll say what bed they’ll sleep in. You let your family sleep on the floor, Walt Freeman. All you done when you did come home was to kick and cuff them around. You didn’t have that fine bed you’re so pudgicky about now—did you?”

“Aw, hell!” Walt muttered low in his throat.

“Yes, you can stand there and swear all you’re a mind to—it won’t do you a mite of good! You take that big dirty carcass of yours up in the attic, or go back and sleep on your boat where you belong. It’s more of a home to you than you’ve ever made this house.”

Like a passing thunderstorm the rumblings of Walt Freeman receded. A door slammed so that it shook the bed under Chance. The lord of the household was vanquished, but Aunt Kate went right on talking.

“My conscience! How you ever come to tie yourself up to Walt Freeman is a mystery to me!” she scolded.

A clear, scornful laugh answered that remark. “Mother simply couldn’t resist that magnificent exterior. He is a handsome brute, Aunt Kate.”

“Hmm! So’s a cougar handsome, I s’pose—if you look at him in a cage. But I wouldn’t want to tackle living with one.”

“Walter has changed something dreadful,” a tired voice made apathetic apology. “He was considered one of the finest men in the country. You never saw him at his best, Kate. I don’t know what’s come over him these last few years. He thought the world and all of Hazel when she was a baby, and he was good as could be to me. When he started in to make a home here he worked hard and took a real interest in things. It’s been just here lately—”

“It’s been ever since I knew anything about him,” Aunt Kate cut in tartly. “He was mean when you married him, Mary; only you was so dead gone on his looks you couldn’t see anything else. I’d like to know if I didn’t have to take Jaqueline and raise her myself, he was so put out with the sight of another man’s child in the house.”

“It was because he thought so much of me,” Mary defended her husband. “Walter was always of a—”

“It was because he thought so much of himself, and you know it. He was mad because you couldn’t wait on him hand and foot when you had a young one he wasn’t the father of in the house. You can stand up for him if you’re a mind to, Mary. You can’t budge me one inch. Walt Freeman ain’t good enough for you to wipe your feet on; he never was and he never will be, so there!”

“Oh, for pity’s sake!” the voice Chance knew must be Jaqueline’s interrupted. “You put him on the run, Aunt Kate; let that satisfy you. Mother married him and she’s got spunk enough to stay with her bargain. Let her alone.”

“Spunk!” Aunt Kate repeated the word with a vigor that made it clink. “Spunk! If she had the spunk of a hen turkey she wouldn’t let him run over her roughshod the way she does! I do believe, Mary Freeman, you’re afraid of him! So there!”

“Oh, it’s easy enough for an old maid to talk!” Mary taunted, suddenly stung to a flash of spirit. “Them that don’t know always have the most to say. You never had a man so dead in love with you—what do you know about married life? There’s memories a woman can’t forget, not even when the father of her children lifts his hand to strike—”

“Well! If that’s married life, you can have it! It wouldn’t matter if I had forty children by a man, he never would lift his hand to me! Not the second time, anyway. If a man dared to strike me, I’d tear him limb from limb! I would so!”

Again that laugh which had set Chance’s blood running faster through his broken body. Not scornful now; it was mirthful and it made Chance grin with sympathy.

“Oh, Aunt Kate! A man could take you in his thumb and finger and snap you in two like a match! You’re like a banty hen brustling up to a turkey gobbler. Run along to bed, Miss Napoleon; you’ve put one man to rout, that ought to satisfy your warlike disposition for the time being.” The young voice gurgled with laughter.

“Jaqueline! The very idea! I’ll have none of your sauce—calling me a banty hen! I’ll whack you with this horn!” But a surprisingly youthful giggle belied Aunt Kate’s truculence. “You needn’t disturb the young man, Jaqueline. Just take a peek now and then, and call me if he wakes up. I do believe he’s going to live!”

“He’d better!” Jaqueline declared, though she did not say why.

Chance lay watching the door. And that was the last he remembered of that night.

CHAPTER FIVE

“JACKIE CHOOSED YOUR MOUTH”

HE was awakened by the touch of a wet cloth to his face. Mary Freeman was bending over him with soap and towel, washing him as if he were a baby. She was very gentle, very matter-of-fact in her nurse's routine. She brought gruel and what she called a coddled egg and fed him with a spoon, and told him that he might sleep now as long as he was of a mind to. Chance watched the door instead.

His first caller was Aunt Kate. “Oh, dear!” she sighed as she perched on the chair, “I most wish I was laid up, myself. I don't s'pose broken bones are any too comfortable, but it would give my feet a rest, anyway!”

“You oughta let somebody younger wait on me,” Chance artfully suggested, pulling his gaze away from the door.

“What'd you say? Wait a minute till I go get my horn. I'm so glad you're live enough to talk, anyway. It's been like taking care of a corpse. Don't go 'way—I'll be right back!” With a puckered smile she hurried out. Chance heard her voice in the next room. “Hazel Freeman! If you've gone and hid my horn again, you're going to get a good sound spanking! So there!”

Evidently Hazel was guilty. The search extended itself upstairs, judging from the sounds, and while she was gone Hazel herself slipped into the room with exaggerated caution and an impish twinkle in her eyes.

“It's way down in the rag bag, all covered up,” she giggled. “That's to pay her back for pulling my hair when she combed it. Your hair's curly too. Don't you just *hate* curly hair? I do. It snarls so, and Aunt Kate just yanks 'em out—”

“Where's—your sister?”

“Who, Jack? Oh, she's gone fishing. Out in the boat. Ma thought it was too rough, but Jackie don't care. She just said, ‘Oh, fiddlesticks. We haven't got any salmon smoked at all hardly, and if I wait for smooth water we never *will* get any.’ Jackie ought to be a boy.”

Not with that laugh, Chance thought, an odd tremor thrilling his weakened nerves. But he only whispered, “Why?”

“Oh-h—'cause she's got a boy's name unless you say all of it, and—” She glanced at the door, leaned forward and whispered, her eyes widened at

the terrible thing she was telling “—she hunts bears and deer, and goes fishing and everything, and—*she wears pants!*”

“Git out!” croaked Chance, stifling a grin.

“She does so! When she goes in the woods or out in the boat she does. Aunt Kate says what if somebody would happen along and catch her at it? But Jackie just says let ’em. She says as long as she has to take the place of a man around here, she can’t be hampered with skirts. She says it isn’t any petticoat job she’s got, and Aunt Kate would find that out quick enough if she followed *her* smoke for a day. And she said if she’d had on a dress when I ran after her and told her to come quick, there was a wrecked sailor floating right in towards shore—if she’d been hampered with petticoats then, she says, you’d both of you be dead and drowned.”

“She—saved me?” Chance was weak and probably emotional beyond his normal state, for a hot flush swept over him as he spoke.

“My stars! You’d oughta seen her! But I guess you was pretty near dead, wasn’t you? Anyway,” Hazel amended boastfully, “I saved you myself, ’cause I’m the one that saw you first and yelled for Jack, just when she was starting out to look at her bear trap. It’s a kind of a bargain that when I see something come in on the tide and Jackie gets it out, we go halvers on it. We get lots of things that fall off ships.

“So I saw you first and told Jack, and Jackie swam out and got you, and we went halvers.” She stopped and regarded him with a round, speculative stare. “If you’d been dead, we’d just have ’vided up the times we prayed for God to rest your soul and comfort your dear ones left behind. But you was alive, so we ’vided *you* up.” She gave him that funny little roguish smile. “’Course not *really*, we never—like ’viding up a deer with a butcher knife. We just choosed the parts we liked the best of you.”

“Dog-gone!” whispered Chance, tremendously interested.

“Yep, we did so.” Hazel smoothed her checked gingham with a smug satisfaction. “I choosed your eyebrows and winkers, ’cause I just love curly eyewinkers. I had a dolly once that could open and shut its eyes, and it had winkers ezzackly like yours. Santa Claus brought it. Now it’s all broke to flinders, but I’ve got the eyes. They didn’t break a bit. Did you know eyes are just hooked together like that?” She crossed plump fingers. “Oh, dear!” she sighed, in startling imitation of Aunt Kate. “I do wish Pa was a nice man. He comes home drunk and smashes things. I just showed him my dolly that Santy Claus brought down the chimney, and he just grabbed it like that —” she snatched violently at an imaginary object “—and frowed it right

against the side of the fireplace and—” Her eyes suddenly spilled tears upon her rosy freckled cheeks.

“What did—*she*—choose?”

“Jack?” The child lifted a corner of her apron and wiped her tears neatly away. “Oh, Jackie choosed your mouth. She said I could have your hair and eyebrows and winkers, she just wanted your mouth. She says there’s strength and charakser and sweetness in that mouth of yours. Is there?”

The mouth under discussion smiled rather wistfully, but the eyes closed as his head moved in refusal to answer.

“We choosed names for you too,” Hazel further informed him. “I choosed ‘My Bonnie.’ ‘*My Bonnie lies over the ocean, my Bonnie lies over the sea,*’” she sang in gracious elucidation. “I choosed that ’cause the sea did bring you back to me. Don’t you think that’s a sweet name—Bonnie?”

“Sure. What does—*she*—call me?”

“Jackie? She choosed Treasure Trove. I wanted that, but I didn’t think of it in time. I tried to get Jackie to trade, but she wouldn’t. She said Treasure Trove went with your mouth. Does it? Anyway, mine’s got a song about it and hers ain’t. I can sing mine and folks don’t know it’s you that’s ‘My Bonnie.’ Jackie can’t say her old name a bit, ’cept when we’re away off by ourselves. I think mine is lots nicer, don’t you?”

Chance lied just to please her. He said, “Sure.” And straightway he repented the lie, for Hazel smoothed her apron and tossed her curls triumphantly.

“Goody! I’m just going to tell that old Jackie you don’t like her name a bit and you think mine is lots nicer. Treasure Trove! I wouldn’t have such a slouchy old name, so there!”

“Don’t you do that—”

Hazel was not listening. Aunt Kate’s footsteps came pattering down the stairs and her voice rose exasperatedly.

“Hazel Freeman, I’m going to just about blister you! Where are you?”

“Oh, my stars!” gasped Hazel, and dove under the bed. Her humpy retreat joggled Chance painfully, as her muffled voice came up through sagging springs, straw mattress and feather bed. “Don’t tell her I’m here, will you? She won’t spank me—after she gets over her mad.”

When Aunt Kate looked in, she saw the poor sailor lying very still with his eyes closed, just as he had lain for so long in that bed. She stood for a minute watching him, then quietly withdrew, closing the door very softly

behind her. Hazel waited much longer, apparently not trusting the quiet. When she did at last crawl out, her Bonnie seemed to be fast asleep. While she dusted herself off and smoothed down her starched apron, she watched Chance as Aunt Kate had done. If he winked he was only making believe. But the lashes she had “choosed” lay motionless upon his gaunt cheeks so she tiptoed from the room and ran down the crooked path to the shore.

Much as he had intended to stay awake until he saw a certain person whose laugh shot strange tremors along his nerves, Chance actually was asleep before Hazel crept from under the bed. It seemed as though he never would get sleep enough.

Another day he winced beneath Mary Freeman’s deft exploring fingers and submitted to fresh bandaging. Conversation was limited to the ordeal of the moment, and with teeth clamped against groaning, Chance had no thought of a girl’s voice, nor any curiosity concerning her persistent absence.

When all was done, Mary stood looking down upon him, basin in her hand, pinkish towel dangling wetly over her bared arm. “You must be tougher ’n whalebone,” she observed cheerfully, when she met his sane, expectant gaze. “I must say I never dreamed you’d ever pull through this far, but I guess you’re over the worst of it now. Looks to me like we done a pretty good job of bone-setting. Your leg’s growing straight as can be, and so’s your arm. I s’pose likely you want to know about what to expect,” she added, as if she must explain her loquacity. “I ain’t no ways sure about that hurt in your head, but seems like you’ve got your senses back, so I s’pose it’s doing as well as a body can expect. You’ve laid so still, your ribs has had a chance to grow together, and if they had punched through any of your inwards, I expect we’d have known something about it by this time, because it’s been three weeks and more. Mortification would have set in before now if it was going to, and you’d be under the sod.”

She smiled reassuringly. “I can talk about it now, because that trouble’s past and done with. You was as near dead as anybody could be and live, but it’s su’prising what a big strapping young man can go through with. All I want you to do now,” she finished briskly, “is to sleep all you can and eat what I bring you. And don’t talk. I guess nature will most likely do the rest—with what help I can give her.”

“I’m sure—grateful,” Chance muttered, abashed before this revelation of her care. “I’ve been—an awful lot—of—trouble.”

“Well, if you don’t want to be a lot more trouble, just mind what I told you,” she retorted brusquely. “The less you say the better. Don’t talk, don’t

try to think, and sleep. Them's my orders, young man, and I want you should obey every one of 'em. I'll feed you an egg beat up in milk, and then I want you to go right to sleep again."

Which Chance proceeded to do.

Days went by with little to mark their passing. Life for Chance had narrowed to the walls of the house where three women and a girl rejoiced in his recovery, secretly dreading the day when he must inevitably walk out of the house and out of their lives, dropping them back into the lonely monotony of their existence. He was the most exciting event they had ever experienced upon this wild seacoast, but Chance never dreamed that he was more than a trouble to them; a great helpless hulk who couldn't even feed himself. It was a long while before even that disquieting thought began to nag at him, however.

Like the fog that had shut him in with Whitey in the drifting dory, a mental fog so tenuous he did not realize its presence had closed down upon him. Within the small compass of the log house his waking thoughts were clear enough. Through board partitions he learned a great deal about the Freeman family. Aunt Kate, with her incessant activities and her sharp speech dominated the household with a solicitous tyranny sometimes sweetly maternal, frequently irritating in the extreme, always inescapable. She reminded Chance of a beneficent mosquito—if such an insect ever existed.

Often he lay grinning in his bed while verbal battle raged in the next room. Mary's patient voice trying to reason with a waspish old maid who said her say and then, so far as Chance could determine by the dialogue, spitefully took down her ear trumpet so that no argument or expostulation could penetrate her deafness. Jackie's rebellions, her good-natured yieldings, her scornful brushing aside of Aunt Kate's puritanic prejudices—always sheer music in her voice, whatever her mood. The one big worry in Chance's days was the persistent way in which that girl avoided giving him a glimpse of her. If she ever did come into his room, she carefully chose the time when he was asleep. His great haste to get well grew out of his urgent need to see Jackie, look into her eyes, feel her near presence in the room.

Avidly he listened to the faintest sound of her voice, though he would have died rather than let any one suspect how it thrilled him. Times when she fought for her freedom from Aunt Kate's petty restrictions, Chance would mutter unflattering things about that dog-goned interfering old maid that tried to boss everybody around. Times when Jackie's voice sounded tired and depressed, Chance cursed his helplessness. He oughta be out doing

that work for her. Dog-gone it, wasn't there an able-bodied man in the country that could take some of the load off her shoulders? And all the while he knew in his heart that he did not want any other able-bodied man to carry her load for her. He wanted to do that himself.

That bully, Walt Freeman, seemed to have made himself scarce lately. Chance hated to think that he was forced to lie in Walt's bed, but remembering that Aunt Kate had paid for it gave him some comfort. He had a very real though amused affection for Aunt Kate, except the times when she was getting after Jackie, and then he hated her like poison. It was Aunt Kate who held the family together; he didn't have to listen very hard to find that out. Seems she had money and spent it buying things for Jackie and Hazel and their mother. She never grudged anybody but Walt a cent; Chance could see that. What did grind her was the way Mary stuck to a man that needed killing for the way he treated his family. Even Chance in his mental fog wondered at Mary's patient loyalty. Aunt Kate didn't call it that. She complained that Mary was stubborn as a mule; that was what ailed her. She wouldn't give in that she'd made a fool of herself twice with men. Mary replied that an old maid couldn't understand how a wife and mother was bound to her husband for weal or woe, and that Walter would realize some day and be the man he used to be.

"But my land!" she sighed one day, after a particularly acrid discussion, "what's the use of trying to explain? When Kate takes down her horn and flops off with her mouth buttoned into that pucker of hers, a person might just as well quit trying to reason with her."

"Do as I do," Jackie laughed. "Take her horn to her and smile. When she gets all ready to listen, say what you've got to say, and *talk fast*. Then you walk off. Aunt Kate can be handled if you know the system."

Chance lay for a long while grinning to himself over that bit of advice. It was the smartest trick he ever heard of. He wished he could tell Jackie she sure knew how to handle that little banty, but she wouldn't come close enough for him to tell her anything. His admiration chilled into a worried resentment. She couldn't think so dog-gone much of her Treasure Trove, he thought bitterly, even if he did have strength and character and sweetness in that mouth.

So did he creep back into life, drifting slowly into the intimate affairs of this small household. He slept a great deal and ate what was brought to his bedside. He lazily contemplated the red roses on his wall and he counted his hours by the times he heard Jackie's voice in the next room. He learned a good deal from Hazel, but he began to doubt a good deal that he heard. She

sure talked plenty but he'd bet she made a lot of it up. That Treasure Trove, for one thing, and what she claimed Jackie said about his mouth. He'd bet she never said a thing. He'd bet she just dragged him in and dumped him down for her mother to look after and thought no more about it. Hazel was a cute kid, all right, but if you asked him, she was a dog-goned little liar.

It never occurred to him to wonder why all this sufficed his waking moments; why he never thought about his own affairs nor felt the least impatience to attend to them. He did not seem to know that he had any affairs outside these cramped walls, nor did he grope for mental landmarks.

And then one evening a chill wind blew upon the muffling fog that shut him in and tore it patchily apart. It came in the form of Walt Freeman, who tramped into the house with a surly purposeful air unlike his usual loud bluster, so that even Aunt Kate made way for him, following him silently to the bedroom with her ear trumpet at attention and a scared, wondering look in her eyes. A small man with sloping shoulders supporting a high narrow head, and a mean face with the beak of a parrot, followed close at Walt's heels.

"Walter, he's a very sick man," Mary warned, coming hurriedly from the kitchen with a long-handled fork in her hand.

"I don't give a damn how sick he is; we want to have a look at him. Come on, Stub."

"Don't—" But something in her husband's face choked the words in her throat. Mary turned white and joined the scared little old maid in the doorway.

Walt Freeman strode across the room and came to a halt beside the bed. "Take a good look at him, Stub," he said grimly. "Ever see his phiz before?"

CHAPTER SIX

THE FOG LIFTS FOR A MOMENT

THE man called Stub leaned over the bed and peered at Chance, who stared blankly up from the pillow. The inspection finished, Stub turned his head and spat tobacco juice toward a gay braided rug some distance away, as if he must have a target to aim at. Having browned the exact center of the rug, he turned back satisfied.

“Don’t know ’im,” he stated deliberately. “Don’t matter, as I see. Tyler wouldn’t be fool enough to run in somebuddy that would be reckonized. Might ast ’im a few questions—wouldn’t do no harm, Walt.”

“That poor boy’s too sick to be pestered, Walt Freeman, and you ought to know it!” Aunt Kate cut in sharply. With her ear trumpet she was not missing a word. “I sh’d think you’d be ashamed if there’s any shame in you. He’s been at death’s door for a month, and we ain’t asked him any questions, and I don’t see why you should.” She pinched in her lips until a dime could have covered them and stamped her foot at the intruders.

But for once Walt refused to be nagged out of his purpose. He reached out a hand and shoved her aside as if she had been Hazel.

“You’ll stick your nose in my business once too often,” he growled. “Git outa my way—and stay out.” He bent and scrutinized the thin face on the pillow. “Young feller, what’s your name?”

Chance had not meant to answer these bullies, but the question startled him somehow. “Name?” Funny, he couldn’t think of a dog-gone thing but Treasure Trove and Bonnie, and they wouldn’t do.

“Yeah. What do folks call you?”

“Chance.” That was it, he remembered now. “Chancey by name, chancey by nature,” he added glibly, as if it were part of some jingle he had learned.

Walt scowled. “Chancey enough, tryin’ that shipwreck dodge. Who sent you?”

Chance merely looked blank. “Search me,” he mumbled at last.

“Goin’ to play foxy, hunh? Cap’n Tyler’s the one, ain’t he? Set you off’n the *Water Lily* in a small boat, didn’t he, so’s you could make out you was

wrecked. Edge in here and find out something, hunh?” He thrust his face close to Chance. “Didn’t you come off the *Water Lily*? Hunh?”

Chance closed his eyes, opened them to find those fierce gray eyes boring into him, trying to snatch the truth from his brain.

“Didn’t you come off the *Water Lily*?”

“I—don’t know. On the square, I don’t.”

“Hunh.” The fierce eyes withdrew. Walt straightened, studied him, grinning. “Lost your memory, hunh? I kinda thought you would.” He pulled at a fine dark mustache, watching Chance while he pondered. “Wasn’t primed to be washed ashore in Whale Cove, I s’pose?”

“I don’t—get you at all.”

“No, I s’pose not.” Walt’s lip curled back, showing white teeth. “Never heard of the *Water Lily*, never heard of Whale Cove—never heard of a feller they called Whitey, either, I s’pose!”

“W-Whitey?” Chance’s eyebrows pulled together. “Sure. I—” A mean rat of an old man—Chance suddenly visioned the bundled figure diving into a sliding green slope. “I gave him my fur coat,” he muttered, groping for the meaning of it all.

The eyes of Walt Freeman and the man Stub met in a long understanding look.

“Sure you did. A wolfskin coat, wasn’t it? Hunh?”

“I—I guess so. All I know is—it pulled him under.”

“Kinda lost your bearings in the fog, didn’t you? Hunh?” Pitilessly Walt kept probing, turning his questions this way and that. “Meant to hit the cove, but the fog—”

“What are you two doing in here?” Like a thin, keen blade the voice Chance had learned to listen for challenged from the doorway. His eyes turned eagerly toward the sound as the two men whirled.

A tall girl with a slim and pliant figure stood just within the room, staring with cold dislike from Walt to his companion. An old felt hat tilted back from her face showed dark hair shining with damp and curling rather distractingly on forehead and temples. Her cheeks were flushed, her dark eyes were sparkling with resentment, her red mouth quivered with words she waited to speak.

“What business is it of yours?” Walt demanded roughly after the first startled minute.

“I’m making it my business,” she retorted in the quick, flashing way she had when stirred. Chance knew that tone, he had thrilled to it and loved it, but he never had dreamed the intensity of the look that went with it. “What do you want with him, Walt?”

Stub whispered something and Walt’s manner changed.

“We just wanted to ask him a question or two, that’s all,” he explained with a grudging civility. “We got enemies up the coast—you wouldn’t understand—”

“I understand perhaps more than you think,” the girl interjected, in that same tone of nervous impatience. “What has he got to do with it?”

“That,” said Walt, “is what we want to find out. A body washed ashore, up above here, and Stub happened to know who it was. There was certain marks of identification—” He paused, drew a long breath, holding his temper in check and choosing his words with care. “Never mind what; Stub knew him and that’s the main point. Ain’t strange we’d got to thinkin’ maybe this feller started out with Whitey, is it? That’s all we want to know—who sent ’em and why.”

“Well, he’s too sick to be questioned now,” the girl declared, in a tone of finality, and came up to the bedside apparently forgetting—or perhaps merely ignoring—her belted breeches of some tough dark cloth, tucked into woodsmen’s heavy boots. Her shirt of dark blue flannel and the knotted silk neckerchief gave her a boyish look, belied by the mass of hair tied at the back of her neck with a blue bow and hanging in a thick braid down her back. “Clear out, both of you, and leave him alone, before you nag him into a fever.”

“Ah, that’s all poppycock!” Walt retorted roughly, sending her a sidelong hateful look. “He can tell who the rest of ’em are, and what they aimed to do when they got here. That ain’t going to hurt him none. You keep your nose outa this. It’s got nothing t’ do with you.” He turned and glowered down at Chance. “He just admitted he was with Whitey—”

“As mean a low-lifed kyote as there is in the country,” Stub explained, shifting his quid of tobacco to the other cheek.

“Now how about it, you chancey guy? What was it Cap’n Tyler told you t’ do?”

The mouth which Jackie had chosen for her own closed a little tighter within the month-old beard which had the fine downy look of a boy who is still proud of his razor.

“Oh, you think you won’t tell, hunh? I s’pose you’ll try and bluff it through—claim you don’t know.”

“I don’t,” Chance blurted, hating his voice for its weakness.

“That’s funny. You let it out that you was with Whitey, and still you don’t know—”

“I don’t.” Chance’s head moved restlessly on the pillow. “Dog-gone it, leave me alone. I don’t know what you’re talking about!” He stared defiantly up into Walt’s darkly handsome face. “If I did, I wouldn’t tell you, dog-gone it.”

“Say, looky here! You ain’t in any shape to give me any lip,” Walt snarled, pulling at his mustache. “If you’re as bad off as they claim you are, you better keep a civil tongue in your head. If you ain’t—I’ll mighty quick find out.” With a swift movement of his hands, Walt laid hold of the bed-covers and jerked them back.

“Why, for pity *sake!*” gasped Aunt Kate, and whacked Walt over the head with her ear trumpet. “You’ve gone just far enough, Walt Freeman. Don’t you dare lay a hand on that poor sick boy!”

“Walter! Please! If there’s anything you want to know, you’re standing in your own light when you excite a man as sick as he is,” his wife implored, coming up to lay a hand on his arm.

“Oh, damn a bunch of hen grannies buttin’ in!” Walt flung back an arm and sent the two women staggering. “Git to hell outa here, both of you! This little pet of yours is going to come through with what I want to know, or I’ll kill the dirty sneak right now. I want to know how many started out with ’im, and what become of the rest of the bunch, and the boat they was in. He’ll tell, or I’ll choke it out of ’im right now!”

“Oh, no, you won’t!” Jackie’s clear voice struck through the clamor like a bell signaling silence. It stilled the angry blustering of Walt Freeman, it hushed the tearful remonstrances of Mary, the sputtering denunciation of Aunt Kate and the grating voice of Stub, as he hustled the two women to the door. It tingled the blood of Chance and brought a light into his eyes no one had ever seen there before. But the girl herself seemed not to know or care what effect her voice might have upon any one. She was breathing quickly, as if she had been hurrying, which was the plain fact. She had slipped from the bedroom, run into the kitchen where she had left her gun, and had run back so quickly that she had not been missed even by Chance, whose brain was in pretty much of a whirl.

“Oh, no, you won’t choke anybody!” Jackie repeated, sidling around the foot of the bed so that she faced Walt across it. “You clear out of here and take that sawed-off runt with you.”

“Say, who d’ you think you are? If you think I’m going to take orders—”

“You go!” And Jackie fired across the bed, fanning Walt’s left ear with a forty-five slug. “That’s just a gentle hint,” she cried, when the roar of the shot ended. “Next shot, I’ll lay you cold!”

“You damned—hell-cat—” grated Walt, but he went.

“And don’t come back, if you know what’s good for you,” she called after him, as he went through the door. “I won’t waste another bullet, I promise you that.”

Her stormy glance dropped to the bed where already her mother was smoothing the quilts with hands that shook. For one long breath Chance looked full into her eyes, his mind fumbling for words to thank her somehow. Then Aunt Kate pushed between, all atwitter with the conquest.

“Well! I guess you sent him off with a bug in his ear that time,” she crowed. “For land’s sake, open a window, Jacqueline, and let some of this smoke out! What d’ you suppose struck him all a sudden? What did he want to come and pester the life out of our sailor boy, for?” She tucked the tube of her trumpet into her ear and tilted her head sidewise, glancing birdlike from one face to another.

But neither Jackie nor her mother had any time or attention for Aunt Kate at that moment. Chance had half raised himself from the bed, muttered a sentence they could not catch and fainted dead away.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“I’VE GOT TO REMEMBER!”

THE shock of that encounter did Chance no good, but neither did it do any permanent harm. As Mary Freeman said, it was surprising what a big, strapping young fellow could go through. And while the pain of sudden movement to ribs newly knitted together sent him into blank unconsciousness for a few minutes, at least it gave the women something to think of besides their own troubles. Chance came to himself just as Hazel appeared out of breath from running, her eyes wide with excitement.

“Oh, something’s—happened!” she panted, her two hands pressed to her heaving chest. “Pa’s back, and I saw him, but he never saw me. I was—down by—the—Spouting Horn. Oh, dear! I—ran—just as tight as—I could go.” She gulped and gasped, recovered some of the breath she had lost, and proceeded more coherently to tell her news.

“Pa’s awful mad. Him and another man was walking along, and Pa was just swinging his arms and swearing and a *cussing*! And he called Jackie a nawful bad word. I heard him, so there!”

“Hazel, I’ve told you and told you, you mustn’t listen when men say bad words and swear!”

“I know, Aunt Kate, and I didn’t listen a bit! I just heard Pa when he went past the rocks where I was. And I heard him say Jackie was a bad word.”

“Your pa is a bad, bad man, Hazel. He’s been here, just acting awful! He most killed our poor sailor boy, and you must keep quiet—”

Whereupon Hazel wept vociferously and must be allowed to see for herself that Chance was alive. She walked on squeaking toes to the bedside and gazed tearfully down upon her Bonnie, and Chance opened his eyes and grinned at her with one lid squinted reassuringly. Aunt Kate then permitted her to see the hole in the wall where the bullet went in, when Jackie took a shot at Pa, and Hazel jiggled on her squeaky toes.

“Oh, goody! I just wish she had most hit Pa, he’s so mean!” but she was hushed and her shoulder shaken reprovingly for that, and hustled out of the room so that the poor sailor boy could sleep.

But the poor sailor boy would not sleep and he would not believe that he was a sailor at all. He boldly demanded to see Jackie, and he was so insistent

that finally she came. Chance was still inclined to be shy—at least, he thought he was going to be. But a girl who could flip a gun like she did and shoot across a fellow's bed and never bat an eye, seemed to him distinctly human; and a fellow ought to be able to talk to her, man to man.

He had another shock. Instead of the boyish young person in boots and breeches and flannel shirt, here came a demure young lady in a ruffled dress with lace at her throat. Her hair was tied loosely at the back as before, but now a cluster of curls hung down over her shoulders. Her cheeks were no longer flushed, Chance noticed. Instead her face was pale and serious and her eyes had lost their sparkle. Cool, they looked. Not exactly hostile, just cool and with a what-do-you-want expression that chilled the warmth in his own eyes.

But then he saw the gun holstered on a filled cartridge belt that sagged from her slim, corseted waist. All that artillery buckled around her, and ruffles and lace and red ribbon and curls—Chance laughed his humorous little chuckle which no one in that house had ever heard before.

“Dog-gone! Looks like you've gone on the warpath for sure,” he bantered.

“Looks like somebody better go heeled around here,” she retorted quickly, “at least, while you're down and can't fight your own battles.”

“Guess maybe you're right,” Chance admitted, flushing. “I know I'm a whole lot of trouble—more 'n I'm worth, I expect. But if you've got an extra gun laying around anywhere, maybe I could get the loan of it for awhile. I can shoot pretty good with my left hand.”

Jackie laughed then and sat down in the straight-backed chair. “Oh, it isn't that bad, I hope,” she said. “I mean to stay pretty close to the house till the storm blows over. What was it you wanted to see me about?”

Chance could think of so many reasons why he had wanted to see her that he simply lay there looking at her and saying nothing at all. Her laugh, for instance. He had never dreamed her mouth looked just that way when she laughed, or that her eyes twinkled so, or that she had such white teeth. All these days and days of waiting to hear her talking and laughing out there in the next room, and he hadn't known a thing about those little curls on her temples—

“Mother said you kept worrying and wouldn't settle down until you had asked me something. She had you all worked up into a perfect fever of worry, and—”

“And what? Go on, say it.”

“And here you are, just lying there trying not to laugh!”

“That,” said Chance shamelessly, “is because you’re setting there. I’m so dog-gone glad to see you, that’s why I want to laugh, I guess.” He sighed. “I know one thing. I’d get well a heap quicker if you’d set there oftener.”

“I do. Only you’ve never happened to wake up and see me here.”

“I tried to. Lots of times I thought I’d stay awake till you did come, but—dog-gone it, you never showed up, for some reason. Looks like you must think I’m—” He stopped abruptly, sharp scrutiny in his eyes. And although he had her blushing, he never noticed it now. “What was that feller Walt trying to get at?” he demanded. “That’s what I wanted to see you about. What was all that about the *Water Lily*? Only water lily I know anything about is a flower. It grows in ponds where there’s a scum on the water.”

“I don’t think you ought to worry about that now,” said Jackie, biting her lip. “You’ve been pretty sick, you know. You got an awful knock on the head when the tide slammed you up against the rock. Legs and arms are bad enough, but that hurt on your head—”

“Shucks!” grinned Chance. “A cowboy’s head is solid bone, they tell me. If it wasn’t, he wouldn’t be one.”

“Oh.” Jackie leaned to him. “So you’re a cowboy, are you? We thought you were a sailor.”

“No, I—I don’t believe I am—not as far as I know.” A troubled, doubting look came into Chance’s face.

“As far as you *know*? Why—”

“Funny,” muttered Chance. “I said that about a cowboy’s head, right off without thinking. But—on the square, I don’t—What was it I told that man Walt my name was? He asked me my name, and I—seems like I told him—”

“Mother says you told him it was Chance. ‘Chancey by name—chancey by nature,’ you said.” Jackie was studying him, watching for some betraying sign. She had reason enough to be wary of men, poor girl, after knowing Walt Freeman.

“Chance. That’s right, Chance is my name, all right.” He stared at her, puzzled, waiting. “What was the rest of it? Dog-gone! I sure must have more name than that!”

Jackie could only shake her head. “Mother says Walt thought you were playing foxy. You wouldn’t tell your last name.”

“He did? Yeah, I remember now. That’s what he said, all right. I had to lay here and take a lot he never would a got away with if—Ah, shucks! I’m

in fine shape to be making my brag, ain't I?" The light dulled in his face. He lay frowning, staring at Jackie—though she knew he was not seeing her at all—his good hand plucking at the knotted yarn that tied the comforter.

"Chance—It's like trying to remember the words of a song. You get a word or maybe a line—and to save your soul you can't think of the rest of it —"

"Don't try to think now." Had he been attentive to her, Chance would have thrilled at the gentle way she spoke. "Just let it go. It'll come—when you least expect it."

"I know—but dog-gone it.—Here. Let me tell you all I can think of. You remember it, and then when I think of something else, maybe it'll piece together—"

That groping, plucking hand! Jackie leaned and took it between her two palms and held it, smoothing the thin fingers in a tender way which neither of them was aware of then.

Chance steadied under her touch. His hand relaxed, lay quiet in her clasp. He sighed.

"Whitey. I remember him, all right. Mean old man. He tried to grab a cracker—I'd just gave him one, see?—I was making 'em hold out as long as I could. But he jumped me. It was that, him coming at me same time a bunch of big waves rolled down on us,—I couldn't hold the boat. A wave reared up like a man-killing bronc and smashed down on us. I hung onto the oars. I saw Whitey take a header into a big heap of water—" He drew a long, shuddering sigh. "Man, oh, man! That sure was the coldest water I ever saw in my life!"

Jackie gave his hand a final pat and let it go. Her eyes were bright and shining with tears, but she held her voice rigidly cheerful.

"I know what we'd better do,—Chance." Her breath caught in her throat at the instant brightening of his eyes when she called him by name. "When I'm trying to remember a song, I always write down what comes to me, and after awhile I've got all of it, as a rule. We could do that. I'll go get a pencil —"

"Sure! You bet!" Chance's gaze followed her out and his eyes never turned from the door until she came through it again with an old daybook and a pencil in her hands and the sparkle in her eyes which should always be there.

"Now." She settled herself on the chair, opened the book and rested its upper end on the edge of the bed, the lower on her knees. And without

thinking of it then, that book established a bond between them, unseen, unspoken, unshakable. “Now. I’ll write ‘Chance,’ and leave lots of room for the rest when you remember it.”

“Chancey by name, chancey by nature. Better put that down too. Kinda runs along easy in my mind. Might mean something; you can’t tell.”

Jackie wrote it on the next line and waited, pencil poised. “Just anything you remember,” she prompted when the silence became uncomfortably tense. “Whitey—I’ll put him down, though there isn’t much danger of either of us forgetting him. Anything else, no matter how—silly it sounds.”

Chance groped, found the tuft of red yarn on the comforter and pulled and tweaked it with nervous fingers. “Well, I—I told you about the water. Well, I—I kinda remember a rooster. Gray. Only got about half his tail feathers, and his comb is lopped down over his right eye, kinda. He—seems like he’s standing up on a hayrack, just starting in to crow. I—I guess that’s about all.” He looked at her worriedly as she wrote, head bent over the book, her curls falling forward upon her breast. “I guess—that’s silly enough, ain’t it?”

Jackie did not laugh when she met that questing, anxious, shamed look. “It won’t be, when you get the rest of it,” she declared hearteningly. “It’s like putting a picture puzzle together, isn’t it? The snippiest little bits fit in somewhere, and if you threw them away because they don’t look like anything, there’d be a hole left in the picture.” She blushed and looked away from his intent, worshipful eyes.

“It sure is good—to have somebody—take hold and help,” he said timidly. “It’s like I was in a fog. It—scares me, kinda. I don’t know—there’s liable to be something—” He made a sound not unlike a groan. “There’s something—if I could just think what it is! I’ve *got* to remember. I’ve got to!” His voice rose almost to a shout. A wild look came into his eyes.

“You will. Don’t you worry one minute about that.” Jackie reached over and caught his hand again and held it close. “Of course you’ll remember! Why, look! Here’s almost a whole page, already. And we’ve only just started. There’s no hurry, you know. Even if you did remember, you couldn’t—go anywhere, Chance.” She stopped short, holding her breath as they stared at each other. “Not for a long while,” she whispered, answering the poignant thought in their minds. “You couldn’t walk far with that leg,” she added hastily, belittling their sudden dread of his going. “There’s plenty of time.”

“I couldn’t go anyway—and leave you.” Had he been perfectly normal, Chance never would have dared say that, at least not for a long while. In his

present condition it seemed quite all right and perfectly natural.

“That is no good at all in the book,” she told him with a little laugh. “You’d better get some rest, now. You’ve done enough thinking for awhile.”

“I can’t sleep.” Chance felt her hand leaving his and clung with a strength that startled her. “All the time I’ve been laying here, you’ve kept away from me. I’d hear you talking and laughing in the other room—*they* could have you around and look at you, but me, I had to lay here by myself and try and imagine what you looked like. I knew you was pretty but I never imagined half—”

“Sh-sh! You mustn’t talk like that. I’ve got to go, now—”

“You can’t go without your hand, can you?” Chance demanded, with calm determination in his tone. “You’ll have to, if you get away from me now—”

“Oh, don’t! Be still! I—”

“‘Don’t be still?’” he mocked, a feverish excitement in his eyes. “Dog-gone right, I won’t be still! Not unless you promise me you won’t go away. Man, oh, man, I’ve been lonesome for you! Why, I’d have been well and outa this bed six weeks ago if you’d acted like you had a heart and come around once in awhile where a fellow could see you. Hell of a way to treat a Treasure Trove! Ain’t it?” He shook her arm with a savage playfulness, still clinging to her hand. “Ain’t it? Tell me, is that the way you treat your Treasure Trove?”

“No! Oh, don’t talk so loud! Mother’ll hear you—”

“You tell me, then!”

“My goodness, you’re stubborn! No—no, it isn’t. Who ever told you about that? I was just—just playing with Hazel. The little tattle-tale, she’d no business—”

“Why? Ain’t I your Treasure Trove? Come on, tell me. Ain’t I?”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake! If you don’t quit yelling like that, you’ll have the whole family rushing in here!”

“You tell me, if you ever want this hand to use again. Didn’t you choose my mouth and say I was your Treasure Trove? Didn’t you? Come on, dog-gone it, I’ve been laying here for a thousand years, waiting to find out if that was so or not.”

“You’re a devilfish!” grated Jackie, teetering between laughter and tears. “You hang on like one.”

“I’ll be two devilfishes if you don’t tell me!”

At that precise moment Aunt Kate popped into the room, a candle held high. “For land’s sake! What’s going on in here? Jaqueline, your mother wants you!”

Chance let go Jackie’s hand as if it were hot. “Dog-gone!” he muttered, fiercely resentful, “I thought that old maid was s’posed to be deaf!” And he turned his face to the wall.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“WHAT GOES WITH ROCKING?”

CHANCE was feverish that night and all the next day. He had to be humored. He kept remembering little things which he wanted to put in the book, and Jackie must drop everything and go sit beside him. When no one was looking, she had to hold his hand.

“I do believe Walt Freeman was right for once in his life,” she told him, at her wits’ end on the second day of this demanding mood of his. “You’re just playing foxy. You don’t want to remember anything. Or maybe you haven’t forgotten anything. You’ve told me about that rooster four times today, and the only new thing you’ve said is that something scared him and he choked off his crow and ran under the barn. I suppose,” she added severely, “there are at least a million roosters in the United States hiding under thousands of barns and hayracks. And they all crow—”

“Man, oh, man!” Chance gazed up into her face with rapt interest. “That’s something I never remembered. Honest, I didn’t. Seems like this hayrack of mine wasn’t the crowing kind. So that oughta make it easy to locate—”

“Oh, you’re the limit!” Jackie snatched her hand away and closed her book with a bang. “I’m not going to have another thing to do with you. If you can’t behave—”

“I will! Aw, come back here! Honest, I do remember something—honest. I was just fooling; I guess,” he added contritely, “I must be getting well, I’m so dog-gone mean and ornery.”

At the door Jackie paused and looked at him over her shoulder, her fingers on the latch.

“I remember something Whitey said in the boat. Honest.”

“Well—” She turned back in pretended reluctance and doubt. “What is it then? But if you ever mention that rooster again—”

“I won’t. Honest, I won’t. This was in the boat when it was just foggy and still. See? I remember it was foggy and still and we was just rocking like a—rocking—” His eyes stared vacantly as his thoughts turned inward. “Rocking—” He shut his eyes tightly, moved his head uneasily upon the pillow.

“Chance! Don’t look like that—you scare me! Oh, what is it?”

Chance opened his eyes, stared at Jackie leaning over him, her hand caressing his cheek. “I can’t—just—get it,” he muttered, questioning her with his eyes. “Something rocking—Dog-gone!” He drew a long sigh. “What goes with rocking, Jackie? Can’t you tell?”

“The boat. Rocking like a cradle in the waves. Is it—” she caught her breath “—is it a cradle you were trying to remember? Maybe,” she suggested, with a sudden tensing of her mouth, “maybe you’re married and it’s a baby rocking in a cradle that the boat reminded you of.”

“Baby?” Chance stared. “Dog-gone! I don’t remember a word about a baby. Nor any cradle, either.” He shook his head slowly (because any abrupt movement gave him a stabbing pain). “You just write down that word ‘rocking.’ Seems like there’s something— It ain’t a cradle, I tell you those. It’s—m-m-m—well, you just write it down. Maybe the rest’ll come.”

So Jackie wrote the word “rocking.” “The boat was rocking and it was foggy all around. And Whitey said—”

“Oh. Yeah. Seems like Whitey said—well, I kinda seem to remember him saying something about how I’d sink like a rock with all that gold wrapped around me—” He looked at Jackie questioningly. “I guess that’s just a notion. There wasn’t any—any gold, was there?”

“Sh-sh!” Jackie looked over her shoulder, got up and walked out of the room with the water glass in her hand. She returned in a very short time, setting the newly filled glass down on the little table beside the bed. “It’s all right. Mother’s taking a nap and Aunt Kate is down with Hazel, watching the Spouting Horn. I saw them through the window, so it’s all right. I think I ought to tell you something, Chance—but if you go out of your head and talk about it to any one, I’ll say it’s just a crazy notion of yours.”

She leaned so close that Chance’s pulse jumped several beats to the minute. “When I dragged you to shore and untied those oars, Chance, you had a money belt buckled around you. I took it off and hid it high up in the rocks where it would be safe. I suppose it must be gold money. It certainly was heavy enough.”

“Dog-gone! I’m getting things straightened out in my mind, then! I remember just as well him telling me I’d sink like a rock. And I told Whitey I sure would give a shark a run for his money— Where is that belt? Maybe if I counted the money, I could tell—”

“You can forget that money, do you hear?” Jackie sent another uneasy glance toward the door. “Don’t speak of it or think of it until you’re well and

know what you are going to do. Why,” she said with a little unamused laugh, “do you realize where you are? Woods and water—wilderness for miles and miles! If a person wants to get away from here, he’ll have to follow a bear trail down the coast or back over the hills, or else go by boat. Walt Freeman has a boat; he goes up to Astoria and down to Eureka—maybe farther, though I’m not sure.” Her mouth hardened. “He is *supposed* to be a fisherman. He and his gang do fish for the canneries now and then, but that isn’t all they do, by any means. I don’t know, of course—nothing I could swear to—but I certainly would hate to be shipwrecked in their neighborhood if I had anything to get hold of worth murdering me for.

“That’s straight enough, isn’t it?” She looked at him fixedly. “That belt of yours is terribly heavy. I should think you must have several hundred dollars in gold. I know when I lifted it up into the niche where I hid it, it was like lifting—oh, half a bucket of water as high as my head. When you’re well enough to get outside and walk around, I’ll take you down and show you where I put it. But whatever you do, don’t ever speak of it to a soul. Do you hear? Mother is the finest woman in the world but—she *might* talk in her sleep, you know. Aunt Kate wouldn’t tell if she knew it, but when she gets her back up, as she calls it, there’s just no limit to what she’ll blurt out if it will give her the best of the argument. And as for Hazel—well!”

Chance grinned. “There’s lots of things I never would have found out about, if it hadn’t been for Hazel,” he defended. “She’s a dandy. She don’t ever hold out on me, the way you do.”

“I think we’d better get busy with your memory book,” Jackie said sternly, sitting farther back. “I won’t write down what Whitey told you about the gold. Somebody might get snoopy and read it. I won’t forget it, though, and I don’t believe you will either. Anything else?”

“Well,” said Chance meekly, “nothing much except that—what I mustn’t talk about no more. It’s sure funny, though. I dreamed—I wish you’d let me tell you what it was I dreamed.”

“Well—if you’ll be serious.”

“Yeah. I am, honest. You know, it’s funny, but I went to work and dreamed about that dog-gone rooster—”

“Oh. If that’s the way you’re going to act, I’m sure I don’t care.” Jackie once more closed her book. “You can harp on that rooster all you please, but you’ll have to talk to yourself. I was only trying to help you, that’s all.”

“That’s all right, sister. I’m trying to help myself too. ’Course, I’d hate like everything to put you out any. I guess maybe I’ll make out all right by

myself, if I have to.”

“You’ll have to, all right,” Jackie told him with something of Aunt Kate’s finality, again rising to leave the room.

A stubbornness settled upon Chance’s mouth. “Then I’ll start in figuring out where that dog-gone rooster belongs. Funny I’d be thinking about him so much if there wasn’t a whole heap more to him than just his crow.”

A glance turned sidelong under his eyebrows informed him that he was already talking to himself, so far as Jackie was concerned, and the definite impact of the closing door emphasized her attitude. So the quest of the lost memories languished for the rest of that day, since she carried his thoughts with her when she went. He promptly forgot all about the rooster and such fragments of his dream as remained to him. He even forgot about the gold money in his belt which was almost as heavy as a bucket of water. He kept thinking about what a fool he was to drive Jackie away like that and he wondered whether she really was as angry as she let on.

So after that he avoided any mention of roosters or dreams when they were together. Jackie continued to hold the book open upon her lap, but nothing much was written in it. For one reason, she seldom had two free hands. For another, she could not help dreading the moment when he remembered what it was that gave the word “rocking” a special significance.

But one day she did force Chance’s thoughts into the channel of his past. He was sitting up two hours a day by that time, in a large wooden rocking chair padded with the comforter from which, in his illness, he had plucked several tufts of tied yarn. Chance wanted to discuss nothing but endearing personalities and he was alarmed and anxious because Jackie had no brightness in her face that day.

She told her news abruptly. “I’ll not be around the house so much after this, Trove,”—since that is what she called him now, when they two were alone and her mood happened to be tender. “I’ve got to lay in fish enough and meat enough for winter. It’s almost Christmas time, do you realize that? I haven’t brought in any game or taken out the boat for more than two weeks.”

“I wish you wouldn’t go off like that by yourself,” Chance worried. “I hate the thoughts of that Walt Freeman and his bunch maybe getting the notion they’ll take their spite out on you, account of what you done that day Walt—”

“Oh, you needn’t worry about that,” said Jackie. “I meant to tell you, Chance. Walt took the boat out and they went somewhere up the coast.

Astoria, maybe. Anyway, Walt found out that Whitey hasn't been with Cap'n Tyler or the *Water Lily* for a couple of years or so. He told Mother so last night and he said maybe you came out of some shipwreck. Two or three ships have gone ashore this fall and I'm pretty certain Walt and his bunch could tell something about one or two if they wanted to. They may even know what ship you were on. They may have a pretty fair idea where you came from and who you are, for all I know. It wouldn't surprise me. Anyway, he seems to have lost all interest in you. The *Good Luck* put out to sea this morning. Walt said he was going to San Francisco but you can't tell anything by what he says. He sailed straight west. When he was out of sight of land, he probably turned north. But at any rate, he just about cleaned us out of supplies and Hazel said he had the men take on water enough to last a month. She watched them. So they're gone, and it's a good riddance, even if I do have to get out and fish and hunt every minute I can to keep us from going hungry."

Her mouth tightened as her forehead knotted with her problem. "We did have a couple of horses," she said. "Walt took them off somewhere and sold them, just before you washed ashore. I could have made a trip outside and packed in our winter supply of food, but now I'll just have to rustle. If we only have good weather for awhile, I'll get out every day and fish. But it's been too rough lately to get out of the bay. Oh, well," she smiled suddenly as she patted his hand, "I'll manage. Don't look so solemn, Trove."

"It grinds me to be held on the bed-ground while you've got to work like a dog, rustling grub. Minute I get so I can handle myself, you'll set in the house and I'll do the work, I tell you those."

"And not even let me go along for company, and to show you the best hunting ground? Don't want me along, won't have me around—"

For his answer to that, Chance reached out his well arm, pulled her down to him and kissed her once with a challenging swiftness, and again with tender lingering as her red mouth relaxed and shyly kissed him in return.

"Girl! My—"

"Chance! Oh, you mustn't. You don't know—maybe we've no right to care. Maybe you—you're—married." It was the thing that haunted her, dogged her thoughts on the lonely hunting trails, whispered with sly malice in the waves that lapped along her boat as she trawled for the great, shining silverside salmon, the ugly cod, the gay red snapper out beyond the shoals. Never had she spoken that thought before. Now she uttered it in a faint, breathless whisper. "You may be, you don't know."

“If I was married I wouldn’t love you like this. A man’s feelings ain’t in his head; they’re in his heart. I don’t care whether I remember or not, I sure never loved anybody before I saw you. I tell you, there’s things go deeper than your memory.” He held her cheek close against his own. “Why, the first thing I done when I come to myself was to love the sound of your voice talking in the next room. Every time you spoke in there, I—it just went all over me like—like when you draw your bow across a fiddle string. The string answers and there’s music. And that’s the way I laid here and answered the tone of your voice. It made a music for me, somehow.”

He held her off and stared deep into her glowing eyes. “Do you think for a minute that every nerve in me, every thought in me, every drop of blood in me, would answer like that if—if I belonged to somebody else? I tell you what I think. I think that when two people belong to each other they’re bound to meet. It’s like the birds flying straight south to find summer. They can’t see the flowers and green grass and bugs that’ll make them fat and sassy, but they know somehow. They just keep going till they find—and they fly straight. Same with me. I don’t know where I come from, but I know I was headed straight for you all the time. I was somewhere else, you was here. I just had to find you; that’s all there was to it. Shipwreck and fog and little boat drifting—they all helped. Even the cold water couldn’t hold me back. Looked like I’d come to the finish, I expect—I don’t remember what I thought about it, but it sure must have looked dog-gone dubious along towards the last. I was just about all in, but I kept coming straight—”

“And I was there, ready to drag you back to life,” Jackie whispered solemnly and held him close. “I knew you belonged to me and I knew I belonged to you. Even while I was pulling you out of the water onto the little strip of beach that was left in Arch Cove. I—kissed your mouth—it looked so—so lonesome for me.” She turned her face and pressed her lips upon his as a nun may kiss her cross in some devotional fervor. “That’s why—I chose your mouth for mine; because I had kissed it. And I called you my Treasure Trove because you had come to me and you were mine. I prayed and begged God to let you live for me—for us both. But if He had just brought you and shown you to me for a minute, and then wouldn’t let you stay, I’d have known just the same that you were mine and I was yours, and I’d have loved you all my life.

“And that,” she finished naïvely, “is why I always waited until you were asleep before I’d come into the room. I always—kissed your mouth. And I always prayed God for you to live and have your senses— But your not remembering what is behind—it scares me sometimes.”

“Don’t be scared.” Chance held her closer. “God ain’t any Injun giver. Not if we shoot square with Him. I ain’t much of a Christian, I guess, but I got more respect for God than a lot of folks have that wear His brand; or claim they do. He’s a square shooter. He wouldn’t bring me ashore right where you was ready to grab me, unless we’d both of us earned each other and the right to be together. According to your mother, I’d oughta be dead by rights—the way I was busted up. But I ain’t, you notice. I’m hard to kill, I can see that. I’m right here with you—sweetheart.” He whispered the endearment, for he was shy again.

“If it just wasn’t for that blank space behind you. It—it’s like a dark room you never saw in the light. Robbers might be in there waiting to jump out when you least expect—”

“Aw, shucks! Near as I can make out, that dark room is nothing bigger’n a chicken coop. Only thing in it is a rooster, and you want to recollect he’s a coward. Run and crawl under the barn—”

“Oh, that rooster!” Jackie gave a little happy laugh and pinched the back of Chance’s hand. “I do believe you made a joke of starving and freezing and almost drowning— You’d joke about anything on earth.”

“Not about some things. Not about—loving you—” Chance drew a long, quivering breath, holding her as if neither life nor death nor that blank past could ever have the power to pull them apart.

CHAPTER NINE

“WHAT’S A ROCKING ARROW?”

INTO this poignant moment ran Hazel, too excited and out of breath to notice the sudden straightening of Jackie or the look of dazed awakening on the face of her Bonnie.

“Oh, lookit what I found! Right in our cove, on the beach behind a log, with a lot of rock that fell off’n the cliff holding it down so it couldn’t wash away. I bet you it’s Bonnie’s hat. And you can’t go halvers on this, Miss Jackie, ’cause I got it all my own self—so there!”

Chance reached out a hand and took it from her. “Yeah, that’s my hat, all right,” he said carelessly, his tone pushing it into the class of unimportant things.

“And you did honest and truly come over the ocean to me,” chirped Hazel, jiggling on her toes. “Oh, goody! You’re a really sailor boy with an anchor on your hat.”

“That mark?” Chance whirled the hat on his fingers, looked at the dingy symbol on the crown. “That ain’t an anchor, that’s a Rocking Arrow.” His eyes met Jackie’s significantly. They smiled, each thinking the same thought. That settled the cradle question. Rocking meant Rocking Arrow.

Hazel stared round-eyed at the mark. “Oh. Is it?” She suspected some joke. “What’s a rocking arrow?”

“You can search me,” Chance made indifferent reply. His gaze clung to Jackie. His thoughts dwelt exalted upon the miracle of their meeting. His heart throbbed with new knowledge of the kisses she had pressed upon his mouth when he lay stretched upon his back, unconscious of her presence. His spirit knelt in reverence before her unshakable faith, her prayers beside his bed.

“Is it the name of a ship?” Hazel was holding the hat now, all her needle-sharp mind given to her new treasure. “I bet it is an anchor, just the samey. I bet it was the *Rocking Arrow* that shipwrecked you. Wasn’t it?”

“Oh, I guess so.” One could almost see Chance’s mental gesture of brushing Hazel aside as he would a singing mosquito. “Better take it on out in the kitchen and give it a good scrubbing. Take lots of time, you better. The way to clean a hat is to wash it off and then watch it dry—slow—and wash it off again. You do that about four times. I bet you can do a better job than

anybody.” Hazel danced happily into the snare. “I bet I can too,” she crowed.

The latch had no more than clicked behind her when Chance lifted his face, Jackie bent like a flower swaying to a breeze. They kissed and forgot the hat, except as it concerned their own very especial affairs.

“Cradle, hunh?” Mary had shaved Chance just that morning. He loved the velvet-smooth warmth of his cheek against Jackie’s. “There never has been any cradle rocking in my corral since I was a baby and rocked in my own. I tell you those. I knew all the time I never was married. I’m sure going to be, though.” He lifted his face away so that he could look into her starry eyes. “Say! Ain’t there a preacher anywhere around?”

“There used to be one at Toledo. That’s the nearest I know, and that’s miles and miles—twenty-five or thirty, anyway—and we’d either have to go afoot through the woods or around the coast in my rowboat.”

“No more rowboat in mine, thank you—unless it was the only dog-gone way I could get us married.”

“There might be a missionary over on the reservation,” Jackie remembered, but her tone was doubtful. “That’s through the woods too, away over on the headwaters of the Siletz.” She looked at Chance in wistful questioning. “Don’t you think we ought to wait, anyway, until—until you remember?”

Chance’s mouth lost its care-free curve at the corners. “I ain’t afraid of anything I’ll ever remember. Tell you how it looks to me, Jackie. Looks like the good Lord knows a heap more about me than I do right now, and if He considered it was all right to send me ashore right here where I was bound to meet you, it sure ain’t my place to hang back, scared of what’s liable to turn up.”

“Well, putting it that way, of course—”

“Yes, and I’ll put it another way too. If the Lord was willing for us to love each other, that don’t mean He’s going to hand us a preacher right on the doorstep. No, sir. God can open up the trail, all right, but it’s up to a man to do the riding on it. So soon as I’m able to travel, you and me are going to get out and rustle us a preacher.”

That subject held until Hazel returned triumphant to show the result of her labor. Once more Chance’s eyebrows came together when he took the hat and looked at it, setting it upon his head and wincing when the felt touched the thin bandage of his newly healed wound. He took it off again and stared thoughtfully at the brand.

“Do you think I ought to write down—”

“Yeah. Write Rocking Arrow. I know that’s right, just like I know that’s a chair over there. Same as I know my own hat. Funny—I sure oughta remember—”

“It’ll come when you least expect,” said Jackie, and got the book and wrote “Arrow” after the word “Rocking.” A pretty name for a ship. She pictured a long slim craft with graceful lines and puffy white sails speeding like an arrow to its port. She smiled at the picture and her dark curls falling upon her shoulders made her beauty something to remember always.

Chance had already forgotten the hat and its cryptic emblem. Or if he had not forgotten, at least it was crowded into the back of his brain. He too had a picture in his mind. He was picturing a long and winding pathway through green woods and Jackie walking beside him, going to get married. It seemed as though they should be riding, but Jackie had definitely told him they had no horses. So they would walk. He wondered how much longer it would take his leg to grow strong. There was so much to do.

So the clue of the wave-battered Stetson went unregarded. A man does not need a broken head to forget everything else when he is in love. The days flowed past like a river, evenly, pleasantly, with just enough change to keep the hours from dragging.

So many days in the rocking chair beside the bed. Then a sunny noon when Jackie had come and with her strong young arms had pulled the rocking chair out into the next room—Chance riding—and to a Christmas dinner. Two mallards roasted, mince pie made with dried apples, venison, raisins and spices treasured for months until this day. Sweet young crabs which Jackie herself had caught. Jelly, even wine from the wild blackberry patches where black bear had fattened in the fall. A hilarious dinner, with the rain drumming on windowpane and door, the thick log walls streaming. Afterwards, Chance must be pulled to the window, where he could look out upon the ocean where he had drifted. He closed his eyes to that view, however, and turned his face away. Even in his forgetting he could not look upon that gray, heaving, rain-drenched expanse without a feeling of cold horror.

That dread of the sea! As he grew stronger, he forced himself to gaze upon it, to watch its varied moods, to appreciate its sunsets, the silvery band along the horizon where ships sometimes floated silently past, dim reminders of a world of men. He would sit by the window, times when Jackie was away, and wonder what the sea had done to him. Plenty, he knew that. Drowned his memory, somehow. Bundled it in fog so that only now

and then would odd fragments be revealed to him. That gray rooster standing on the hayrack; where, when or how it persisted he could not tell. But there it was, as plain as day.

Sometimes he remembered walking along a path with old snow patches turned black and soggy, and puddles of water which he stepped over or around. He saw a house, a familiar, weather-beaten house. There it left him. He never seemed to get inside that house. Always the fog closed down and the picture blurred as does a dream when one awakens. Other times he recalled stray sentences spoken in the night. Svensky lying in the bottom of the boat, blood-stiffened bandage (which had been somebody's shirt sleeve) on his head. What became of that long figure he could not remember, but he knew that it was Svensky who had the battered head. And always he came back to his hatred of the ocean.

Later, when he could get outside, when he could walk without limping very much and could swing an ax at the woodpile without thinking much about his broken arm, except to favor it a little, he moved the chopping block around to the other side of the pile, so that he faced the woods instead of the sea. He did not explain that, even to himself. When he made his first tentative explorations of his surroundings, he walked along the forest trails where the sigh of the wind in the branches drowned the beat of the waves along the nearby shore.

He never mentioned the money belt hidden in the tide-washed cove. Secretly he dreaded the time when he must take that belt in his hands. He had a vague uncomfortable feeling that trouble was tucked away in that belt, but what the trouble was he could not quite remember. It was only when he was alone that he thought of it at all or fell under the mood of forebodings which never assumed any definite shape but hid their menace just within the wall of fog that shut him out from his past. Some day he would remember. When he did . . .

“Chancey by name, chancey by nature,” he would say then, and push depression from him. Whatever it was waiting there in the fog, time enough to meet it when it showed itself. There was something he had meant to do, he was sure of that; but how could he do it when he didn't remember what it was? All he could do was go ahead and take a chance on what the future might hand out to him. He had Jackie—at least he would have, when the storms let up long enough for them to make a trip outside where they could get married. And so long as they could be together, planning a home of their own, he didn't give a dog-gone for anything else.

Still, certain things bothered him a little; things that would have led him back to a complete remembering if he had set himself the task of following the mental clues they furnished. He kept waiting for snow, though Jackie told him again and again that never had they seen snow fall on this part of the coast. Nevertheless, he caught himself wishing a real old blizzard would come whooping out of the north. Nights when he awoke and lay open-eyed in the darkness, he found himself listening for the querulous yap of coyotes. And when the wind roared through the forest, he would tell himself sleepily that here came a chinook, cutting the snow like knives, and the cattle could get their fill of water, and they wouldn't have to root for every spear of grass they got.

Then he would rouse himself and remember that it was only the wind in the spruce trees roaring, and he would wonder what made him dream of thirsty cattle wandering rough-haired over frozen prairies. But when morning came, his thoughts were all for the present—which of course meant Jackie most of all.

Then, one day, the air was a golden warmth, filled with the scent of growing things. A new and tender green shone bright with new sap in the young leaves on bracken and bough. Alder catkins were dropping like brown woolly worms, and the grass was hidden in places with the flowers that seemed to have bloomed overnight.

Chance had just come from the forest, a brace of pheasants tied together at their necks slung over a stick on his shoulder. He was humming a tune whose words eluded him like everything else; all except the beginning, which he began to sing tentatively, pulling each word out of the void as if they were strung on a string and the string might break at any moment:

“Come along boys and listen to my tale,
I'll tell about my troubles—ta-da-da, ta-da-da—”

Jackie was coming up from the shore, stooping under the weight of a bag slung over her shoulder. Beyond her the sea was blue with little waves dancing silver-tipped in the sunlight. Far out on the horizon a steamer drew its brown ribbon of smoke toward the north. And down below the cliffs a clutter of black-humped rocks lay wallowing in the quiet water. A beautiful scene, perfect in its way. But Chance thought only of the girl and the load she was carrying. He swerved from the path, hung his game on a dead branch, stood Jackie's rifle beneath, against the tree trunk, and hurried to meet her.

“You sure do love to make a pack mule of yourself,” he scolded, though his eyes laughed. “Man, oh, man! What you got here? Rocks?”

“Mussels—partly. Let’s sit down here, Chance. I want to—well, guess, can’t you?”

Chance’s eyes clouded just a little. “Say, I don’t do anything much except guess. Can’t you tell me straight out?”

“Why, of course. The tide is lower than it has been in the daytime for ages, and the bay’s calm, so I went around into the cove where—you know—where I found you. And I got your belt. I knew you didn’t want to go—”

“You got it?”

“It’s in amongst the mussels, so if the folks saw me they wouldn’t know what I was carrying.” She leaned from the log where they sat and opened the bag at her feet. “I thought—maybe—you’d be needing it—”

“I sure will—”

“Well, there you are. It was dry till I mixed it up with the mussels. And just lift it, Chance! I never dreamed it was so heavy. There must be simply hundreds of dollars.”

Chance took the belt, laid it across his knees, stared down at it, frowning. His mouth was thin and straight. On his temple nearest Jackie a pulse began suddenly to beat—beat—beat, ridgy veins branching like tiny fingers into his hair.

“Hundred-and-eighty ounces of gold dust,” he said, in a strange, tense tone. “I dug it out myself. I was taking it home—I was planning on laying it down in Mom’s lap—”

“Oh! Where? Where’s your home, Chance? Oh—you’re remembering!” Jackie caught his arm with both her hands, clinging as if in terror of losing him. “Oh, Chance! Sweetheart! I—you—what makes you—look like that?”

CHAPTER TEN

MEMORY MEANS MISERY

WITH puckered brows, Chance was twitching at a pocket fastening rusted shut. He lifted his face and looked at Jackie; an impersonal, unseeing stare, his thoughts questing far.

“Mom needs me. I’ve got to go. I oughta been there long ago. When she wrote me that letter to come quick, I took the first boat out. Her boilers blew up. The *Esther B.*”

“Oh, then it wasn’t the *Rocking Arrow*?” Jackie did not know that she had been holding her breath until it escaped in a long, shivery sigh.

“The *Rocking Arrow*,” said Chance dully, “is our brand.” He pulled off his hat, into which Jackie herself had sewn a new band of heavy buckskin, turned it and stared at the faded symbol. “I’d oughta remembered that I don’t see how I’d ever forget it—or Mom—or Dad. And—Nell’s waiting for me yet, I guess.”

“Nell—is she—your sister, Chance?” Jackie’s voice was pinched, scarcely audible.

“Sister?” Chance let the belt slide to the ground as he turned and caught Jackie in his arms. He held her fiercely, pressing her face against his shoulder, fingers tangled in her hair.

“You’re the one,” he said, between his teeth. “It ain’t right. If God’s capable of double-crossing us, then I’ll double-cross Him. He’s supposed to set us an example to follow— You’re the one. I won’t give you up for all the Nell Shirleys in the world. We’re going to be married—see? It won’t—”

“Chance!” Jackie tore herself from his arms, sat back facing him on the log. “What are you talking about? Are you married—or engaged to that Nell? Are you?”

“Engaged, yes. Or I was.” His face was white and hard. “I went to the Klondyke with a chum of mine, and—Nell and I were planning on getting married when I got back. I wanted to make a stake and help Dad out of the hole he’d got himself into by buying out the Cross J. Then Dad was going to cut me in on the ranch—I kind of figured I’d take the Cross J and run it on shares, maybe. That was the understanding when I left Nell—Nell was going to get her clothes and things ready and piece up some quilts and so on —”

To any one else it would have sounded strange, perhaps amusing, to hear a young man some inches more than six feet tall telling his sweetheart how another girl was piecing quilts for his marriage bed. But Chance saw nothing amusing in that, nor did Jackie, listening wide-eyed while he talked.

“And she’s waiting for you to come back?”

“Yes, I guess she is, all right. I never wrote I was coming. I thought I’d get home quick as a letter would.”

“So she is—making quilts—” Jackie choked on that thought “—and she thinks you stayed on, up North?”

“I expect she does.” Chance’s tone was turning sullen. “I got a bunch of letters—from her—and one from Mom. Dad had been killed and Mom wanted me to come home. So I pulled right out on the *Esther B*. And she blew up. So most of the folks on board—they was killed or else drowned trying to get away in boats. I was in the last one—it was all mixed up, in the dark like that, and the boat going down—Whitey and I was the last ones left in our boat, after Svensky cashed in.”

“So they’re still looking for you to come back. Your mother—and—Nell.”

“Yeah, I expect they are.” All the spring gladness had gone from Chance’s face, and the mouth whose smiley curves upward at the corners Jackie had loved so much was straight and stern. He was looking down, now, tearing open a pocket in the belt, lifting out a buckskin poke of gold. “There she is,” he said, listlessly, holding the small, heavy bag out to Jackie. “That’ll run around five hundred dollars in money. Makes quite a load, packing a belt full of that stuff.” He was making impersonal talk while he gathered his mental forces to meet the situation. Jackie, Nell Shirley, his mother—His brain seemed to whirl with the surge of remembered things pushing into this new life, this new love he had found. It was like the conflict between tide and ocean current, out beyond North Point where Jackie had taken him one day. Two irresistible forces rushing together, meeting with a roar, flinging spray high into the air, swirling, boiling, and the stronger force rushing on to dash against the land. So now the two forces within him met and clashed.

“I’ve got to go back,” he said, with heavy finality. “Mom’s there alone, with all those debts to pay, or they’ll take the ranch. I’ve got enough here—there’s a bank draft done up in oilskin—but I wanted to take Mom some of the gold I dug myself. All I could pack. I—”

“Why, of course you must go. There’s no question—” Jackie’s voice was hard, brittle.

Chance looked up at her, reached out and caught her by the shoulder. “You’re going with me. Do you think I’d leave you here? Not on your life! We’ll get married—” His voice faltered. His eyes dropped away from her brilliant, steady gaze. “I don’t love Nell Shirley,” he said doggedly. “I can see now I never did love her. I didn’t know what it was like. Not till I found you, I didn’t.” He looked at her again, a fire in his eyes. “We belong to each other. Nothing on earth can make me think any different. Why, if I’d loved Nell Shirley, do you think for a minute I’d go and forget her like I done? I wouldn’t forget *you*, and I don’t give a dog-gone what they done to my head. *You’d* be there as long as I was. I—you—you’re just a part of me, Jackie. When I stop loving you, I—I’ll stop living. I tell you those.”

“Well—but there’s your promise. And—she’s been getting ready to marry you. I—why, think of all those quilts she’s got made by this time!”

“Oh, damn the quilts!” Chance thrust out his long legs and stared stubbornly straight ahead of him. “I’ll never sleep under ’em, I tell you those.” His hand had dropped from Jackie’s shoulder and he began picking and pulling at a loose fragment of bark on the log between them.

“You’ve got to think of her side. If—before you were hurt, you wanted to go back to her, didn’t you?”

“Before I found you, I did.” Then he added obstinately, “I didn’t know any better.”

“She—isn’t to blame because you—changed your mind.”

“I never said I blamed her.”

“She must love you—an awful lot, Chance.”

“Oh, I don’t know—why?”

“Well, because—no girl could help but love you an awful—”

Chance whirled and crushed her to him. “I can’t. You’re the one.” He kissed her twice; long, tender kisses that left them both a little breathless. “Don’t send me back to Nell. You can’t. We both—our love means too much to both of us.”

She clung to him dry-eyed for a minute longer, then pushed him from her. “Our love means too much for us to take it—over all those wedding quilts!” She gave a hysterical laugh more terrible than tears. “What I mean, Chance, is that we can’t take it dishonorably. I won’t steal you, I won’t let you steal me.”

“It isn’t stealing. You said yourself God meant us for each other. If that’s the case—” He flung out a hand as if the matter were settled for all time.

“But you can see yourself—”

“Yeah. It sure looks as if God had kinda gone off half-cocked that time.” Chance gave a snort of anger. “God didn’t happen to think about Nell Shirley, looks like. Now He’s cooked up a fine mess. Hunh! You know what I think? I think God never had a thing to do with it. I’d sure hate to think He’d play as dirty a trick as this has turned out to be. You say we’ve got to think of Nell. Well, I’m thinking of her. Nell’s a good kid and a smart kid. Pretty as a picture. She ain’t one of these hen-headed kind that thinks only of her good looks, either. Mom’s sure crazy about Nell and she was tickled to death when I told her the news. She called Nell a jewel and said she never would worry a minute over the kinda wife I’d have.

“Well. Do you s’pose I don’t think of the way they’ll both feel about this? But dog-gone it, they’d have felt worse, maybe, if you hadn’t swum out and hauled me to shore. It’s just the way the cards fall, looks like to me. For every one that wins, somebody’s got to lose. And we’ve got to play the game out. We can’t—”

“That’s just it, Chance. We’ve got to play the game out. It certainly won’t be easy, but we—we can’t mark the cards or deal from the bottom of the deck. It looks to me,” said Jackie, drawing a long breath, “it looks as if God wanted to try us out, just to see what kind of stuff there is in us.”

“Yeah? Well, He won’t find any stuff for doormats in me, I tell you those!”

“Well,” Jackie observed under her breath, “maybe He doesn’t want a yellow doormat, anyway.”

Chance’s eyes narrowed. “What’s that?” he asked sharply. “You think I’m yellow to fight for you? You’ve always said we *had* to meet, because we belong to each other. It’s so, too. You’re a part of me—part of my life. Come hell or high water, I won’t let you go. If that’s yellow, all right.”

“I never said you were yellow. But—can’t you see, Chance, that we’ve got to play fair? I’m not afraid to go ahead and do what’s right and honorable—”

“Don’t you think it’s honorable for us to keep—”

“Not when it means breaking promises and—maybe breaking a girl’s heart because she trusted you. We couldn’t be happy that way, Chance. We’d always be thinking of—her.”

“It’s nothing we can help. If I’d remembered about her, I’d have fought against—caring like I do. But even if I had, I know it wouldn’t have done a dog-gone bit of good. You can’t fight what was meant to be.”

“No, but you can be strong enough and brave enough to do the right thing. We’ve got to play the game, Chance.” She caught him by the shoulders, shook him a little. “Why, what’s that you kept saying right at first, when you began to remember little bits? You said you were Chancey by name and chancey by nature. Aren’t you? Are you afraid to take a chance with life?”

“I am, if it means giving you up. I can’t take any such a chance as that —”

“Well, look here. I’m not much on quoting Scripture, but there’s one verse—‘He that loveth his life more than honor is not worthy—’”

“That ain’t what it says. You’ve got it all twisted to suit your argument. Mom has read that—” He stopped, caught his breath as if cold water had been dashed in his face.

“I’ve got to go back and straighten things out for Mom,” he said. “If they ain’t found out who it was killed Dad, I’ve got to do that too. But you’ve—I want you to go along. We can be married in the first town we strike and keep right on going. You’d like Mom. She’s a saint on earth, if ever there was one.”

“No, we’ve got to play fair. That girl piecing her quilts and making her wedding clothes; she holds a hand in this game too. You asked her to marry you and she’s waiting for you to come back and do it. You say yourself she’s a nice girl. You—we’ve got to let her play her own cards.”

“I don’t get you at all.” Chance scowled at the ground. “All her cards—they’re wedding cards. She can’t play them. Not with me, she can’t. I couldn’t marry any girl but you.” He took her again in his arms, dropped his face against her shoulder like a hurt child. “Oh, Jackie girl—I couldn’t!”

“And I couldn’t marry you, the way things stand. I’d feel like a thief.” She held him close. “It isn’t your fault, dear. It isn’t anybody’s fault. It’s just—fate.”

“I couldn’t leave you and the folks here,” Chance said, after awhile, when they had talked in circles and come back to the plain necessity of his going. “You could come as far as Portland, Salem, any old place but here, and wait. I’ll go on and straighten out—”

“No, that wouldn’t do at all. You couldn’t get Mother to go, for one thing. Aunt Kate has been at her for a year, and if she can’t budge Mother,

nobody could.” She was holding his hand, smoothing and patting it as she had done while he was sick. The soothing effect was less noticeable now. “And I love it here, really. I don’t believe I could stand a town, after living with these woods and the ocean.”

“I couldn’t leave you here for that bully, Walt Freeman—”

“You needn’t worry about Walt. Ever since I took a shot at him, he treats me with a wholesome respect. Furthermore, he’s got some project that keeps him away from here. No, we’ll stay right here. Where—I found you.”

“I’ll come back—”

“No. Not unless fate—”

“Oh, here’s where you are! You better come along with them mussels, Miss Jackie, or Aunt Kate’ll be awful mad.” Panting, each freckle showing distinct against the clear pink of her face, Hazel stood staring round-eyed at the two. “Shamey, shamey! I bet you’ve been makin’ love to my Bonnie! Oh, what’s that?” She pounced upon the belt, lying unregarded at their feet.

“Lay-over to catch meddlers,” Jackie retorted, slapping Hazel’s hand away. “That’s what I found myself. We don’t go halvers on that, Missy. You leave it right alone!”

“Stingy.” But the pact held between them. Hazel backed off.

“There’s a couple of pheasants hanging on a limb of that tree over there. You can carry them to the house, kid. Be careful and don’t knock the gun over, getting ’em down.”

The two stood up, watching Hazel go trotting down the slope swinging the two brown birds importantly as she went.

“I better start first thing in the morning.” Chance’s voice was flat, toneless.

“I’ll have Injun Jim take you as far as Toledo.”

“You keep that poke. I want you to. Case of sickness or anything—”

“Oh, no—”

“Call it board and room.” Chance thrust it away, buckled the belt on under the coat Mary had given him to wear. He did not look at Jackie. “You bring the gun. I’ll pack these clams.”

“Mussels.”

“Well, mussels, then.” Chance stooped, shouldered the sack and started. He did not look back, though he knew that Jackie was lingering beside the

tree. He strode swiftly toward the log house, his eyes dark and hard as agates, his mouth bitter.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHANCE PLAYS THE GAME

ON a warm and sunny day in early spring, Chance rode up to the Rocking Arrow stable. Hens were cackling, bare earth was steaming in the sun like fog rising off the water along shore, after a chilly night. On the hayrack propped on stakes alongside the corral stood a gray rooster with half his tail feathers gone. He was just flapping his wings and curving his neck to crow when he stopped abruptly, flew off the rack and fled to the barn.

“Dog-gone!” Chance pulled his horse up short and stared. Feather for feather, he knew that rooster perfectly, knew just what he would do. It was exactly as he had dreamed it that last night on the boat. Well he recalled that dream—had done so when the cogs of memory slipped into place when he lifted that belt of gold dust. Instantly his memory began to work smoothly, surely, showing him scene after scene with perfect accuracy. Among them had been the dream which began just here with steaming earth, cackling hens and that gray rooster choking off his crow and legging it for the barn.

Chance sat there on his hired horse and watched until the rooster disappeared. In his dream he had laughed, but he was not laughing now; nor did he lead his horse into the stable and remove the money belt from around his middle. Instead, he swung down from the saddle, left the horse standing at the yard gate with dropped reins and went up the muddy path, noting with tightening lips how each little puddle lay just as it had lain in his dream, with the shrinking snowdrifts lying black and honeycombed under the spring sun. He felt as if he were walking in a trance. His mind shrank from the conviction that life held stranger realities than he had ever imagined. Dreaming accurately a scene still months in the future—that sounded crazy. Yet here it was, right before his eyes. He couldn’t understand it at all. He did not even attempt to understand.

Yet the dream did not hold true in every particular. It seemed to be true only in patches. There was the house just as he had dreamed it, but he did not walk up to the door with the belt of gold over his arm. He had completely forgotten the belt.

In those later dreams of his groping after memory, he had seen this house where he had been born. He had come to the very steps and there had seen the vision waver and fade to nothingness. Never once had he been able to dream himself inside that scarred and weather-beaten doorway. A nervous

haste caught him now. He took long steps, crossed the narrow porch in one half-running stride and flung open the door with the suddenness of a gust of wind.

“Mom! Mom!” Instinctively he turned toward the pantry where in his dream she had been working. She came from her bedroom instead, a freshly cased pillow in her hands. She was a tall woman, black-haired, sturdy, capable-looking, with level dark brows like her son’s and a mouth that had been like his until it had hardened with the stress of life. It trembled now. She flung the pillow upon a chair and came swiftly, arms spread to embrace him.

“Chancey! I—wasn’t looking for you before dark.” Casual words, spoken to cover her excitement, her joy at seeing him.

“The stage got in early. I done the driving myself. Old John’s got a game arm. I put them cayuses over the road in a hurry, I tell you those.” He hugged his mother with a bearlike squeeze and released her. They were not a demonstrative family. “Well, how are you, Mom? How’ve you been making it?”

His mother glanced up at the tall clock with pendulum swinging indefatigably behind a tight little bunch of painted daisies on the glass door. “Good as could be expected, I guess. Aren’t you hungry? You always used to be. I’m going to have chicken potpie for supper, but it’s only two o’clock and you’ve had a long ride. You better have a cup of coffee and a piece of pie to stay your stomach till supper.”

“Sure sounds good to me, Mom.” Chance turned away, hung his battered old Stetson on the nail behind the door, where it had hung in its new magnificence. He pulled off his coat, hung that upon the next nail and began unbuttoning his shirt sleeves, rolling back the cuffs with due care for their starched freshness. “I ain’t tasted any pie like yours since I left here.”

His mother forced a laugh. “Any stray’s bound to come back to his own feed box when the pickings get too short, Chancey. I’ve never known it to fail; a man’s stomach’ll lead him home when nothing else will.”

“Well, the pickings wasn’t so dog-gone short, Mom. You wait till I get my hands washed and I’ll show you something that’s good for sore eyes.”

“You hurry up and drink your coffee before it’s cold. I’ve got it all poured out. You can show me afterward.”

Commonplace talk, consciously pushing vital issues aside for the moment. Chance sat down, fresh-combed, virile, his level gaze dwelling with understanding affection upon his mother’s face. He spooned sugar into

his coffee, ate a great wedge of mince pie with relish while he listened to her rambling comments pulling in the scattered threads of their mutual interests, deftly weaving them into a comprehensive picture of surface events.

“I didn’t get your telegram till yesterday afternoon. Then Jim had to ride in to town after horseshoe nails and he brought it out. I sent it over for Nellie to read.”

“How is she?” Chance asked between swallows of coffee.

“Just fine, I guess. She’s been away all winter. Myrtie and her man moved to Great Falls, and Nellie’s been staying with her ever since right after Thanksgiving.” Mom tucked back a straying lock of hair. “Jim said she was real surprised when she read your telegram. She sent word that she might ride over to-day if it wasn’t too windy. I’ve been kind of looking for her all morning. I thought maybe she’d want to be here to meet you when you come—but I guess she thought we’d want to have our talk out first. Nellie’s as considerate a girl as there is in the country.”

“Sure is.” Chance laid his fork down on the empty plate, drank the last of the coffee, wiped his lips on the fringed napkin he remembered of old, and stood up. He unbuttoned his vest, opened his shirt and felt inside.

“Why, Chancey! You aren’t going to bed right here in the kitchen, I hope!”

“Never you mind. You just hold your horses a minute, Mom.” For the first time since his home-coming, his mother saw the old, boyish grin of the Chance who had gone blithely away to find his fortune. Mischief and a gleam of triumph brightened his eyes when he pulled out the thick, heavy belt and tossed it into her lap. Her astonishment at its unexpected weight set him laughing.

“Well, there’s your gold dust, Mom. Your Chancey boy has done just like he said he would. He’s brought you the raw dust he dug out of the ground himself.”

“My! How much of it is there, Chancey? It’s heavy as lead.” She tested its weight curiously. “My, there must be hundreds of dollars’ worth there!”

“Oughta be somewhere around three thousand there, Mom. I’d ’a’ got it changed at some bank, only I wanted to show you what the clear quill is like. I got more than that, too. When your letter come, I sold out my half of our claim to a friend of Blainey’s, and pulled right out. Stopped at the bank this morning and put in close to thirty thousand. That oughta see us in the clear, Mom, hadn’t it?”

“There’s a note overdue. Part of it. Things was so upset last fall, I didn’t ship near as much beef as your father expected—”

She drew a sharp breath. “Oh, Chancey, why didn’t you come right on home? Where’ve you been all this while? You got my letter about your father—” She pressed the edge of a hand against her lips to quiet their trembling. “If ever I needed you, Chancey— If we could only have found his body! If we could give him decent burial— But to have to think of him, all winter long, laying out in the cold and snow—” She dropped her face upon one arm laid upon the table, and sobbed. The belt of gold slid unregarded from her lap and lay like a fat yellow snake coiled at her feet.

“Mom! Oh, Mom, don’t cry like that!” Chance went down on his knees beside her, pulling her solid shoulders up into his arms. “I did start, Mom. Right away, on the first boat that pulled out after your letter came. She blew up on the way down. I had all I could do, getting ashore. I—I had a lot of busted bones, Mom. I couldn’t come any quicker, honest I couldn’t. I was awful sick for a long while. Aw, please don’t take on like this, Mom. I’m here now—me and the gold I went after—ready for business. You bet.” The scene struck him all at once as being familiar, something he had experienced before. He patted her shoulder, frowning at the wall over her head, lip drawn between his teeth. “You never told me in that letter, Mom.” But he knew that there was now no need of telling him.

His mother quieted, pulled herself under control. She sat back, wiping her eyes with her apron.

“I thought I’d tell you when you got here, Chancey. I didn’t want you to get all worked up over it when you couldn’t do anything. But—the way it happened, as near as we can find out—your father had been missing cattle right along all summer. Those Cross J’s. Seemed like they kept drifting back — He did a lot of riding and I could tell he was worrying a lot, but he wouldn’t come out and tell me what was on his mind and I didn’t want to press him.

“The day—he came up missing, he’d started out early in the morning. I put him up a lunch, because he said he’d probably be gone the better part of the day. It come along dusk and I was keeping his supper warm in the oven — Jim, he’d been to town after a load of wire and finally I told him I was getting uneasy about your father and I wished if he wasn’t too tired he’d ride out and see—but of course there wasn’t much use in that, for no telling which way your father would be coming home. Anyway, Jim didn’t have a chance to more than saddle up—or get the cowboys started—

“Your father’s horse came home with blood on the saddle. It had run all down over the stirrup fenders, showing how he must have stayed with the horse quite a while after— He was shot, we know that much. You can see the saddle, and the marks where a bullet scored the cantle rim. Jim thinks it’s the same one that killed your father.”

“Yeah, I know.” He did not tell his mother how he knew; that he had dreamed of her telling the same thing in almost the same words. “All that don’t prove he’s—dead.”

“No, it don’t prove it, but he certainly must be, Chancey, or we’d have heard something from him long ago. That was on the fourteenth of last August. We raised the alarm right away. Dickie rode in with the word. The sheriff got here at daylight with a posse. They scoured the whole country for over two weeks and then there was a bank robbed in Snake Springs and the sheriff had to get out after the robbers, and the hunt kind of petered out. But we’ve kept looking, Chancey. The boys never have let up the search, except when work just had to be done. Your father was well liked in the country. If those responsible had been found, they’d have had short shrift, I can tell you that.” Her dark eyes flashed.

“Didn’t the sheriff have any suspicion—or you, Mom?”

Mom looked away. Her nervous fingers began pleating a corner of the tablecloth and she was making fastidious little measurements, her thoughts far off.

“Chancey, there was so much feeling amongst the neighbors—a person wouldn’t hardly dare point a finger at any man. There’d have been a lynching and maybe without just cause. No, I never heard the sheriff mention any man as being suspected.”

“Wasn’t there any clue, even?”

“None in the world, Chancey. I don’t want you should think everything wasn’t done that could be. They trailed Smoky back into the hills and saw where he had started running. They found splashes—blood—on the bushes. This side Bent Willow there wasn’t any more. He’d stopped bleeding, or—they don’t know what happened. The sheriff thought maybe he fell off crossing the creek, but they looked along down to where it runs into the Sluice and even on down below. They never found a trace there.”

“There’s a man or two in this country I’d sure like to read their minds,” Chance said moodily.

“There couldn’t anything much be done, unless your father’s body was found.”

“I know. *Corpus delicti*, or some such thing,” observed Chance, who was not so ignorant as his speech sometimes made him appear.

“I can hardly talk about it, Chancey.” Mom smoothed back her hair, glossy as a crow’s wing. The sprinkling of white hairs on her temples had come within the last year. Chance’s eyes blurred unexpectedly at sight of them. “Hadn’t you better ride over and get Nellie? I expect maybe she feels it’s in your place to go, though she did say she’d ride over. I want her to come and help eat chicken. I had Jim kill two, so we’d be sure and have plenty.” She stood up, laying her roughened hands on Chance’s chest and looking deep into his eyes. She did not need to raise her glance very much to do that.

“Chancey, we’re awful glad to have you back. It hurt us, Nellie and I, when you didn’t come or write. We didn’t hardly know what to think. I was afraid—”

“I couldn’t come any quicker. I was shipwrecked. I told you, Mom—”

“Yes, and I’m thankful you escaped without harm. Run along now, Chancey. I’ve got my dinner to see to. You go meet Nellie—and don’t be late, you two.”

She gave him a tender, knowing smile as she let him go. Chance reddened to ears and collar as he reached for his hat, but when he mounted the hired horse, his face looked pale and older than his years.

He took the short-cut trail up the creek, riding toward the west. Toward Jackie, he thought dully. “Without harm!” he said once, savagely, and stared straight out between his horse’s ears, his body swinging slackly graceful in the saddle, his hands clasped over the saddle horn.

Half a mile so, and Nellie came loping around a clump of young quaking aspens on a sorrel horse whose shining coat was almost the color of his rider’s hair. His eyes brooding on the distance, Chance was completely unaware of her approach. He was seeing a dark spruce forest rising against a gray sky, wisps of scudding clouds tangled in the tree tops as they fled before a storm wind. He was seeing Jackie, slim and boyish in her old breeches and boots, flannel shirt open at the throat, laughing as she came up the slope, tossing waves behind her. He was hearing her voice—

“Why, hello there, Prodigal!” cried Nellie, and struck the sorrel lightly with her quirt.

Chance started, pulled himself together, back to the present. “Play the game straight and take a chance,” he said between his teeth and spurred the livery horse forward.

“Prodigal nothing! Just for that—” As they met, he reined in beside the sorrel, which stopped as he leaned, and caught Nellie’s saddle horn. “I’ve been a long tough trail, but I’ve come back.” He shook the saddle teasingly.

“Yes, you’ve come—back.” Nellie’s voice broke a little on that last word.

Chance did not answer. He leaned closer, kissed her on the dimple beside her mouth and never noticed its trembling as he pulled himself straight in the saddle. At that precise moment he was visioning with some consternation an immense pile of patchwork quilts neatly finished and folded—waiting for him to come back.

CHAPTER TWELVE

CLOUDY

CHANCE studied the rocky ridge with a ten-rod pass cut at an angle through it, giving passage between Brush Creek to the north and the wide prairie scored by the deep gorge through which Bent Willow tore noisily to easier channels beyond. Just short of the pass he stopped, reined his brown horse around in the trail, twisted himself in the saddle and scanned the steep slope behind him.

“This is about the place, ain’t it, Cloudy?”

Cloudy, whose real name was Claude, shook a handsome head. “You rode past the place, kid. Back by those sarvice-berry bushes is where we picked up the first sign. The leaves was splattered with blood.”

Chance eyed the bushes they had passed, looked back up the ridge. “What would he want to get down on the level for? The dirty skunk was up on top watching Dad come riding up to the Gap. He’d just about have time to get back down in good shooting range before Dad showed up this side. It’s about two hundred yards through, and Smoky would be shacking along in that running walk of his. Whoever wanted to kill Dad bad enough to get out and bushwhack him would wait till the last minute to make sure he was coming through the Gap. There’s that trail just the other side, remember, that would get Dad home just about as quick. It turns off this one close to the Gap, so he’d have to watch Dad past the turn.”

“That’s right,” Cloudy agreed.

“Well, that wouldn’t give him time enough to get down on the flat. Any darn chump could see that. It musta been along about dusk—just light enough to see your front sight—”

“Not mine, kid.”

“His. You know what I mean. He’d get about halfway down; it’s too hard to hit a mark in bad light when you’re above it. At that, he musta got buck fever. The way his bullet scored the cantle rim, he musta hit Dad just about at the left kidney. Aimed at his heart, I’ll bet. It’s funny,” Chance said suddenly, “you folks never found the bullet. It would go clear through, wouldn’t it?”

“Liable to. We never found a sign of it, though.”

“That don’t mean a dog-gone thing to me. Sheriff was all off the track, lookin’ for signs around them berry bushes. He wouldn’t bleed enough for that right the same minute he was hit. Smoky most likely gave a big jump and lit out for home. You know he’s gun-shy, Cloudy. That’d take him about to the berry bushes before the skunk could get in another shot. Time he got down to where he’d left his horse, he’d be scared to follow Dad up. He musta thought he’d missed and pulled out for his hole, hoping for better luck next time.”

“Maybe,” Cloudy dubiously conceded. “That ain’t the way the sheriff figured it, though. He thinks whoever done the shooting chased your dad up till he dropped off his horse, and then packed him off somewheres and buried him.” He looked at Chance with unspoken sympathy shining in his dark eyes. To hide his feelings, he eased himself negligently in the saddle, lifting himself sidewise with one foot dangling free of the stirrup. “What makes you think he never followed your dad up, Chance?”

“You never picked up his trail. Sheriff had his dawgs, didn’t he? Never used to go after his mail without them two curb setters.”

“Yeah, he had ’em.” Cloudy gave a snort. “About all they done was to trail Smoky into the stable. Hell, we didn’t need them dawgs to tell us he come home and we fed him inside. Wel-l, they up and trailed the saddle, too, come to think of it. Snuffed and slobbered and yelped all over it where I’d hung it up where it belonged in the shed.” He shivered, though the sun shone warm on his back. “I don’t want to ever put in another time like that first week,” he said. “Combing the country—it was plain hell.”

“I’m havin’ my hell now,” Chance said grimly. “And I can’t do a dog-gone thing about it.”

“You’re doing as much as anybody has,” said Cloudy, who did not understand. “Eight months and we’re right where we was that night it happened.”

Chance was staring somberly up the steep side of the pass. “You hold Stepper for me a minute, will you, Cloudy?” He swung down and handed his reins to the cowboy. “I want to take a look.”

“You won’t find nothin’ after all this while, Chance.” Cloudy slid straight in the saddle. “ ’Course—”

“I just want to satisfy myself, that’s all.” Chance unbuckled his spurs, hung them over the saddle horn and started climbing limberly up through rubble and scattered broken ledges to the point he had in mind, two great flattened boulders leaning drunkenly together a hundred yards up the slope.

Mary Freeman and Injun Jim had done an expert job of bone-setting, it would seem, for he never once thought of his old injuries.

At the boulders he turned and shouted down to Cloudy who watched him, "Stay right where you are! I want to see—" He disappeared from sight, leaving the sentence unfinished.

Within the triangular space between the two huge rocks he stood and looked out through a narrow space. Stepper, the big brown horse he had broken to the saddle three years ago, stood hipshot outside the trail, nose touching the velvety muzzle of Cloudy's gray. Cloudy, lounging again in the saddle, was making himself a cigarette. A perfect ambush. A man standing just here could take his time, watching his victim emerge from the Gap. He could rest his rifle along a three-inch shelf, take careful aim—if he were any marksman at all, he could scarcely miss.

Chance backed out, turned and climbed on up to the top of the narrow upthrust of rock which had formed this long barrier across the grassy upland where the Rocking Arrow cattle grazed in summer. Three minutes of climbing took him to a point where he could see the trail for miles in either direction, until the turn-off just outside the pass. Made to order, if one wanted a lookout and a safe get-away.

He returned to the boulders, avoiding the shady places where remnants of old snowdrifts still clung tenaciously. There seemed scarcely a possibility that any clue would remain through all these months, even if there had been one in the first place, but Chance still owned that trait of persistence that had kept him doggedly fighting for his life when reason told him there was no hope; that tenacious optimism which had made him live when another man would have died, had given him the courage to go on playing the game when there seemed no hope of winning happiness.

Eight months, almost. Wind and rain, blizzards driving the snow into every nook and cranny, chinooks to cut the snow into water, cold to freeze it into ice, spring suns to melt it again. Little hope of clues after all that, even if this were the spot where the murderer had actually waited. But then Chance had to start at the bottom, anyway, he told himself hearteningly. The sheriff and everybody had taken all this time to find out exactly nothing, and he certainly didn't mean to take their word for a dog-goned thing. He'd make his own trail.

So he stood once more in the rock shelter, looking down at Cloudy smoking a leisurely cigarette while he waited. "Dog-gone! I could pick him off from here in the dark, almost!" he exclaimed aloud, as the sinister perfection of the spot struck him anew.

He wondered whether the sheriff had searched this place—had even looked into it; or any of the men searching under the sheriff's directions. He did not believe they had. According to what Cloudy had told him, every one believed the shot had been fired from the brush off to the right of the trail, on the more level ground well outside the Gap; when his dad had almost reached the service-berry bushes where his blood had stained the leaves. A man could have stationed himself there and been close to his horse, able to mount and ride off at top speed, in case he missed. Cloudy said that was the argument the sheriff had used and that every one had accepted, so far as Cloudy knew. That no one had been able to trace a rider to that spot didn't mean a thing, Cloudy said. Stock was ranging in here, cattle and horses too. The whole country was tracked up. It was the bloodstains and the deep prints of a horse galloping along the trail that had made it possible to trace Smoky.

Well, if that was their theory, it certainly hadn't got them very far. Chance felt a little of the thrill of discovery. "He probably left an empty shell in here, too," he reminded himself. "If he was scared as I think, he sure wouldn't wait to pick up a shell; he'd make tracks outa here and get to his horse."

So he squatted down on his heels and began raking the fine gravel with his fingers. In that narrow place an ejected cartridge would strike the rock wall and recoil. No telling which way it would fly, but the boulders were on a steep slope and he thought it would probably roll down into a crack somewhere. With that in mind, he got down on all fours and laid his face against the gravel, peering and prying under the lowest boulder.

He was almost at the point of giving up the idea, though he hated to, it seemed such a good one. As a last resort, he backed up to where he could reach a dead stick fallen from an old sagebush up above the boulders. With this he extended his search, raking the dirt from as far under the rock as the stick would go.

Once more his pertinacity carried him beyond the point where another man would have given up. Twigs, small rocks rewarded him for a time. Then at last, as he drew the crooked stick carefully in a short arc toward him, he picked from the loose dirt not one empty cartridge but two.

So the murderer had fired twice in such quick succession that he had not moved the rifle sufficiently to eject the second shell at a different angle. Two bullets aimed at his dad's back. "And that proves he's yella from his boots up," grated Chance, turning the slender brass cylinders over in his palm. "He's such a damned yella cur he was afraid to give a man a Chinaman's

chance.” He dropped the shells into his pocket and stood up. His eyes looked as hard as the rocks beside him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“I’M GOING TO FIND DAD’S BODY”

“THOUGHT you’d went to sleep up there,” Cloudy commented, in an attempt to lighten the situation as he handed the reins over and looked into Chance’s embittered face.

“Not what you could notice. Look here.” Chance pulled his hand from his coat pocket, the two rifle cartridges cupped in his palm. “I found these down under that smallest boulder, where they’d rolled down and stuck in a crack. What do you think now, Cloudy? Still think the damn cur cached himself across from them bushes?”

“Hell!” Cloudy took the shells, examined each one closely. “Two, huh?” He looked straight into Chance’s eyes as he handed them back. “You win, kid.” He took a last long pull at his cigarette, pinched out the glow, spat on it for good measure and dropped it straight down into the trail; every motion revealing long and intimate knowledge of the range and the danger of prairie fires.

“He shot twice,” Chance said in a hard, level tone wholly new to him.

“Still, I don’t know as that brings us much farther along the trail,” said Cloudy, and sent a comprehensive sweeping look up the slope and back along the trail. “What d’ yuh think, Chance? You can’t make any headway with those shells. Every other man in the country, if he owns a rifle at all, uses them kinda ca’tridges. I do, myself.”

“That’s all right. I ain’t going to snoop around after the gun that fired these. Use your imagination, why don’t you—if you’ve got any.”

“You first. What’s on your mind besides your hat?”

“You say the sheriff has doped it out that the man that shot Dad followed him up, caught him when he dropped off Smoky, and took him off and buried him. That the theory?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“Where was his tracks, then?”

“Well, I told you, Chance, there was a bunch of horses running on this flat at the time. Between the time it happened and when we got over here next day, over a hundred head had come tearing down to Bent Willow to

water. Rockin' Arrow round-up horses, with a few strays mixed in the bunch. And some of 'em was shod. About a third."

"Yeah, but you trailed Smoky, all right, you said."

"By the splatters of blood here and there on the grass alongside the trail." Cloudy shivered. He was careful not to look at Chance when he spoke. "They stopped at Bent Willow."

"Dad maybe went down the creek. Pretty steep pitch, this side—"

"Hell, Chance, don't you s'pose we looked? Couple of us boys went along the top of the Sluice with glasses. We never missed an inch of bank or water—there was darn little bank," he added, remembering that straight-walled gorge. "It was tolerable low water, and there was more rocks sticking up than you could shake a stick at. Current too swift to let anything sink and stay sunk very long, though. We was pretty certain for awhile that he'd floated down the creek, but we had to give up. Dick took one side and I took the other, and then we crossed the creek down below and each of us took a different side coming back up. Places where we couldn't get close enough to the edge to see down on our own side, we looked at every inch of the water over across from us. So what one didn't get a look at, the other one did."

"We done that twice, kid. We both saw the carcass of a colt lodged against a little bar about halfway down, and I could count the sticks of wood stuck in amongst the rocks in places. We never passed up a thing, I know that much. There wasn't a sign of him. And there was men watching the creek down below—No, kid, you can make up your mind to it, he never went down Bent Willow."

They rode in silence for a time back the way they had come. Their young faces were dark with troubled thoughts, their slim flat bodies were slack in the saddles, their long legs swung in unconscious rhythm with the stride of their mounts. Clean, handsome young fellows, both of them; loyal friends, though one was boss and the other a hired man. Neither ever gave that a thought.

Chance sighed, straightened his spine, looked at Cloudy. "Ever have an idea who done it?" He paused. "No danger—spill anything you may think about it, Cloudy. I won't let it slip unless I've got proof a jury would look at."

"Sure. A fellow's got to keep his face closed unless he's dead certain he's right. Wel-l—no, I don't know a thing. Dick and I, we kinda wondered if it had anything to do with the Cross J's, but it don't hardly hold water. They've caused a heap of riding, but no more than you'd expect. They kept

drifting back across the hills, and your dad kinda made it his job to haze 'em back. We've been kinda short-handed; to save expense, I took it."

"We'll run a full crew this spring, Cloudy. They kinda bugged their eyes out at the bank when I walked in there and shoved a draft for thirty thousand under their noses. I guess they wouldn't of shed many tears if the Rockin' Arrow had fell into their hands. Well, what about the Cross J? You was saying—"

"Nothing. Not a darn thing there, Chance. But I know one thing." He lowered his voice. "Along after you left, something got to riding your dad like the devil. It—I don't know what it coulda been, but it wasn't that Cross J debt, I don't believe."

"Riding him—how?"

"Search me, Chance. All I know is that two or three times he come in off a long ride, looking mad enough to bite nails. You know. Hot under the collar and holding it in. He never said a word, though, about what was making him sore, and I know it wasn't over anything around the Rockin' Arrow. We was all of us working our fool heads off and willing to do it. Mostly it would be when he'd been off by himself."

Chance rode along, digesting this news. "You don't know what it could be, I s'pose?"

"I don't know a thing more than I've told you, kid. It was like as if he'd met somebody and had a ruckus over something and was too mad to get over it right away."

"What does Dick think?"

"I don't s'pose Dick noticed it. He ain't the kind that would, unless it hit him somehow. But I always thought a whole lot of your folks, Chance. Way your mother nursed me through that sick spell, and your dad keeping me right on the payroll when I wasn't able to work—he was as much to me as my own pappy would have been, if I'd ever remembered him. You know how it is with me."

"Sure, I know. And we all of us feel the same about you. I tell you those."

"Yeah, I know that. Well, anything botherin' your dad, I could tell it in a minute. And there was something grinding him, I know that."

"Funny nobody knows anything about it," Chance gloomed.

"I never said nobody knew. What I said was, nothing was ever said about it. I've always kinda suspicioned that your Uncle Jim knew what it was. I

ain't sure.”

“Him and Dad never had much to say to each other,” Chance mused aloud. “Jim being Mom’s half-brother and kinda alone in the world, he’s made his home here and always will, I s’pose. But him and Dad—I don’t know as they ever was on the outs; they just kinda didn’t team up. They both always thought the world of Mom. That’s about as far as they had anything in common, I guess. I don’t believe Dad would talk to Jim about it.”

“I don’t know as he did. I only said I always had a hunch Jim knew what it was.” Cloudy flung out a hand, disclaiming all responsibility in the matter. “There may not be anything in it, anyway.” And then he retracted that dismissal. “All the same, I know damn well your dad used to get worked up over something that last month or two before—”

“I wonder if Mom wouldn’t know. What do you think?”

For some minutes Cloudy did not answer that tentative question. He rode along, idly slapping his leg with the rein ends, his eyes broodingly introspective.

“I’ll tell you, Chance—and I want you to keep it under your hat. I had a feeling for quite a while after the thing happened that your mom was scared, and so was Jim. Worried and all broke up, of course; but scared too. I got it once or twice in the way they looked at each other, like as if they was both dreading something they wouldn’t talk about. I don’t know—” he shook his head as if impatient over the futility of his words. “Probably you’ll think I’m a damn fool. But seems like I get things that ain’t ever been put in words—”

“Sure. I do, myself, sometimes.”

“You do? Well, you know how batty it sounds to most folks. Anyway, that’s what I mean. I got it that Jim and your mother both suspicioned something and was scared of something that they never mentioned to a soul, not even to each other. What it is, I’ll never tell you, ’cause I don’t know.”

Chance looked thoughtful. “I felt something, myself,” he confessed after a silence. “When I first got home and Mom was telling me. She—well, she had a sort of look—when she was talking about how dangerous it would be to go naming names just on suspicion. She said it was easy to misjudge a person and make the innocent suffer— She said there’d have been a lynchin’ bee if anybody’d just pointed a finger at some particular man.”

“That’s so. She was dead right when she told you that.”

“But I got a feeling that she had her suspicions, all the same, but she wouldn’t let on till more was found out. We’ve got to go slow, she said.”

Cloudy snorted, not at Mom but at the slowness. “Well, we ain’t got anywhere since three days after your dad come up missing,” he said. “Them shells is the first thing that’s been found since then. And they don’t throw no searchlight on the murder,” he finished glumly.

“Think not? They prove quite a lot to me, Cloudy.”

“Yeah? I wish you’d give it a name.”

“All right, I will. There ain’t been any one else ever shot along this trail, so it’s safe to say the bullets from them two shells was fired at my dad.”

“That’s right.”

“So the feller that shot him was cached back up there between them boulders, wasn’t he?”

“Right again. That’s all plain enough, so far.”

“Well, you say yourself Smoky’s tracks showed him running. I’d know it, anyway, for Smoky’s gun-shy and he’d beat it for the ranch. And he can sure pick ’em up and lay ’em down in a hurry, when he feels that way.”

“Sure. Nobody’s contradicting you.”

“Well, dog-gone it, by the time that skunk got down off that hill and onto his horse, wherever he had him cached, and out on Smoky’s trail, Smoky’d be across Bent Willow and hitting the high spots for home. Wouldn’t he?”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“And another thing, Cloudy, you seem to forget. He never dropped Dad outa the saddle—you’ve got proof of that. So far as he knew, Dad was able to make it in, even if he was hit. You traced blood to the creek, didn’t you? Dad got that far, we know that. If you want to know what I think, why, I think that sneaking, shooting thus-and-so was high-tailing it for home or wherever he’d come from, about as quick as he could travel.”

“That’s all plausible enough,” drawled Cloudy, after a pause, “and if we knew what had become of your dad, I’d say you’ve got the savvy of the whole thing. But there you are, kid—what became of your dad’s body? Don’t say it fell in the creek, ’cause if it did, somebody would have found it. We hunted Bent Willow from the ford clean down to the Missouri.”

“I don’t say that.” But Chance looked stubborn.

“Well, that leaves us right where we started. So what’re you going to do?”

“Me? I’m going to find Dad’s body. And I’m going to find who killed him. Dog-gone it, Cloudy, there’s nothing else *to* do.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

EACH TO HIS OWN PROBLEM

THAT strange apathy of the emotional sensibilities which had seized Chance at his parting with Jackie still held him more or less detached from his sufferings. He was like a person hurled suddenly into some cataclysm of nature, going calmly about the work of retrieving bits of furniture, establishing a makeshift shelter for surviving members of his family. He was well aware of the fact that life was going to be rather a bleak affair for him, but the rending agony of his bereavements was missing. He suffered, but his anguish was dulled by some mental anæsthetic to which he clung, dreading the time when its effect might wear off.

In that state he could talk of his father's murder with a reasonable degree of calmness. He could discuss the gruesome details with less emotion than Cloudy, who had endured the first-hand shock of the tragedy. He could determine just what he should do, decide just where he would begin the search for his father's body. He had loved his father with that wholesome warmth of affection which is natural in a son of his type. He missed him terribly, wanted him back, longed for his querulous voice. He felt the weight of responsibility thrust upon his shoulders, was anxious lest he should fail to make good. He was stubbornly determined to bring his father's murderer to justice in full atonement for the crime. And yet—

He wondered dully at his calmness. In the back of his mind he knew that it seemed not quite real. It was like his absence from Jackie. He knew that they had sacrificed their happiness to that thing called honor; that their love was never to be more than a beautiful dream. Yet he kept holding her close in his thoughts, dreaming of her, pretending that they were only thrust apart for a little time.

He would not face the fact that he was preparing to marry Nell Shirley. He knew that Nellie loved him, would be a sweet and faithful wife, but he never pictured the future with Nellie and himself living together in a home of their own, having children perhaps, their lives welded into one common interest. All that was vague, something to be put off and not faced beforehand. Like the end of one's own earthly life, which one knows to be inevitable even while assuming it will never happen, his mind closed itself against the logical end of his engagement. He drugged his mind with dreams

of Jackie, even while he continued to drift along the lover's lane that would lead him to the altar with Nellie.

The same with his father. Cloudy could not mention that blood trail without shuddering. Chance could and did. For Cloudy had seen those red stains on the prairie grass; winter storms had washed them away for Chance. Cloudy had lifted Thede Moore's bloodstained saddle from the trembling back of his reeking horse. He shut his eyes now and drew a long shivering breath when he must pass it where it hung in the shed. Chance had not seen his father's saddle. He had let his Uncle Jim and Cloudy tell him about it instead. They did not realize that he was deliberately avoiding the shed where it hung.

Matters stood so for nearly a month. Chance rode hard on the trail of stale clues. He spent hours at his father's cheap, scarred desk, reading papers, bringing accounts into some kind of order, talking things over with his mother, gathering up the reins as best he could. He gave Nellie as much attention as any engaged girl could reasonably expect from her betrothed husband. He told her all about Klondyke, he gave her the nuggets he had saved to make her a bracelet, he spent an hour helping her arrange them exactly as she wanted them to look. He kissed her as often as he thought of it, he told her how pretty she looked, he ate huge chunks of her cake, sections of her fresh baked pies, and he praised everything lavishly—sincerely too, for Nell Shirley cooked as well as any woman in the country.

He did everything but feel an extra heartbeat in Nell's presence—everything but thrill to her kiss, show a love light in his eyes when he looked at her—tell her about his rescue from the ocean or about Jackie. When he was with Nell, he shut his mind and his heart so completely that he did not think of Jackie—or anybody much.

At the Rocking Arrow he did everything but go into the shed and look at his father's saddle, everything but explain to himself just why he would not look.

But one evening he forgot. He had been at home just long enough for the strangeness to wear off and for old habits to assert themselves. The path leading from stable to house had dried, the snowdrifts were gone and not even a wet patch showed on the ground where they had been. Chance could walk up that path to the door without ever thinking of his strange dreams about it, and the gray rooster could crow on the hayrack or anywhere else and be just a chicken, so far as Chance was concerned. Had he thought about it, he might have concluded that the torpidity of his emotions had become mercifully permanent.

He had half promised Dick Larkins to make a hand at solo that evening, and he was on his way down to the bunk house when he happened to think of an old bridle he wanted from the shed. The bit had been broken and he had not bothered to replace it before he went away to the Klondyke, but the headstall had silver conchos and he meant to take them over to Nellie next time he went. She wanted some for a new bridle she had just got.

It was not dark, even in the shed. The sun had not slipped out of sight before the moon was showing over the ridge beyond Bent Willow, and the shed had a large double window facing the east. Chance turned aside from the path, thinking only that he had better get that old headstall out now, while he thought of it, or it would slip his mind. He was punctiliously careful about not disappointing Nellie in little things; the more so, since he could not give her the one thing that really mattered. He went in, the moon lighting it almost like day.

“D’ yuh know, Cloudy, Chance has sure changed a lot since he went up to the Klondyke,” Dick observed sagely, more than an hour later, and chewed two sticks of gum with zest, his wide good-humored mouth opening and closing with mechanical precision. “Never used to pass up a solo game b’fore. Course, we all of us feels bad over what happened, but that’s all over and done with. It ain’t that. Chance is gettin’ as unsociable as a Babtis’ preacher.” He turned his quid reflectively while he studied his hand, debating whether to discard the trey of spades or hold it awhile longer, in the hope that another would turn up and he could rob his heart run and make a spread of treys. Might cut off a run for Cloudy that way. For this was “coon can” and a fellow had to figure close when there were four tabs piled up and they were playing two bits a hand.

“A man don’t have to be unsociable to sidestep a tatty tat with you,” Cloudy snubbed him. “What’s the matter? Your fingers paralyzed or something?”

“Aw, dry up. I got to figure something out.”

“This ain’t a chess game, you understand. You’re s’posed to move a card every hour or so.”

“Aw, what’s the rush? You’ll be broke quick enough, anyway. What I wanted,” Dick complained, “was a good solo game. We ain’t had one since Chance got back. Now I got all them back wages in my jeans, what I want is a little action.”

“You sure as hell don’t show it,” Cloudy snorted. “That trey of spades musta froze to your thumb, didn’t it?”

“Hunh? How’d you know?” Dick clutched his three cards to his breast and glared across the table.

Cloudy’s laugh was colored with contempt. “Lay it down, you chump. You’ll have to anyway, in a minute, ’cause I’m going out. I’ve got one trey and I’m going to use it where it’ll do the most good. The fourth’s gone past. If you wasn’t bone from the neck up, you’d know what cards are turned.”

Dick sighed hugely and discarded the trey of spades, sighing again with relief when Cloudy ignored it and turned up one from the depleted deck. “I hate this darn Mex game, anyhow,” he grumbled, as he watched Cloudy pick up the four of diamonds, place it on his run, add the trey and deuce, neatly insert the king of clubs above the queen on his club run and reach for the four white beans which symbolized four “tabs”—and a dollar. “Chance ain’t so broke up over his dad he can’t set into a solo game no more. He’s just changed, that’s all. He ain’t the same boy, no more. Has he said anything to you, Cloudy? You and him’s been ridin’ around a lot.”

“What’s it *to* yuh?” Cloudy leaned back, picking up his tobacco and papers from the table. Then he relented. “The kid’s changed, all right. He’s got more than his dad’s murder on his mind, if you ask me.”

“It ain’t his girl, I know that. Him and Nell Shirley’s sweet as honey,” Dick imparted wisely. “I bet he’s over there right now, after promisin’ me sure thing he’d play solo. Ma Moore was tellin’ me t’day that Chance aims to get married right after calf round-up. Long about the Fourth, she guessed it would be. I ast her would there be a reg’lar big weddin’ and a doin’s—picnic or somep’n, but she said there wouldn’t be no fuss made at all. They’d all go up to the Falls, she guessed, and have the ceremony p’formed, and then the two newlyweds ’d prob’ly go on a weddin’ trip somewheres.

“It sure is a fright—only weddin’ loomin’ up in the future, it’s got to be on the quiet, account of it not bein’ a year since his dad was killed. Wouldn’t be so bad if Chance ’d just give up lookin’ for the body and quit keepin’ it all fresh in our minds like he’s doin’. Gives me the creeps, way he acts—and I’d commenced to kinda git the whole thing outa my mind.”

“Outa your *what*, did you say?” Cloudy pushed back his chair with a rasping sound that somehow gave audible expression to the look on his face.

“On my mind. ’Course, not havin’ such a thing yourself, you wouldn’t hardly know what it’s like—”

“Oh, dry up. The more you talk, the less you say.” Cloudy got up, jerked his hat off its nail, slammed it on his handsome head and started for the door.

“Hey, where you goin’? Come on back here and finish the game! I gotta have a chance to win back— Aw, thunder!” Dick ejaculated indignantly, as the door banged behind Cloudy. “Plumb looney, this outfit’s gittin’ to be. Can’t dast to open your head about nothin’ but what some darn chump goes and gits on the peck.” Mumbling to himself, Dick pawed the scattered cards to him, evened the deck, shuffled it sourly, licked his thumb and began morosely laying down a spread of solitaire. Could he have looked through the door and seen Cloudy, his mouth would have fallen open with blank astonishment.

Cloudy was standing just outside, staring up at the moon. In its light his face was revealed with pitiless clarity. Bitter, rebellious, suffering, he looked as if he would like to blast the moon from the sky and quench its serene radiance; as if he hated it and all that it shone upon that night. His lips, drawn back from his teeth, formed soundless words. “They’ve got to know. I’m going to talk turkey—I won’t stand no more—I *can’t*! Damn it, a man’s got a right—” Some movement in the room behind him caught his attention. His mouth closed with a click of his teeth. He jerked his hat down over his eyes and started down the path to the corral.

The shed door was open. As he came opposite, a sound within halted him as though a barrier had dropped unexpectedly before his face. His breath caught in his throat. His eyelids twitched, stung with hot tears of helplessness.

“Dad! *Dad!*” Low, broken, the words came weighted with the intolerable anguish one knows beside the open grave of one’s beloved. He looked in, somehow found himself inside the door, taking swift steps towards that terrible sound, the weeping of a man utterly bereft.

His own trouble seemed swept from his mind. His hand went out, gripped the shoulder of Chance, standing there with his face bowed upon the stained saddle, his whole body shaken with the grief that racked him.

Not a word did Cloudy speak for awhile. His arm across Chance’s shoulder lay firm and friendly, his fingers tapping a silent code of understanding sympathy. Those awful, rending sobs gradually subsided. Chance drew a long, shuddering breath, lifted his face from the stained leather seat. His convulsive grip of cante and horn loosened slowly.

Cloudy’s fingers clamped down, pulled in gentle urging. “I’ve had to let go all holds myself, once or twice,” he said simply. “Does a man good to get it outa his system.” He waited. “I’ve got a letter I’m going to take over to Spud’s camp. Better come ride over with me.” He waited again. “Come on, old kid. Do yuh good.”

They rode the ten miles across moon-drenched rangeland, their shadows overlapping, sliding black upon the new grass. Their horses walked steadily along the winding trail, heads swaying rhythmically with their stride. Stepper burred the “cricket” in his bit with a leisurely content. Cloudy’s horse, Dandy, made occasional snoring sounds, blowing some bit of ticklish dust from his nostrils. Now and then a rabbit bounced across a brightly lighted space and dodged into some shadowed sanctuary. Once a coyote slid wraithlike across the trail, paused upon a nearby ridge to yap his keening, ululating call, nose pointed toward the moon. Swinging stirrups clicked in soft collision. Thin ribbons of cigarette smoke wavered upward to where a light breeze caught and raveled them quickly into nothingness.

In all that ride no word was spoken, nor was either conscious of the silence. Yet each drew strength and comfort from the other’s presence and felt his loneliness less bleak. Each buried something deep that night; Chance his dreams of Jackie, his hope of any real joy in life; Cloudy—whatever it was he had said he could not stand. And so perfect was their friendship, that long and silent ride with the moon swimming its spangled sea of purple sky was never mentioned. Nor would it ever be forgotten.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CLOUDY IS GOING TO DRIFT

THE mysterious disappearance of Chance's father was not the only event of the past twelve months in that part of the country. A year brings changes, even in a sparsely peopled land where the stay-at-homes are chiefly impressed with the monotony of their lives.

The Cross J ranch land had been bought by Eccleson and a partner who had shipped in purebred Herefords and was experimenting with certain crossbreeds he expected would produce heavier beef cattle without sacrificing their hardy ability to shift for themselves during the greater part of the year. His herd was not large, they were easily spotted on the range and his brand was a new one, monogram HEJ. Mart Higgins was his foreman. Eccleson, vice president of the bank, had little to do with the ranch, apparently content to give his partner a free hand, driving out occasionally for a Sunday dinner.

Mart Higgins no longer bossed a round-up crew but concerned himself with driving ditch diggers to their tasks. The Fuller ranch was being transformed into hay land, fences were beginning to stretch barbed boundaries across the high prairies and the lush bottom lands. The Rocking Arrow might not like it, but they were expected to adjust themselves to changed conditions.

Chance had no quarrel with the march of progress. He had some vague ideas of his own about fenced grazing land and irrigated meadows and a better grade of cattle, and when his present troubles were behind him, he meant to tackle the problem of bringing the old Rocking Arrow up with the times. He distrusted Eccleson and Mart Higgins. He still thought they had purposely misled his dad in that Cross J tally, for reasons of their own. What that reason was did not appear. As his round-up proceeded to comb the range for the calf branding, he was compelled to admit that there wasn't a sign of rustling going on.

"I guess they just thought they could break us and buy in the Rockin' Arrow for a song," he concluded, talking with Cloudy one day. "They would, too, if I hadn't made that clean-up and paid off them first notes. I did think they was maybe the cause of Dad—" He clamped his jaws together, unable now to put the thing into words. After a moment he added, "I can't see their object, though. I thought he'd maybe caught Mart stealing cattle,

but that don't look reasonable now. They unloaded the Cross J's because they didn't want 'em. They'd be dog-gone fools to try and steal 'em back again. They're too choicy about their stock."

"Sure. I thought myself for awhile it was Mart makin' him trouble," Cloudy responded. "I done a lot of prowlin', last fall and on through the winter. There ain't a thing to connect 'em with it, far as I can see. No more than anybody else in the country. A thing like that ain't done without some reason."

They rode for some time in silence.

"Where did Eccleson's new pardner come from?" Chance asked then. "He may be a wizard at breeding cattle, but he sure stacks up with me like a hole in the ground. I tell you those."

"Sure chesty, all right. I ain't got much time for him, either. Hugh Jennings, his name is. Keeps pretty much to himself. Money has sure soured that gazabo—or some darn thing has."

"Well," said Chance, "he's got no call to turn up his nose at the Rocking Arrow, dog-gone him—"

"He do that?"

"He sure did. Or at me personal, and that's the same thing. Gave me that sneering smile of his and looked me over when Mart introduced me to him. 'Oh, the Rocking Arrow, hmm? Son and heir!' Just like that"

"That," Cloudy observed, "is just the way he is. He's like that."

"You'd of thought I was trying to bum a job off him, or something," Chance snorted. "I rode over that day we moved up on Brush Creek—last Wednesday, that was—to ask if they wanted to put a rep with our outfit, or should we just cut out what HEJ's we found and leave 'em be. Dog-gone! You'd of thought I insulted him, the way he told me to let his cattle alone. Mart told me afterwards that they didn't have more'n a hundred head of cows running in there, and the calves was all branded, anyway—but how would I know that?"

"You couldn't. Not till we started workin' that range."

Chance still looked sulky and aggrieved. "Man, oh, man!" he sighed, "I sure do hate to hate anybody. But there's something about that dog-gone cuss that makes my back hair bristle up every time I think of him."

Cloudy chuckled at that, not wanting to encourage moroseness in Chance, who had reason enough for taking life seriously.

“That ‘son and heir’ sounds like he thought you was kinda throwin’ out your chest over your importance. Ain’t every kid your age that’s head chief over an outfit the size of the Rockin’ Arrow. Maybe you kinda need taking down a peg once in awhile. Jennings is old enough to be your daddy and he probably hated to see you at the head of a bigger ranch than what he’s got.”

He had made a mistake. He knew it before he had spoken two sentences, but he also knew that it would be a greater mistake to shy off once he started. He could have kicked himself, but there was no help for it now.

The old cloud of trouble settled upon Chance. “He don’t hate it a dog-gone bit more ’n I do,” he said miserably. “I’d give—” He bit his lip, staring out over his horse’s head.

“So would the rest of us, kid. You know that.”

“Yeah—sure, I know it, Cloudy.” Chance released the breath he had been holding. “It’s—not being able to *do* a dog-gone thing. That’s what gets me the worst. When I first got back, I thought I’d be able to—find him. I was so dead certain I could pin it on the one that done it. I—of course you boys had done all you could—I knew that—but I thought I could do more.”

“I know about how you felt, kid. I was that way myself for awhile.”

“I guess you don’t know it, Cloudy, but I wouldn’t take your word for it—about Bent Willow. Them first two weeks, I sneaked off lots of times and hunted all up and down the Sluice. Both sides. I thought you must have missed something. I—went through, once; I liked to didn’t come out alive.” He flushed guiltily. “It was a dog-gone foolish thing to do, I tell you those. I had all I could do, keeping off the rocks. I never saw a dog-gone thing but them.”

“Hell, I was watchin’ you, kid. I was up top, tryin’ to stay even with yuh.” Cloudy gave a grim sort of chuckle. “I pulled that same stunt myself. Time I done it the water was low. That was—just a coupla days afterwards. I made it, all right, or I wouldn’t be here, but it sure wasn’t no way to see anything.”

“You never told me, dog-gone it.”

Cloudy flung out an expressive hand. “Tellin’ wouldn’t of stopped yuh, kid. You had to satisfy yourself. That’s the way folks are made—to find out by experience. You wouldn’t take nobody’s word. Not after finding them ca’tridges, you wouldn’t.”

“Yeah, but that’s all I did find.” Chance was bitter. He turned abruptly toward the other, a desperate look in his face. “Ain’t we *ever* going to find out? Have we got to just lay down and take it?” His voice rose savagely.

“Somewhere in this country there’s a man that knows. He’s hidin’ in his hole, safe. Can’t we ever smoke ’im out, don’t you s’pose?”

“Yeah,” grated Cloudy, “some day, maybe. When we least expect it.”

“If there was a just God, we would,” Chance stipulated, with the harsh judgment of youth. “There ain’t.” His fine mouth took a bitter twist. “From the samples of His justice I’ve seen so far, I don’t want no more of it in mine.”

“Sure is a whole lot different from my idea of justice,” Cloudy agreed, in a tone of almost equal bitterness. “That don’t let us out, though. All we can do is hang and rattle and wait for the cards to fall a different way.”

There was no answer which Chance cared to make to that. They rode along in the unconstrained silence which was so certain a proof of their companionship.

Cloudy broke that silence in an odd, hesitating way, not looking at Chance. “By the way, kid, I—you’re pretty well through with the round-up now—anyway, you’re paying more men than you need—I’d like to draw my time.”

“You—what?” A blow in the face would not have dazed Chance more.

“I think—well, I’m going to drift. I heard about—well, several of the boys I used to know have been down in the Argentine, and they like it fine. I been thinking I’d take me a little *pasear* down that way—” He stole a sidelong look at Chance, who was staring straight ahead, his underlip caught between his teeth. “You’re getting along all right. You don’t need me—”

“Who said so?”

“Why, nobody. I know—at least, I s’pose,” he amended carefully, “my job’s safe as long as I want to stay. You’d keep me around just for my good looks, I s’pose—” He laughed mirthlessly, quite unaware of the good looks he mentioned. Suddenly he exploded. “Hell, what’re you looking like that for? Can’t a man quit if he feels like it? I ain’t married to the Rockin’ Arrow, am I? If I want to quit, ain’t I got the right?”

“Why, sure,” said Chance, in a strange tone. “If you’re a quitter, a course you can quit.”

“Oh, hell!” snorted Cloudy, and they rode for a time without speaking. Only this time the silence stood like a wall between them. He himself broke it diffidently at last.

“You’ve got me wrong, kid. I ain’t quitting just because I’m a quitter. I’ve got a reason.”

“What?”

“I can’t tell you that. I can’t tell anybody. It—ain’t so damn easy to pull out, but—”

Chance’s face changed, softened from its frozen anger. “Why, Cloudy? You—done something?”

Cloudy waited while they rode fifty yards. “You can put it that way if you like. Yes.”

“It can be squared somehow, can’t it? I’ll be tickled to death—”

“No!” Cloudy’s tone was brutal. “Nothing on God’s earth— You can’t do a thing, kid,” he said more mildly. “Nothing except let me go and say nothing about it.”

Chance wrinkled his brows in puzzled thought. He looked at Cloudy questioningly. “It must be— Is it something that happened before I got back?”

“Y-yes. It happened,” said Cloudy, “away early last fall.” He drew a long breath, leaned and slapped a green-headed fly from his horse’s neck. “I—thought I could tough it out, but—well, a man can only stand just about so much. I better pull out.”

“Who is he? I’ll go take a fall outa him myself.” Chance tightened the reins, as if he meant to take the war trail right then.

“Don’t be a chump.”

“Well, just take a little trip till it blows over, then.”

“It won’t blow over, kid. Not as long as I’m alive, it won’t.”

Chance meditated upon that statement. He turned a tense face toward Cloudy. “Well, tell me one thing. Is it—about Dad?”

“Hunh?” Cloudy gave a jerk of surprise. “Good Lord, no! What put that into your head, kid?”

“I don’t know. I’m always dragging everything back to that one point, I guess. Some of these days I’ll run onto something that ties in. Then I’ll have something to go on.”

“Well, this don’t. It’s got nothin’ whatever to do with—that. It would of happened the same, anyhow. I’ve got t’ go, kid.”

Chance stopped his horse which immediately swung around, facing Cloudy.

“You’re the doctor, Cloudy. I won’t try to stop you, if that’s the way the thing stands.” He looked away. “I’ve got to ride in to the ranch. While I’m

there, I'll make out your time. Kinda keep a line on things till I get back, will you?"

Before Cloudy could answer him, he wheeled and galloped away. He felt as though he could not bear to talk about it any more just now. He wanted to be alone, where he could face this new and unexpected calamity by himself. He could not let Cloudy see how this thing hit him. Desertion, just when he needed a friend most; that was the way it looked to Chance. He did not believe that Cloudy had done anything that would drive him out of the country. Even if he had, why wouldn't he tell his best pal what it was? Why make a mystery of it? Did he think he couldn't trust Chance any more? Or was it that the friendship didn't mean so much to him after all? Whatever it was that lay behind his behavior, Cloudy had hurt Chance almost past forgiveness. And Chance had been hurt badly enough without that. It made him savage, ready to lash out at anything within reach.

It was in this mood that he rode slowly up the last rise before he reached his own pasture gate. His lean young body was slouched in the saddle, his two hands were clasped on the horn, he was scowling blackly at the trail ahead. He was telling God and himself that he had stood just all he was going to stand. He was willing to swallow a lot and say nothing, but there was a limit. From now on he'd be dog-goned if he was going to take anything off anybody; God or anybody else. He was through being a chump, he'd tell you those.

Just on the crest of the rise a horseman rode to meet him. Hugh Jennings, managing partner of the new HEJ ranch, coming from the Rocking Arrow. At any other time Chance would have pulled his mouth shut and acknowledged the meeting with a stiff nod at best. In his present temper he ignored even that slight courtesy. The two glared at each other and rode on stiff-necked, neither looking back.

"The dog-gone son of a gun!" Chance growled to himself. "What'd he want to give *me* the bad eye for?" Unintentionally he jabbed his spurs against Stepper and the horse shot forward toward the gate.

He was about to ride on through when a certain fact brought him up short. "I'll be *dog-gone!*" he snorted. And he wheeled Stepper in the trail and tore back after Jennings, the big brown in a dead run.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CHANCE HAS A "RUN-IN"

JENNINGS heard the rapid thud of racing hoofbeats behind him. He twisted in the saddle and looked back, then reined hurriedly out of the trail to let the madman thunder past. Instead, Chance pulled up in two stiff-legged jumps as if Stepper were set to turn a runaway. Jennings gaped when the horse spun toward him.

"Come along back with me a minute," Chance said, with a deadly kind of calm.

"I must say—what for?" Jennings tried to bluster, but his tightening of the reins kept his horse backing away as Chance pressed close.

"You forgot something. Come on back and I'll show yuh."

"What—you could have brought it, then—" Jennings was feeling his pockets while he gave way before that steady advance.

"No, I couldn't. I'll have to show yuh."

Jennings attained a shrug whose scorn was meant to mask his submission. He was already headed back over the hill and Chance cleverly herded him along without open coercion but with a calm insistence which Jennings obeyed.

"I haven't lost anything—"

"I said you forgot something." Chance crowded Jennings's horse into a lope. They reached the gate and he jumped his horse ahead and rode through first. He stopped, full in the trail.

"Mr. Jennings, there's one unwritten law that no rangeman ever thinks of breaking. It's to leave gates the way you find 'em. You was the last one through here. Now, *shut that gate!*"

Jennings went purple. "Why, you impudent pup—"

"Shut—that—*gate!*"

Jennings looked at him, faced the granite in Chance's eyes. His own glance flickered and turned to the gate. He opened his lips to speak, shot another glance from under his eyebrows at Chance, and threw a leg over his cantle. He shut the gate with a slam, turned his back.

“Shut that gate and—*hook the chain*,” Chance directed evenly. And cursing, Jennings did as he was told.

“Now, dog-gone yuh, don’t you ever open that gate again. Nor any gate that belongs to the Rocking Arrow,” Chance cried hotly. “I hate your insides. You keep your side the fence and I’ll keep mine. I tell you those.” He waited until Jennings, red-faced and swearing horribly, had topped the hill and gone his way. Then he rode on across the pasture and up to the stable, cooling a little and feeling much more friendly with the world. But something kept nagging at him. Jennings’ errand? Yes, he told himself, maybe that was what bothered him. And yet—

Suddenly his tongue coined the answer. “Yella. He’s yella from his boots up. Let me bluff him bare-handed. But if looks could kill—”

Sobered, aware of an inward shivering, he dismounted, took saddle and bridle off Stepper and turned him into the corral. His Uncle Jim, a silent, somewhat colorless old man, came out of the stable, looked at him, grunted some unintelligible greeting and started afoot for the calf pasture, nail bucket and hammer in his hands.

“What did that dog-gone Jennings want?” Chance demanded, waiting until he came close.

“Better ask your mother. She’s the one talked to him, not me.” Jim hesitated, eyed Chance as if he meant to say more, then mumbled something into his beard and went on about his errand.

Mom was in the pantry when he went in. As the door slammed behind him she came out, her hands and forearms covered with flour. Chance’s eyes widened. Here was the picture she had made in that strange dream he had in the boat. But he saw that her eyes were red with weeping and the sight was so unusual that he forgot the elusive mysteries of dreamland for this more vital one.

“What did Jennings want here, Mom?” he asked without prelude, and went up to lay a hand on her shoulder and kiss her on a cold, tear-dampened cheek. “Jim says you talked to him.”

“Yes, I—oh, Chancey, be careful with that man! Be careful! If you only knew—” She began crying again in a dreary, heartsick way more hopeless than her grief for his father. She turned away, one hand fumbling awkwardly for her apron. “I sometimes wish I was dead and done with it all,” she cried brokenly, half to herself.

“Now, Mom, looky here! You wouldn’t stand that kinda talk from me, you know you wouldn’t. If that yella-bellied rattler come here bothering you

about anything, he'll sure wish he hadn't, I'll tell you those. Why, he's just a coward, Mom. I had a run-in with him a little bit ago and he showed the yella right from the start. Don't you worry a minute about *him*."

"Chancey! Did you have trouble with Hugh Jennings? I'm afraid of that man. Don't you ever go near him. I—there's been trouble enough in this family—" She groped blindly for a chair, her face white and drawn.

"You come on and lay down awhile, Mom. You'll feel better." His arms around her, Chance was urging her gently into her bedroom. But she would not lie down. Instead she sat on the edge of the bed, slow tears streaking her cheeks. Chance was at his wits' end with worry and helplessness. He drew her head to his shoulder, smoothed her black hair comfortingly. "Come on, Mom, you just tell me the whole dog-gone thing. You wouldn't leave your Chancey boy guessing around in the dark, would you? You remember what you always used to tell me when I was a little skeezicks and fell off'n haystacks and things? 'Crying never did any good'—that's what. I never thought I'd grow up and be telling *you* that. Come on—brace up. Tell me and get it over with."

Mom was not a weak soul, yet she responded but sluggishly to his boyish wheedling. Even when he carefully spread a gay corner of his neckerchief and wiped her tears with it she could manage no more than a faint attempt to smile.

"Now come on, Mom, get it off your chest. What's all this about Jennings? I've done ordered him to stay off the ranch, just on general principles. If I'd 'a' knew he made you cry—"

"Known, Chancey. Your grammar's worse than Dickie's." But she could not mask from her son her shudder when he spoke Jennings' name. And he so patiently waited for her to explain that she squared her shoulders and lifted her head for the ordeal. But she would not look into his face.

"Chancey, it—I don't—it's hard, terribly hard. But it's your right to know—if only you'll promise me you won't say or do anything—" She pressed her aging mouth tightly, fighting for control.

"I promise not to go off half-cocked, Mom. I've—learned to control myself pretty well. You know that."

"Yes, you're a lot more settled—you're a man now. Just remember to *be* a man and use your reason and not—"

"Go on, tell me, Mom. I'm—settled. What is it, Mom?" He hesitated, forced himself to say it. "Is it—Dad?"

“No—oh, I don’t know! Chancey, don’t ever do what you know is foolish or—dishonorable. Always reach up and live the highest you can. I—promise me, Chancey boy!”

“Sure, I promise.” His long, curling lashes that Hazel had “choosed” so fondly, blinked twice over a stab of recollection.

“It’s terrible to pay the reckoning when it comes, Chancey. That’s what I’m doing now. Paying in bitterness and—regret.”

“Yeah?” A casual word, but it was burdened with blank amazement.

“Yes. Your mother is paying a terrible price—”

“Better start in at the beginning. Tell it straight, Mom. That’s the way you always made me do. Remember?”

“Yes—Chancey, I’m afraid—terribly afraid I’m responsible for—whatever it was happened to your father.” She stopped, perhaps waiting for some sign of horror and repulsion. None came. Chance only held her tighter, pressed her head closer against his cheek. “I can’t be sure. I’m just afraid.”

“Tell me, Mom.”

“Well—it started when I was a girl. I—guess I was—I was considered a handsome girl, and I guess it was true. You—if you’d been a girl, Chancey, you would have been the dead image of me. Your mouth and eyes—but your hair is lighter—”

“You’re a dog-gone handsome girl right now, Mom. Go on.”

“Well, the fellows were all after me—I never lacked for beaux—but your father was the one—always. Remember that, Chancey. I always loved your father—Thede, we called him. I always will. But—I don’t s’pose girls ever will have any sense. He hung back. He was bashful, and I used to encourage other young men just to tease him—”

“Yeah, I know that game, Mom. The pretty girl don’t live that don’t play that game more or less. Us fellows kinda expect it. We—we like ’em better that way. Well—?”

“Hugh Jennings was one.” She drew a sharp breath. “His folks had money. He drove a fine covered buggy and a span of pinto ponies that must have cost a pile of money. Perfectly matched and high-lived—”

“Yeah, I got a pretty fair idea, Mom. And you went buggy ridin’ with him. That it?”

“Yes, that started it. Hugh and Thede—your father—always did hate each other, and like a fool I used Hugh for a club to whip your father into line. Hugh was overbearing and there was some talk about him—the boys

used to hint things—but I was just an ignorant little fool and I didn't know what it all meant. I—the first thing I knew, Hugh Jennings claimed we was engaged. It wasn't so. I had never promised—but he claimed I did.

“Well, it brought your father around quick enough. I thought I'd been pretty smart. He come and asked me point-blank and I told him the truth. I told him I wasn't engaged to Hugh, no matter how much Hugh might think himself engaged to me. So—your father and I come to an understanding that day. And—”

“Jennings was sore and him and Dad tangled. Mom, that kinda thing happens every day. No use blaming yourself—” He stopped, lifted her head, stared deep into her eyes. “Mom, do you think he's the one—”

“Oh, Chancey, I don't know! You know your father never was a quarrelsome man and you'd think that thirty years would— But some folks never forget. Thede and Hugh hated each other so, and then they fought— Hugh was so beside himself when he found out I was going to marry Thede, and the young folks deviled him— It seems he talked about me and told—a pack of lies. I know he said he would never want to—*marry* me. I—your father almost killed him for that.”

“He'd oughta finished the job.” Chance put away her hands and stood up. A white line showed around his mouth. His mother knew that sign. She sprang up and caught him by the shoulders, halting him as he was leaving.

“Chancey!” She shook him as if he were a little boy having nightmare. “That was thirty years ago and they settled it then. Your father whipped him and made him come and get down on his knees to me and ask forgiveness for the lie. He humbled Hugh till I was sorry— And now you'd play the fool over what's past and gone.”

“He killed Dad to get even. Is that past and gone too? Am I supposed to let him get away with that?” His mother was standing with her back against the door. He wanted to get out of that room, ride after Hugh Jennings—

“There's no proof of that. I taxed him with it to-day. I said it seemed as if he must have—taken out his spite on Thede. I begged him to—just to tell me where the body was. I—”

“He'd tell you that—oh, sure he would!” Chance gave a short, bitter laugh.

“He don't know. Chancey, I know Hugh too well; I can tell when he's lying. There's a twitch of his left eyebrow—he can't help it and I used to watch that eyebrow—I never knew it to fail, that and a look in his eyes I

can't describe. Chancey, I'd stake my life on it—he *don't know what became of Thede*.”

“It'd take more'n his eyebrow to make me believe that. I tell you those.”

“That's as may be.” His mother seemed unimpressed. “You're young and you've never learned to give the devil his due.”

“That's what I aim to do, if you'd just let me through that door. Don't make me push you outa my way, Mom. I'll sure give that rattlesnake his due!”

“Chancey, if you don't stand still and listen, I'll box your ears, old as you are!” The clash of wills was rapidly restoring Mom's spirit.

“You better talk dog-gone fast.”

“I'll talk as I'm a mind to. Chancey, Hugh don't believe your father's dead. Say what you please, I know when he's telling the truth. He thinks he's alive somewhere and that I was the one doing the lying about it. He said—Chancey, stand still!—He said I'd move heaven and earth to keep him from knowing Thede had left me. He meant it too.”

“Well,” Chance demanded harshly, “and what about the saddle?”

“I asked him that, and he said your father gaumed up that saddle to throw folks off the track.”

“Of all the crazy—why, dog-gone his rotten—”

“But, Chancey, who's to prove anything different? All the hunting and searching that was done, it does seem—”

“Mom! Do you believe that?” Chance's eyes searched her face. “Have you let that—Jennings—talk you over?”

She shook her head. “Chancey, I don't know what to think. It isn't what Hugh said, so much. But here you've been hunting high and low, after the sheriff and all the posses gave it up last summer. And I know the boys have never quit looking. All winter I suffered the tortures of the damned, thinking of your father's body laying out in the storms—and you came and hunted everywhere, and there isn't one thing to show for it. I'd pretty near made up my mind your father must be alive somewhere, even before Hugh came today, and I saw he thinks the same thing.”

Chance regarded her frowningly. “Is that what brought him over here, to tell you that?”

She met his look steadfastly. “No, Chancey, it wasn't. He was over this way—bear in mind, Chancey, that we almost grew up together, and there was a time when—” She flushed, glanced away, turned back to her son

—“when he was in love with me and expected to marry me. He came as a friend; or so he said. He left mad as a hatter at me. I—don’t trust Hugh Jennings when his temper’s up. He’s got a mean vindictive streak in him. I accused him to his face and—Chancey, we had a regular quarrel. He was in a terrible temper when he left. But you can think what you please, I’m as sure as that I’m standing here that he thinks your father is alive to-day.”

“And I’ll bet he wishes he wasn’t.” Chance’s rage had cooled. He spoke in his normal tone almost.

“Well, maybe. He always did hate Thede Moore and he always will, I expect. He’s changed till I wouldn’t hardly know him, but he’ll never change that much. He’s carrying some terrible load, I could see that. He would have it that I knew your father’s whereabouts and just wouldn’t let on to anybody.”

“What business would it be of his, anyway?”

“Why, none, that I know of. It was just that we got to quarreling and one word led to another. We both said more ’n we meant, I expect.”

“Yeah? What about me being careful of that man and you being afraid of him. That’s what you said when I first got here. Didn’t you mean that, Mom?”

She bit her lip as Chance had a way of doing. “I was all worked up, then. I’d say anything most.”

“You musta meant it, or you wouldn’t have said it.”

“My conscience! Don’t you ever get mad and say things? Far as that goes, I don’t trust Hugh. I don’t forget the lies he told about me when we were young folks together. I wouldn’t want to have anything much to do with him, and I don’t want you to. But I don’t s’pose he’s any worse than lots of other folks we like well enough.”

“I betcha he knows more about Dad than he lets on, just the same.”

“No, I don’t know as he does, Chancey. He come over here fishing for information, I guess. But there ain’t a mite of evidence to go on that would implicate Hugh—and it would be a terrible thing to accuse a person of such a thing unless you’ve got proof to back you up.”

“That means,” said Chance bitterly, “my hands are tied.”

“Yes, and your tongue, Chancey. Be careful you don’t say more than you can prove.”

“Well, dog-gone it, you can’t tie my thoughts, anyway!” And Chance snorted and left the house, slamming the door after him.

He almost ran over Cloudy, who was sitting on the steps smoking a cigarette.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

TALK DOES NO GOOD

CLOUDY unfolded himself, carefully disposed of his cigarette, which had gone cold before it had burned half an inch of its length, and followed Chance down the path. Until they were through the yard gate and nearing the corral, neither spoke a word.

“I forgot to make out your time,” Chance said gruffly then. “If you’ll wait a minute, I’ll go back right now and do it.”

“No hurry at all, kid. Not unless I’m fired for wanting to quit.”

“Don’t be a dog-gone chump. It’s your move, not mine.”

“Well, forget it for a little bit. I can’t quit yet. We got too much on our hands right now.”

Chance was saddling swiftly. He looked at Cloudy over Stepper’s back as he drew tight the cinch. Cloudy was already on his horse, waiting just across the pole fence.

“I thought you said—”

“Don’t make a damn bit of difference what I said. That was ten mile up the trail. Now’s a different story.”

Chance took up the dangling reins, led Stepper through the gate and fastened it, thrust a booted toe in the stirrup and swung up with that effortless nonchalance which is the envy of city equestrians the world over. Cloudy leaned as negligently to one side, reins held loose. His horse swung that way and the two drew together in the dusty trail and rode stirrup to stirrup back the way they had come. From the kitchen window Mom watched them through blurred eyes, closed hand against her trembling mouth.

“God, protect my son!” she prayed aloud. “Don’t let *him*—come up missing—” She saw Jim coming up the path with a battered basin heaped with eggs. She turned abruptly and went into her bedroom and shut the door.

The two in the trail reached the gate without speaking. It was Cloudy who loped ahead, swung the gate open, held it until his young boss passed through; and closed it, bending limberly from the saddle to hook the chain around the post. The gray horse wheeled and loped eagerly to overtake the

brown, tossing his head to show his satisfaction as he drew alongside and settled to the leisurely fox trot Stepper was taking.

Cloudy gave Chance a swift, intent look that read the moody face and the downcast eyes with accurate understanding. “Say, I don’t make it my business to glue my ear to every keyhole I see,” he began with a whimsical apology in his tone. “But when a thing concerns me as much as anybody else around here—damn it, the bedroom window was standing wide open and you folks wasn’t talking in a whisper, you know—”

“Aw, cut out apologizing. If you heard what Mom said, you don’t need any telling.”

“Yeah, I heard. I got to thinkin’, after you left me, and it looked to me like a dirty trick to quit in round-up time. Not that I’m so darned indispensable, but folks would talk and wonder how come. They might blame you for it, for all I know. So I thought I’d overhaul yuh and say I’d postpone that trip to South America till it come along time for vacations. Then all the granny gossips wouldn’t have so much to say.

“Well, what I’m getting at is that I met that Hugh Jennings fogging down the trail like the devil was after him. I d’ know why, but I just got one of them feelings—you know.”

Chance nodded.

“Mom could talk herself black in the face, but that son of a so-on was ripe for murder, if he thought he could get away with it. I’ll never believe anything different, and I only got one look at his face as he went past me.”

“I’d just had a run-in with him over leaving our gate open,” Chance informed him. “I hauled him back and made him shut it.”

“Yuh did?” Cloudy spoke with incredulous joy lighting his face.

“He coulda killed me for it, but he shut that gate and hooked it like a little man. Plumb yella. I told you he was.”

“Sure, he’s yella. Look at the way your dad made him crawl, back when they was young together. I got to the porch,” Cloudy stated shamelessly, “just in time to hear about them pinto ponies he cut such a dash with, makin’ himself a hell of a feller with the girls.”

Chance gave him a sharp look which Cloudy saw without seeming to see.

“Well, you heard about all there was to hear, then. What do you think about the whole thing?”

Cloudy half turned, leaning slightly toward Chance in his earnestness. “Me? I think your mom is so scared she can’t hardly see straight. She knows Hugh Jennings to a fare-you-well, and if you ask me, it’s because she *does* know him that she’s scared of him.”

“She said she believes Dad’s alive.”

“Your maw,” said Cloudy judiciously, “was just talkin’ through her hat. You’re a bull-headed kid and she was afraid you might break loose and get yourself in bad. She’s scared you’ll go after Jennings, and he’ll edge around behind yuh, some of these days, and pull the trigger. I don’t give a damn what your maw says, Chancey; she *knows*. I’m sure glad,” he congratulated himself, “that I was ornery enough to eavesdrop that time. You couldn’t give me the straight dope on this thing like I got it from hearing her story. Your mom has got brains, kid. She’s trying to lay low till Jennings gives himself away somehow, or something’s found out some other way. She don’t want you to tip our hand.”

“She said she accused him to his face,” Chance remembered.

“And she said she’s sure he don’t know what become of your dad. I think myself he’s all up in the air over it. He’s afraid your dad got away and is hiding out somewheres till he can get the drop on Jennings somehow.”

“Dad ain’t a killer. You couldn’t make him shoot a man.”

“Hell, don’t I know that? Evidence is what he’d be after. That’s what Jennings is afraid of. That’s why he rode over to see your mother. He wanted to find out how much she knew. If him and your dad had a fight or anything —” He flung out his hand arrestingly. “That’s about what happened, kid. That’s what made your dad come home two or three times looking ready to boil over. He’d run into Jennings, that’s why.”

“Sure. Dad wouldn’t shoot, but he’d fight quick enough. He never took any lip from anybody. I tell you those.”

“Well, there’s your answer, kid. Your mother and Jim both knew Jennings was over on the old Fuller ranch, and they knew them two had locked horns once or twice over that old quarrel. She knows in her own mind that Jennings *tried* to kill your dad, and probably made a botch of it.” He paused, squinting his eyes while he studied the matter. “Kid, there don’t nobody know just what happened after that shot was fired; or them two shots, if the shells you found mean anything.”

Chance’s face looked pale and drawn under his tan. “D’ you s’pose there’s any chance at all of him being—alive?” His tone was wistful.

Cloudy gave him one quick, compassionate glance and looked away. He did not say anything at all; and by his very silence Chance was answered.

They rode for a long time silent, each submerged in his own somber meditations. It was Chance, always refusing to accept defeat, who suddenly burst into speech.

“It was Jennings, all right. There ain’t another man in the country had it in for Dad enough to try and kill him. Do you s’pose it would do any good to go to the sheriff and tell him—but that would drag Mom’s name into it. We couldn’t do that.”

“Not on your life, we couldn’t. There’s got to be some other way to get at him. And we will, kid, make no mistake about that. I know as well as if I’d seen it happen that he shot your dad in the back. He’s too big a coward to face him and do it. You know that.”

“I’ll say I do,” gritted Chance.

“And what proof have we got? Not a damn bit. You found them two shells up in the rocks and that wouldn’t be worth two whoops to a jury. A good lawyer’d just make a monkey out of us. But we’re satisfied that’s where he was cached. If so, then you’re right about it taking him too long to get down to where he’d left his horse. Smoky’d be to hell-an’-gone by the time Jennings got under way.”

“Sure. That’s what I kept tellin’ you, Cloudy.”

“Yes, but see where that puts us, Chance. Your dad never reached the ranch. He stayed with his horse till he got to the creek—we had plenty proof of that. That can only mean one thing, and you know what it is.”

Chance gave an involuntary shudder. “He went into the Sluice—that’s what I’ve thought all the time.”

Cloudy looked at him, looked away. “Unless he’s alive somewhere, he’s there yet. But I don’t see how ’n hell we’re goin’ to get him out.”

“We’ve got to, Cloudy. We can’t pin murder onto Jennings unless we can produce the body.”

“And don’t forget there’s one other thing you’ve got to produce, and that’s the motive.”

Chance winced. “We can’t drag Mom into it,” he said again, and shivered. “I went to a trial once and I heard how the lawyer that was questioning the witnesses went after a woman—” He lifted his shoulders as if a cold wind had struck him. “We’ve got to keep Mom out of it, no matter what comes up.”

“That’s what. I’m glad you’ve got brains enough to see that.”

“But Jennings ain’t going to get away with it, just the same.”

“I’ll say he ain’t. I’ll rake hell with a fine-tooth comb but what I’ll find a way to get at that—”

“That,” said Chance hardly, “is the job I’ve staked out for myself.”

“Well,” Cloudy retorted, with a bleak smile, “from all present indications, I’d say it’s going to be a man-size job for the two of us.” After a minute he added trenchantly, “And talk won’t do it, either.”

“Darn right,” Chance agreed. They spurred their horses into a gallop and headed for the gray tents of the Rocking Arrow round-up camp.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE SLUICE REVEALS ITS SECRET

ALL this was in May, with the round-up well started and the days filled from dawn until dusk with the kind of work Chance loved best in the world. It is not to be supposed that he spent all his waking moments in bitterness, bewailing his fate. There were long hours in the saddle with the soft spring sun shining warm on his face. There were roping, branding, rollicking half-hours with the boys in camp after supper. There were times when his youth and his wholesome good humor turned his face away from worry and won from him laughter and the gleeful jibing of his fellows. But they were few and farther between than they should have been, and they were likely to be followed by black moods, when he reined his horse away from the crowd and rode gloomily by himself.

Heartsick moments caught him unaware. At night, when he lay in his tent and the wind came whooping across the prairie, he would half awaken and think it was the tide pounding against the rocky shore. When they camped near some wooded stream and he heard a great hoot owl intoning his melancholy summons to an absent mate, he would quiver the full length of him, remembering the pair of owls that haunted the big spruce tree just behind the log house where Jackie now lay dreaming of him, perhaps; or staring into the darkness thinking, thinking—just as he lay night after night, thinking achingly of her.

There were times when he could no longer control the impulse to ride along the rim of the Sluice, peering down into the straight-walled canyon where Bent Willow creek ran snarling at the boulders in its bed. Cloudy usually went with him, driven by the same thought. They even discussed the expediency of going down in there with ropes. It was not impossible for an active fellow to reach the water from above, provided his rope was long enough. But the chief objection to that plan was the futility of it. No man could make his way along the edge of the stream. He would have to come up to the top and lower himself in another place. There was no bank, save here and there piled rock against the wall, where it had sloughed off from time to time. It would be very much like going hand-over-hand down a rope into a mile-long row of hundred-foot wells, with no positive assurance that what they sought lay in any one of them. Possible, perhaps. Certainly unfeasible.

The only way of getting in was by swimming down the creek, and each of them had tried that. Once was enough.

It was hard to give up looking. Like one who has lost some treasured thing and goes back again and again to search the place where last he remembers having had it, Chance had spasmodic spells of riding up and down the rim of the Sluice, even after he and Cloudy had agreed that it was absolutely useless, that nothing more could be done. These times left him with a desperate sense of frustration, of rebellion against the stark injustices of life.

Moreover, he was worried because Mom was growing gray and gaunt, with a constant vague questioning look in her eyes that always sent him back to the round-up with a heartache not born of his own troubles. She never mentioned his father now, nor Hugh Jennings. It maddened Chance to think that she was afraid to mention them to him; that she was hoping he would forget. As if he ever could.

To cheer him, to set him looking happily ahead to the near future, she talked a great deal about Nellie and she harped a good deal upon the wedding and just how she meant to rearrange the house so that she could live in the two east rooms and let them have the rest for themselves. She began to look at small stoves pictured in her pet mail-order catalogue, and she wanted Chance's opinion of this one and that. She meant to do her own cooking, she assured him over and over, and she said rather wistfully that she'd have her table big enough so that she could invite them to supper once in awhile.

Chance looked at the stoves when she thrust the catalogue under his nose. He told her anything she liked was all right with him and he'd always want to eat her cooking—and he never failed to remind her that there was lots of time yet. Why, he wasn't anywhere near through with the calf round-up yet. He had a lot to do, he'd tell her those. And Mom would (unless he got out of the house in a hurry) bring the almanac and show him how short the time was getting. July would be here before he realized it.

Then Chance, who was trying his hardest not to realize the closeness of July, would remind her that he had all those Cross J cattle to handle besides the old Rocking Arrow. The calf crop, he declared, was the heaviest known to man, and when you made a circle and started working the herd, it looked like there were more calves than anything else. He didn't mean to overlook any, he'd tell her those.

Well, if it came to that, Mom would reply, Chancey was right, of course. His father had paid enough for those Cross J's, and they would have to make

every critter pay for itself if they wanted to come out ahead on the deal. She was glad Chancey was taking hold so well. If he didn't finish the round-up in time, she supposed he could leave Cloudy in charge. Cloudy had run the beef round-up and done real well, considering the little time they had before the snow got too deep. It would be better to leave Cloudy running the round-up than it would to postpone the wedding. A girl never felt the same about a put-off wedding; as if marrying her wasn't important. Still, Mom thought Cloudy would more than likely feel hurt if he didn't get to stand up with Chancey. He'd gone and bought himself a real nice new suit, just before Chancey came home, and she s'posed he was kind of figuring on wearing that to the wedding. Had Chancey said anything to Cloudy about being best man?

No, Chance admitted, he hadn't mentioned it at all. Secretly he wished she hadn't got that idea into her head. More than once he was tempted to tell her that Cloudy was only waiting for the end of the round-up before he left, and that Cloudy would be halfway to Argentine before there was any wedding to stand up for. Mom would sure have a lot to say about it, if he told her Cloudy was going to drift. It would take her mind off the wedding for a little while. But Cloudy's going was another thing he hated to think of, and, moreover, he had a strong feeling that Cloudy did not want his plans known until the last minute. Whatever trouble he had got himself into, he sure didn't want it talked about. So he did not tell Mom anything at all.

Another thing that irked him on his hasty home-comings was Mom's careful planning to feed him early and give him time to ride up and see Nellie for a minute before he galloped back to the range. He might pile his work and his responsibility into a mountain, but Mom could always see Nell Shirley over the top of it, waiting at the window (at least figuratively) and watching for him to come riding up the creek trail. Chance's conscience could see her also. He did not need Mom to remind him. But where he might have hushed his conscience with specious excuses, there was no hushing Mom's alert loyalty to Nellie. She was so afraid that Nellie would feel slighted and a little jealous of Chancey's mother, and she was fiercely resolved never to come between her son and his happiness. So in her unselfish zeal she harried him off to play the unloving lover.

Chance would mount in haste and go tearing up the road, wanting to get it over with. Mom would stand by the window and watch him go, chewing her lip to keep her eyes from blurring with her own loneliness and hunger for him. And neither guessed how the other's heart ached over the steady march of the days toward July.

It is easy to understand why the calf round-up lagged under Chance's competent management—for it took a competent man to seize every small excuse for delay without arousing the curiosity or suspicion of his crew. But it was not easy for Chance to see afterwards just how or why it was that his instinct to push off certain dreaded events proved a vital factor in pulling other events to a focus in what seemed the most natural manner in the world. All his life afterwards he would have spells of wondering about that.

The first event manifested itself as a culmination of seemingly trivial incidents. June being the month of sudden storms and terrific downpours of rain, it so happened that Chance cast a wary eye toward the southwest one morning and told Shorty, the cook, to pull over to Sweetwater Spring and camp at the cabin. Chance was no weather prophet, but he chose to act as if he were one. He declared that he smelled rain and plenty of it, and they could use the Sweetwater pasture for the cavvy and what few cattle there might be in back of Sweetwater. It was stony, barren ground back in those hills, and cattle did not favor it as spring range, but Chance chose to ignore that fact.

The truth was that riding the Sweetwater hills would hold them a little longer north of Bent Willow and that much farther from home. It would also kill a little time. So, instead of working down to the lower ford of Bent Willow that forenoon, and crossing to the south side to a camp five miles beyond, on a little stream called Clear Creek, the wagons swung toward the northeast, which would carry them no nearer Bent Willow than when they started at sunrise.

Chance wondered afterwards what uncanny prescience had impelled him to that move. For night found them housed snugly in the roomy cabin at Sweetwater, the cavvy pastured where grass and the shelter of aspen thickets were plentiful along Sweetwater Creek—and the worst storm of the season raging over the prairie. Wind, rain, hail-stones the size of a pigeon's egg, thunder and lightning. All night the tempest whooped and howled and pelted the land. After that the wind lessened a little and the rain came slanting down hour after hour with never a break.

It lasted two days and nights before the wind changed and the sun showed his face again. And since the bare ridges had been raked by the storm until the stubbornest old steer would have fled to the creek bottom, and the gullies were washed full of silt and rock rubble, covering what grass might have grown there, Chance had no further excuse for lingering. The Rocking Arrow wagons pulled out for the ford, and the cowboys, turned off

two by two like the spokes of a huge wheel, rode a wide circle and swept the Sweetwater range clean of cattle, driving them down to Bent Willow.

All very natural, with nothing save Chance's remarkable weather wisdom to set those days apart from the regular routine of the spring round-up. He felt a bit guilty over that. Though he did not confess it even to Cloudy, that storm had surprised him as much as any one. Yet afterwards he wondered—just as he had wondered over that gray rooster.

Half a mile from the crossing, Dick came galloping out to meet the vanguard of the herd, Chance riding point. Dick's face was the color of tallow. His good-natured and none too intelligent blue eyes were round and a bit glassy with the tremendous import of his news.

"Better flag the boys down, Chance!" he yelled, when he was still a fair pistol-shot away. "Turn them cattle back and hold 'em away from the ford!"

"What's the matter? Flood?" As so often happens, Chance failed at the moment to see any particular significance in Dick's excitement.

"No! I—uh—I was ridin' down the bank to give m' horse a drink, and—uh—I seen something—acomin'—uh—" Dick gulped like a stranded fish, which his bulging eyes made him somewhat resemble.

"*What?*" A dawning comprehension drained the color from Chance's face, then sent the blood humming into his head. "You mean—?"

"Uh-huh." Dick set his horse down on its haunches as the two met. "I seen him comin'—out purty near in the middle. I—I took down m' rope and—I caught him just as he was—floatin' past."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

BY A MAN HE KNEW

AS CHANCE galloped down to the ford, certain trivial details stamped themselves upon his memory with the fidelity of a camera lens. The cook leaning forward over a small wild-rose bush in full bloom on the bank, staring slack-jawed at something below him; the scant locks blowing across his bald patch, and the purple stain on his flour-sack apron where juice from a can of blueberries had dribbled down his bulging front. Just beneath him, the bare heads of four Rocking Arrow riders standing on the gravel bar, staring with compressed lips at something hidden from view. A meadow lark teetering on a willow branch less than fifty feet away, gray throat swollen with the melody pouring from his sharp little beak.

The last of his boyish immaturities dropped from Chance as he swung down from his panting horse at the water's edge and strode down to the silent group, his high boot heels pegging holes more than three feet apart in the soggy sand as he went.

“—ain't been in the water long,” a grave voice was muttering, as he came up. Then they saw Chance and moved aside to let him pass, wide-brimmed hats dangling from gloved fingers hanging helplessly at their sides. By their frozen passivity they betrayed how hard they were hit. They did not look at Chance directly but held their faces averted. A few turned in evident relief, as Cloudy came hurrying with long steps to the spot.

“Here, kid. Better let me—”

“I'm no kid,” Chance stated without a shade of feeling. “I've got to see it through myself.” Though his voice was even, his eyes held a look never seen there before. The line of his jaw had sharpened and hardened. His mouth looked carved in bronze.

Cloudy said no more, but nevertheless he went down on one knee before the desiccated body, Chance beside him. The same thought must have held each for a moment; the thought that this poor shrunken thing was not Thede Moore. It seemed as little human as a coat that has lain out all winter under the snow. As when he looked down at Svensky, dead in the boat, Chance wondered where the man had gone. His boots, his big-roweled spurs identified the wreckage as having once belonged to his father, but certainly it was no part of him now. Cast-off. Discarded, maybe forgotten. Chance wished he knew.

The grim examination Cloudy made did not take long. There was so little left to examine; a bony structure to which clothing clung. The hard outline of something in the breast pocket of the shrunken coat attracted Cloudy's glance. He hesitated, gingerly unbuttoned the moldy garment, the button dropping away in his fingers. He shivered a little, probed with his fingers and withdrew the object.

"His tobacco can," he said in a low tone and offered the can to Chance, who took it mechanically, wrapped it loosely in his handkerchief and shoved it into his pocket as though his thoughts were far from the act.

The growing group of Rocking Arrow men shot sidewise glances at one another. Some of them remembered seeing their boss tear the trademark seal off that can. English Curve Cut. Thede Moore always smoked that brand. "Funny he'd stick it in that pocket," a thin-faced puncher mumbled to the man beside him. "Always carried it in his hip pocket."

The other nodded wordless agreement. Chance stood up and the group backed a little.

"Slim, you better catch you a fresh horse and go bring the sheriff and coroner out here," he said, with a grating harshness. His face was gray but his eyes now had a cold, forbidding look. "Be damn careful you don't let out a word of this to a soul but them. If you think you can't keep your mouth shut, say so now, and I'll send somebody that can." His bleak gaze went slowly around the group. "It's going to take a doctor to tell just what killed him," he vouchsafed, in a flat even voice. "We'll camp right here till we get his word on that—and I don't want a soul but us to know a thing about it. Dick, you go bring a canvas. You'll find a clean one rolled in my bed. I've been packing an extra one, in case—"

"Hadn't you better let me go bring the sheriff?" Cloudy filled the pause Chance left.

Slim, already ten steps from the spot, heard and swung back. "What's the matter? Think I haven't got any brains in my head?" he challenged sharply.

Chance waved him on his way. "Catch up that buckskin you've got in your string, Slim. He's the fastest horse in the outfit. That's why I picked on you. No, Cloudy, I want you here with me." No careless youth left in look or tone. A man, hurt to the quick and bitter hard over the hurt, going calmly through with the distressing details of this last grim service to his father. Or what he feared would be the last.

He sat apart with Cloudy, ten rods or so farther down the creek, in the shade of young alders on the bank. Two weighted corners of the new tarp were just visible beneath a screen of wild-rose bushes. Slim ought to make it in to the county seat by four o'clock, he was thinking. If the sheriff were there, he should be at Bent Willow Creek by midnight or a little after. Nothing to do before daylight. A damnable thing, this waiting. He was aware of the cowboys hunkered down in the shade of another little grove, smoking and talking in gloomy undertones. Some one was idly throwing his jackknife, balancing it on his fingers and nipping it so that a blade stuck in the rain-moistened loam. Johnny Williams, it was. While Chance was regarding him absently, Johnny plucked his knife from the earth, used it to make quick, emphatic gestures while he argued something, leaning toward his fellows. Talking, speculating still upon the manner of Thede Moore's death. Chance knew that without hearing a word.

He turned his head and met Cloudy's eyes. "It's going to be pretty dog-gone hard to get any proof, Cloudy."

"Just what I was goin' to say, kid. Maybe the doctor—"

"Maybe. I kinda doubt it, myself."

"Wouldn't have to find much. Saddle damn near proves enough."

"Yeah. But a jury—"

"Then again, you've got to pin it on somebody in p'ticular."

"Yeah, you can't just say it's so because you know in your own mind it's so; you've got to have some evidence."

"Slim oughta be back around midnight."

"Yeah, I figured it about then. They couldn't do anything much before morning."

"No, that's right. You going to say anything to the sheriff?"

"About—? No. What's the use? Just our say-so wouldn't cut any ice. Besides, Cloudy—"

"Yeah, I think you're right, kid. We'll find some way to handle him ourselves."

"Dog-gone right."

They sat for ten minutes staring at nothing, neither moving nor speaking.

"Say, I'm going to ride over there, Cloudy. I'm going to face the —— —— . Maybe there ain't proof enough to take into court, but there sure is proof enough for me. We—can produce—the body." He swallowed dryly.

“I’m with you, kid. Four ways from the middle of hell.”

“Sure. I know that.” They got up, dusted off their pants with the accustomed downward sweep of their hands. As unconsciously they hitched up their belts, as they started off toward the camp where their horses were tied to the bed-wagon wheels. Heads turned to watch them go, eyes questioned.

“We’ll be back,” Chance flung his bone of explanation for the group to gnaw upon with conjectures. “Johnny, you’re in charge.”

“Going over to tell—her,” Johnny guessed, and closed the blade of his knife into its horn handle.

In the bed tent, Chance was unrolling his blankets which Dick had not troubled to tie again. He drew out his war bag, untied it, reached a long arm down inside. Cartridges. He pulled out a handful. Four feet away, Cloudy was pawing his own war bag on the same quest. He looked up, about to speak. His lips closed again without sound. Chance, in the act of dropping the extra ammunition into his pocket, touched the tobacco can and flinched as if it were red-hot.

“Funny he’d put it in that pocket,” Cloudy said, after a perceptible pause. “I wonder—”

With visible reluctance Chance pulled it from his pocket, unwrapped the handkerchief with fingers that shook. The can was dingy, rusted where metal showed. He needed his knife blade to pry up the lid.

“Tally book,” Cloudy muttered, his head now close to Chance’s face. “Put it there to keep it dry.”

Chance nodded, tilted the can and withdrew the little book with the dark red binding he remembered so poignantly. He laid the empty can down on his tarp, opened the book and riffled the pages. Never since his agonizing hour with the stained and bullet-scarred saddle had his father seemed so close—and so irretrievably lost to him.

“Wait. There’s some writing. There in the back.” Cloudy leaned, peering at the pages as Chance opened the book and found the place. Their hat brims crushed together as they read the cramped, carefully written lines, the letters deeply indented with the intensity of Thede Moore’s fevered determination that this record should not blur and so be lost to sight.

To Whom it may concern. In case this is found on my body. I was shot in the back just this side of the gap by a man I know. I tried to make it home but could not make it. I fell off my horse when he went in to the crick. The water rivived me and I

managed to haul my self on to a bar and saw this small cave in under the cliff and crawled in to it. My legs are both paralyzed from the hips down. I am not suffering but I went last long. God bless my wife and boy. Theodore R. Moore.

That was all. Two pages were covered with the small vertical writing Chance knew so well. He turned the page, but had there been more he could not have seen the writing through the blur of tears. Teeth set into his lip, he fought for calmness.

“By a man he knew,” Cloudy muttered savagely. “I wish to God he’d wrote down the son of a ——’s name.”

“We don’t need it,” Chance said in a stifled tone.

“Damn right we don’t. Come on, kid. Let’s get going.”

“Sure—wait a minute. Look here, Cloudy.” Chance had been turning blank leaves hopefully, searching for something more. Some definite charge. Away over next the last page he had come upon two lines scrawled across the double page. Uneven, shaky, yet legible because the man who wrote held himself indomitably to the task. Heads together, they read:

“Dizzy spells verry weak.” And below that, with a stern recovery of his forces, he had scrawled, *“Hugh Jennings can’t crawl out. I got him now where I want him.”*

Chance closed the book, slid it back into its can, snapped the lid down with a purposeful deliberation. Once more his mouth looked carved, it was so quiet and so hard. He pulled his hat down on his forehead with a jerk, got up and ducked his head in the low opening, leading the way out of the tent.

Cloudy followed. They mounted their horses, reined them away from the camp and without a word they galloped away toward the old headquarters ranch of the Cross J.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“THIS BOOK’S GOING TO HANG YOU—”

HUGH JENNINGS sat at dinner. True to type, he fed himself well and in the best style, and he had a Chinese cook trained on Nob Hill in San Francisco—this, you must remember, was years before the great earthquake. The most exacting epicure could not reasonably have complained of the meal served that day in the old Cross J ranch house, though the cook’s record was not so savory, having too pungent a flavor of tong warfare and inquisitive policemen.

All that did not concern Hugh Jennings, who had finished his turtle soup, a fish that must have come from a can, though no one would ever suspect it, so cunningly had strange herbs and seasonings been combined in a sauce no round-up cook ever dreamed of. The suave little cook had just removed the fish plate and set before his boss a smoking *filet mignon* smothered in French mushrooms. Jennings picked up the knife and fork that went with the course, shifted his position a little in his padded leather dining chair and leaned to breathe in the delectable aroma of the dish when an intrusive sound behind him interrupted.

The subdued clack of spur chains dragging across wood, mingled with the burr of big rowels on the floor as some one walked across the front porch, slammed the screen door and came across the living room toward the clink of dishes in the dining room beyond. Two men, by the sound.

“What the devil?” rasped Jennings, speaking over his shoulder. “Raking that hardwood floor with your damned spurs—get the hell back outside, where you belong! Go around to the side if you want to see me, and keep your dirty carcasses out of the house.”

The heavy portières draped halfway across the arch he had cut between the two rooms hid the intruders from where he sat. The brainless louts had heeded his voice, it seemed. They walked quietly now on his expensive Oriental rug. He’d fire the idiots—keep that front door locked hereafter, though he liked the pleasant sweep of air through the open doorway. But his dinner came before anything. The *filet mignon* was in danger of cooling before it was tasted. He scowled, tilted knife and fork downward and cut a juicy gash across a tempting morsel of the savory meat.

“Put your hands up, Mr. Jennings. Stay where you’re at—but Cloudy, pull his chair away from the table when you take his gun.”

Jennings turned the shade of the beef on his plate, then the color drained out and left a sallow grayness in his face. His lifted hands took a fit of palsy. His eyes darted quick, scared glances this way and that, then settled in a fixed stare, as Chance came around the table and stood looking down at him in a detached, unemotional calm more terrible than any violence. The door into the kitchen slammed behind the little Chinese cook, who fled the scene. “Melican tong no good,” he would have explained hurriedly, if he had been stopped.

“W-what’s the meaning—” Jennings’s jaw worked in futile effort to finish the question.

“Yeah, I’ll explain. This storm we’ve been having,—well, it raised Bent Willow higher’n a kite.”

“You—I—”

“Shut up. I’m talking now.” Chance rested knuckles on the round table, staring across its linen and silver and fine china to where Hugh Jennings sat rigid in his chair six feet beyond, Cloudy at his back. He saw no gun in Chance’s hand and took heart.

“Jennings, that high water brought Thede Moore’s body down out of the Sluice.”

Jennings ran his tongue along his lips. “W-what’s that got to do with me?” he blustered tremulously.

“Plenty. He wasn’t dead when he hit the water. He wasn’t dead when he started down the Sluice. He managed to crawl out on a bar and up under the cliff into a little cave. He was shot in the back and both his legs was paralyzed. But he had guts, Jennings. He crawled on his belly like a broken-backed dog—” Chance stopped and swallowed, furious because his voice had broken in spite of him.

“If that’s so—but you’re guessing.” Jennings spoke breathlessly, almost in a whisper.

“Not on your life. My dad hung on long enough to tell what happened.” Chance dipped a hand into his pocket, brought out the can, unwrapped it with a steady purpose more deadly than eager haste.

“Know this can, don’t you? You maybe saw it that day. Anyway, you know English Curve Cut is what he smoked. His pipe either fell out in the cave or was washed through his pocket. This didn’t. This he took good care would stay by him. It was in his breast pocket, inside. He was careful to button up his coat.”

As if he had all the time in the world, Chance straightened his right leg, leaned a trifle the other way, slid his hand down under his leather chaps into his pants pocket and got his knife. There were knives on the table, but he would not touch one to this last personal object of his father's care. He would as soon eat Hugh Jennings's *filet mignon*. He opened the small blade of his knife, unhurriedly pried up the lid of the can, conscious of the coward's uneven breathing as he watched. He tilted the can just as he had done in the tent, pulled out the small leather book and held it so Jennings could not fail to see.

"My father's tally book. Here's the pencil still in its loop under the flap—see? That's what he used to write your death warrant, Jennings. Dried the book and then wrote you down as his murderer."

"That's a dirty, god-damned lie. I hardly knew your father. I hadn't seen him for weeks!"

"You hadn't?" Chance regarded him from under straight brows. "Too bad. You're sure going to have a hard time making the jury believe that—in the face of what dad wrote down in this book of his, when he knew he was dying."

"I—he was crazy if he said— Ah, you can't bluff me!"

"Say, I don't have to bluff you! And Dad sure wrote a straight story without any bobbles. Person out of his head wouldn't write so dog-gone careful. Here. You know Thede Moore's writing, I expect."

Chance had opened the book to the two filled pages. Now he held the book across the table, where Jennings' flinching gaze could not fail to see and recognize the unmistakable cramped, precise handwriting of Theodore Moore. His gasp proved that he recognized it.

"I don't have to bluff you," Chance repeated coldly, bringing the book back to a reading focus. "Listen to this. How's this going to sound when it's read out in court by the district attorney? What do you s'pose the jury'll think when they hear this?"

"*'To Whom it may concern, in case this is found on my body.*

I was shot in the back—by a man I know.'"

He looked up at Jennings, leaned over the table, holding the book at arm's length. "See that? If you think I'm bluffing, read it yourself. Them first two lines, there."

Under Cloudy's watchful eye, Jennings leaned and scanned the writing with the intent gaze of sheer terror. It was there just as Thede Moore's boy

had read it. His lips were ashy, his heart felt like a lump of lead in his breast. He could not have spoken, even if there had been anything to say.

Chance withdrew the book before those scared eyes could do more than confirm the accuracy of the reading. “No use going all through it now,” he said, scanning blank pages as he turned the leaves slowly, the book tilted so that Jennings could not see they were blank. “This will all be read in court, and the book handed around amongst the jury, so they can see for themselves it’s down in black and white and signed—*Theodore R. Moore.*”

Jennings groaned as he met those young, pitiless eyes that sent accusation like invisible thin knives into his inmost self.

“Yeah—you won’t like that a dog-gone bit, will you? How you and him always did have trouble, account of your lying yella tongue. And how you’ve had it in for Thede Moore ever since you both lived down in Colorado, and he licked the livin’ tar outa you—know why, don’t you?” His stony glance lifted from the book, froze like liquid air where it touched Jennings’s soul. “If you’ve forgot, I can tell you why—” And his eyes turned again to a blank page, scanned it from top to bottom hastily, flicked to the next as his finger lifted it.

“Don’t read—I—yes—I know—”

“Sure, you know. And I guess I don’t have to read about you meeting out on the range when he was line-riding them Cross J cattle?”

“No—I—I never meant what I said—”

“Well, that’s for the jury to decide, whether you meant it or not. Not me.” Chance turned back indifferently to the book. “He knew you was laying for a chance at him. But the Gap’s a little off your beat. He kinda overlooked a bet there.

“Well, he goes on to tell how he tried to make it home, and how he fainted and fell off his horse crossing the creek. You’d shot twice, from up amongst the rocks—what’s the matter, Jennings?—but the light wasn’t any too good, I s’pose (though he don’t say anything about that here) so you fired two shots, one right after the other. Here’s your shells, if you’ve forgot.” With a startlingly quick motion he pulled two rifle shells from his pocket and tossed them down on the table in front of Jennings, saw the twisted agony of fear and went on with driving cruelty pressing the bitter revelation home to Jennings.

“Two shots—at a man’s back. You were so scared of missing—you thought you *had* missed. *Didn’t you?*” He shot the question with such unexpected fierceness that Jennings jumped. “Didn’t you?”

“Yes, I—no!” He gulped, steeled himself. “I don’t know anything about it,” he snapped, much as a wolf will snap at the trap that grips his leg. But his eyes could not pull themselves away from those empty cartridges. He kept moistening his clammy lips.

“Oh, sure not!” Chance gave a snort of contempt. “You could lie outa those shells. You’re thinking that. But you can’t lie out of a dead man’s last written words about it. You’re rackin’ your brains right now, tryin’ to think of some lawyer that’ll wiggle you out of the noose. Cut it out, Jennings. All the lawyers on earth can’t help you a dog-gone bit. This book’s going to hang you, sure as God made little apples. It will,” he reiterated darkly, “and maybe quicker than you think. The boys,” he said with terrible significance, “are going to be hard to hold when they get a sight of you.”

“My God! You—I—”

“Shut up. I ain’t through yet. You fired two shots. Dad didn’t drop and you thought you’d missed. He never heard you on his trail, so he figured you’d lit out for your hole. You was scared he was going to get the boys and you wanted your alibi ready. They didn’t show up, and Dad was reported missing, and you’ve been wondering what the hell. You’ve been thinking lately that you’re safe. You thought you’d got away with it. And maybe you would of, if Dad didn’t have more grit in his little finger than you’ve got in your whole rotten carcass. You killed him. You’ve just said so—”

“That’s a lie!” Desperation lifted Jennings’s voice to a shrill squeak. “I never—”

“Aw, dry up. You killed him. You shot straighter than you thought you did. Dad didn’t—quite—make it home.” Abruptly that frozen control erupted in flaming wrath. He leaned and shook the little book in Jennings’s face. “But he got you dead to rights, just the same! While you thought you was safe, he had you cold. He laid there in that cave, where he’d hauled them dead legs of his, and he put the rope around your neck! He dried out the leaves so he could write your death warrant. He done it deliberate, as you planned his murder. And if you don’t believe that, look here, on the last page.”

He flipped the remaining blank pages quickly until he came to the last, and held the book so that Jennings could read.

“See that? What he wrote right at the last—dying with your damned bullet in him? Read it, you skunk! ‘*Hugh Jennings can’t crawl out. I got him where I want him.*’ You’re just the same as a dead man, right now. You can’t crawl out, you’ll hang for murder—”

“Look out!” Cloudy yelled warning, and jerked Jennings back into the chair, with a hand twisted in his collar.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“SIGN, YOU FOOL!”

PANTING like an exhausted runner, Jennings sat rigidly erect, Cloudy’s gun muzzle pressing coldly against the back of his head. With flaccid lips drooped loosely away from well-brushed teeth lavishly filled with gold, and with his eyes bloodshot and staring, he was not a pretty sight.

Chance’s lip curled. “Yeah, I expect you want this book dog-gone bad. I would myself, if I was in your shoes.” He flaunted the book tantalizingly. “Don’t look like much, does it? Ain’t bigger ’n a minute, don’t look like it’s worth a cent, but I guess you’d give about all you’ve got in the world to get your hands on it. Wouldn’t you?”

Jennings emitted an inarticulate snarl, lips curled back.

“I didn’t read you all of it, either. You wait till the boys get a look—”

“No! For God’s sake don’t let them see it! I—I’ll do anything—I’ll pay everything I’ve got in the world. I’ll make you two rich—both of you! I’ll sign over my share of the ranch—I own the cattle and I’ve got money, bonds you can have—a quarter of a million, and it’s all yours, if you’ll give me that book and say nothing about it—”

Cloudy jabbed him with the gun, sending his head forward. “Spill any more of that rotten talk and I’ll splatter your brains all over that plate of meat,” he hissed in Jennings’ ear.

“Buy your lousy life for a quarter of a million, would you? Say, it ain’t worth a punched nickel right now. After my father went to all the pains of writing this with the last breath he drew, do you think there’s money enough in the world to buy it?” Chance leaned, staring fiercely.

Jennings cowered away from those terrible, accusing eyes. “God knows I wish—I’d do anything on earth to—to bring him back,” he muttered. “I—don’t look at me like that! I—I didn’t do it! Thede was mistaken. It was—was some one else. But the book—I couldn’t get justice in the face of all that— You can see that yourself. He—he thought I did it—I can see he believed that. A jury’d take his word— My God, it would be murder!” He almost shrieked the last words.

“Dog-gone right, a jury’d take his word. They’d know it for the truth. Why, this book’s enough—”

“Aw, put it safe away, kid,” Cloudy admonished, with some impatience. “We ain’t getting anywhere, chewin’ the rag here. You hold your gun on him while I tie his hands.

“W-what you going to do?” whined Jennings, beads of sweat oozing on his face. “You can’t do this—”

“Oh, can’t we?” Chance looked up from sliding the book back into its can. He snapped down the lid with a finality that made Jennings flinch, put the can in his inner pocket and buttoned his coat over it. “We’re doing it just the same, you notice.”

“W-what—?”

“Why, taking you over to camp. We aim,” said Chance calmly, “to turn you over to the sheriff—unless the boys beat us to it and stage a lynching bee. Course, if the sheriff’s there, he’ll likely try and protect you, but there ain’t a chance in the world he’ll make it stick. I tell you those.”

“Y-you let them h-hang me?” Jennings choked over the words. “I—you can’t do that! It’s murder! I’m—I’m innocent, I tell you. They can’t hang an innocent man—why—”

“They won’t.” Gun balanced nicely so that its muzzle stared at Jennings’ silver belt buckle, Chance mocked him with sardonic smile and a flaming fury in his eyes. “They sure will string up my dad’s murderer, though. They won’t wait a holy minute after they set eyes on you and I read ’em what Dad wrote in this book.” He drew a long breath. “The Rockin’ Arrow ain’t a tough outfit, you know that. They’re all of ’em nice peaceable boys, like Cloudy and me. But we ain’t softies, either. It ain’t going to stick in anybody’s craw, seeing you swing from a cottonwood limb. Dog-gone right.”

“Stop! Give me my gun—or you put a bullet through me—just so I don’t hang—I can’t *stand* it. Let me blow my brains out before they get hold of me. Give me my gun—and on my word of honor I’ll—”

“On your what?”

Jennings gasped, cringed before the contempt in Chance’s eyes, blathered again his abject fear, pleading for his gun, for mercy, for the book, for their belief in his innocence—but for his gun most of all.

“Hell’s bells!” Cloudy gave a disgusted twitch to the rope he was tying. “Maybe we ain’t very bright, but I hope we got *some* brains. We ain’t feeble-minded enough to let you put a bullet through your head and make it look like we done it. Shootin’s too good for yuh, anyway.”

He picked up Jennings' hat and slammed it on his head and gave Chance the signal to go. Between them they walked Jennings to the gate, where his horse stood saddled and waiting his master's pleasure. Jennings might be an expert breeder of cattle, but he showed little regard for his horse. Or perhaps a more sinister purpose lay behind his wanting a saddled horse always ready for him.

The habit was useful now to Chance and Cloudy. They had barely finished tying Jennings' feet to his stirrups and were mounting their own horses when Mart Higgins rode into view across the meadow.

"One yip outa you—" Cloudy's glance toward the gun in his hand completed the warning.

Jennings swallowed dryly and with his tied hands resting on the saddle horn reined his horse alongside Chance in the trail. To Mart Higgins it looked as though his boss was starting off on some casual errand. And yet he wondered a little, because he could not imagine what would bring two Rocking Arrow men to the ranch, or why Hugh Jennings should ride away with them. He shook his head, puzzled but not in the least suspicious or alarmed. He was just about three minutes too late for that.

By that small margin they got away from the place without interference. The Chinese cook, as they were careful to satisfy themselves, was maintaining a scrupulous neutrality. He had retreated to his garden two hundred yards from the house and he was hoeing onions with furious industry, his yellow mask of a face turned the other way. Without a doubt he was still thinking that American tong was no good to meddle with and that the less he knew of what was going on the better.

Fifteen nightmare miles they rode, Jennings between them, babbling like a man in delirium; begging, pleading, weeping, explaining, denying—anything that might win some sign of relenting. He shouted, he swore, he whimpered, with as little effect as if they were stone deaf. In all those fifteen miles they gave him less notice than did his horse, for the horse occasionally tilted an ear back inquisitively when his master blubbered with self-pity; or jumped and quivered under a sudden fury of imprecation.

With nauseating revelations of his base nature, Jennings told them things they never had dreamed about him. Fate had always been against him, he said. Thede Moore threw things up to him that no man would endure. He supposed Thede had taken the trouble to write his version of that affair with the young squaw. Well, he'd tell the truth about that.

He wasn't any worse than other men, nor did he claim to be any better. He couldn't marry a squaw, any one would know that. He came of a good

family; he couldn't think of disgracing them that way. And the fact was, she had run after him, dogged him. She was good-looking—handsome, in fact—and she was crazy about him. Simply crazy. Well, he was human, wasn't he? Any other man would have done the same. And if Thede claimed in that damned book that Hugh Jennings was responsible for Lily Strongman's death, he was badly mistaken. Thede had accused him of it, but that was false. Lily killed herself, as a matter of fact. Grabbed his gun right out of his hand and shot herself. Why, the coroner never pushed the case; that in itself ought to prove—

Thede Moore twitted him with that old affair. Called him a squawman and a squaw-killer. Why, he even had the nerve to ask him what had become of that half-breed son of his! It was enough to drive a man crazy. Why, if that ever got out, if Eccleson got to hear of it—

He was talking with an hysterical abandon of all caution. Behind his back, the eyes of Chance and Cloudy met in a look of complete understanding. There, they silently agreed, was the motive for the assassination. With his own unguarded lips, Jennings was condemning himself.

“And what I said about his wife I said to shut him up. A man is bound to strike back—”

“Like that,” Chance said harshly and slapped him on the mouth. “My mother ain't for the likes of you even to mention.”

“And them's my sentiments too,” Cloudy stated tersely. “If the kid hadn't lammed you for that, I would of.”

“You—you'd strike a man when his hands are tied!” cried Jennings.

“Hell, I'll kill yuh with your hands tied, if you don't shut up. Or I would,” Cloudy amended, “if it wouldn't be robbing the boys of their hangin' bee.”

Whimpering to himself like a hurt dog, Jennings lifted his bound hands and rubbed his lips, looking for blood on his ungloved fingers; looking slightly disappointed, too, because there was none. His garrulity was completely squelched. He rode with a soggy inertness, brooding and sulky, chin on chest.

More than once Chance stole a questioning sidelong glance his way, measuring the man's moral stamina, his powers of resistance. He had to confess. Somehow, between there and Bent Willow, the truth must be forced from him. Cloudy, too, seemed to be mulling the same problem. Once their

eyes met, clung for a long breath. Then Cloudy's gaze swung to the ridge for a meditative moment, back to Chance and fell finally upon Jennings.

It was not necessary to cross the ridge at all. A more direct and a smoother route lay along the north side and around the eastern end of the huge upheaval of rock and barren soil. But with that wordless understanding, Chance took the turn that led through the Gap. And now he no longer studied Jennings, but rode steadily forward on the trail that had led Thede Moore to his death.

Without a word spoken, they rode through the narrow defile, darkly forbidding now as the long day closed and shadows lay deep within the pass and for some distance beyond. Jennings was shivering when they rode out from the south end.

At a certain spot, Chance pulled his horse to a stand. "This is the place, ain't it, Jennings? You was cached up there where them two flat boulders lean together. That right?"

"Y—how did you know?" In his abject fear Jennings apparently forgot the two empty cartridges Chance had shown him. His eyes followed the pointing finger and he shuddered.

"How do I know? Well, don't you reckon Dad knew where the shot came from?" Chance eyed him with pitiless calm. "You hid up on top till you saw he was coming through the Gap, then you ducked down as far as them boulders. Dad knew every stick and stone around here. He knew where you'd cached yourself, just as well as if he'd been watching you. Mistake he made was in not realizing just how treacherous a human being can be.

"Jennings, a rattlesnake would spit in your face. He's more human than you are. He'd rattle once, anyway, before he struck. You never peeped. You let Dad ride on past—you waited till you could draw a bead on his back before you dared to pull the trigger. And even then—you was so scared you shot him twice. Didn't you?"

"I—I don't know—I don't remember the second—" Then he realized what he was saying. "Oh, my God!" he gasped, and swayed in the saddle. "It's a lie! You made me say it—I didn't shoot—it was—some one—"

"Time for lying's gone by, Jennings." Chance was leaning, staring intently into Jennings' ashen face. "You're going to hang anyway, you might as well come clean. You shot Thede Moore right here where we're standing. You was up there in them boulders. Dad could see the smoke of your gun and that's where I found the two empty shells from your gun. We've got the

goods on you. No use trying to crawfish, Jennings; you admitted killing him before you remembered to lie. You shot him. Damn you, *say so!*”

“I—will, if you’ll promise not to—”

“I’ll promise nothing. You killed him, didn’t you?”

“Y-yes, but I was not myself. I didn’t know what I was doing. I was crazy mad—I was afraid he’d tell Eccleson. He’d have ruined me—”

“Now, write it down. What you just said. Cloudy, you untie his hands. He’s got a fountain pen there in his pocket, and most likely there’s a tally book or something in his coat.”

“I won’t—what do you want me to write it for? You’ve got Thede’s story—I just admitted—”

“Oh, dry up,” Chance said roughly. “I’m dog-gone tired of listening to you tell a different version every few minutes. You write down the facts and sign ’em.”

“No—no, I refuse, I absolutely refuse to sign a thing—”

“All right, then we’ll see what the Rocking Arrow boys’ll do about it.”

“No, my God, you won’t let them—I—I can’t write, I’m shaking so—”

Chance swung down from his horse, took the book and pen which Cloudy had gleaned from the tailored pocket of their prisoner. “Here, I’ll write it down. You can sign it.”

With the book spread open against the rose-stamped saddle skirt, he wrote with nervous speed for a minute or two. His writing covered two pages; a surprisingly fine symmetrical style of penmanship flowed steadily away from Jennings’ gold pen. Presently he looked up. “Here it is, cold turkey:

To Whom it May Concern: I, the undersigned Hugh Jennings, do hereby confess that I killed Theodore R. Moore. We had been enemies all our lives. There are things in my past which he knew and that would ruin me with my partner if he found out. I was afraid Thede Moore would tell what he knew so I hid in the rocks above the Gap and shot his twice in the back as he came through on his way home. This is the truth so help me God.

He moved forward, held book and pen within reach. “You sign that, Jennings, and I’ll hand it over to the sheriff.” He waited, studying the pitiable creature who sat trembling like a palsied man in his saddle, hands loosely gripping the horn. “Here, hurry up. We ain’t got all day.”

“The boys—if I sign a thing like that they’ll—h-hang me! I—I can’t sign that—”

“They’ll sure as hell hang yuh if you don’t,” Cloudy prodded him. “Put your john-henry on that confession and come along. It’s about the only thing that’ll save you from bein’ lynched the minute we hit camp.”

“Dog-gone right it is,” Chance added his urging. “Sign, you fool.”

Jennings groaned. He drew a hand across his bleary eyes to clear them of their coward’s tears, took the pen which Chance was holding inexorably out to him.

“Sign, you yella ———.”

Jennings shivered when his fingers touched the pen. But he took it, shivered again as if a cold blast had struck him, scrawled a shaky signature. He stared at it stupidly, mouth dropped half open. Of a sudden he snarled like a trapped animal, lips drawn back from his teeth.

“Damn you! You’ve made me—” He snatched at the book, fingers spread and stiffened into hooks.

“Dog-gone right I made you.” Chance whipped the book out of sight into his pocket, as Cloudy cast the looped tie-rope expertly over Jennings’ outthrust hands, jerking them back into their bonds. “That’s what I started out to do.”

He mounted, turned his stony face toward camp. They rode on at a swift gallop now, Jennings an awkward, bouncing lump of fear, riding between them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

JENNINGS CRAWLS OUT

THE long June twilight was deepening into dusk when the three came riding into camp. Vague forms detached themselves from the deeper shadows of trees, tents, wagons. Without unseemly haste, with no word of greeting or inquiry, they strolled up to where Chance and Cloudy were dismounting beside the rope corral. That the third man remained a motionless, slumped figure in the saddle struck every man in camp as of ominous significance. Limber legs lengthened their stride. A group formed.

The cowboy called Johnny, left temporarily in charge, edged forward until he stood at his young boss's elbow. "Who yuh got here, Chance?"

"Hugh Jennings. He's the jasper that done it. I've got his signed confession and I'm holding him for the sheriff." Chance stepped close to the shoulder of Jennings' horse. Cloudy, he observed, had taken his position beside the other stirrup.

"Hugh—Jennings!" Johnny gasped it aloud. Muted voices repeated the name incredulously.

"We've got him dead to rights, boys," Cloudy explained bluntly, a sharp glance at Chance's ghastly haggard face showing him his duty. "Him and Thede was on the outs—had been from away back in Colorado. He was scared Thede was going to spill what he knew about Jennings—give away to Eccleson. We know all about it. He told the whole story, comin' over, and how he waylaid Thede at the Gap. Confessed the whole thing. We're holdin' him till the sheriff gets here."

More muttering, while he untied Jennings' feet and half dragged him from the saddle. Jennings staggered, fell against the horse, groaned as Cloudy jerked him upright.

"My gosh, what yuh been doin' to 'im?" blurted Johnny.

"Not a damn thing but tell him where he gets off. He's so damn' yella he's been howlin' like a whipped pup all the way over. He don't like the prospect of hangin'," Cloudy said grimly.

"Aw, string 'im up!" a harsh voice urged from the shadows.

An uneasy shifting of the group followed that grisly suggestion.

Chance whirled savagely toward the voice. "He goes into the night-hawk's tepee till the sheriff comes. I've had trouble enough bringing him in—none of you chumps are going to spoil it now. I tell you those." A strident note in his voice betrayed nerves frayed to the breaking point. "Come on, Cloudy. Bring him along."

Between them they led Jennings to the little round tent set apart from camp, so the night herder could sleep undisturbed through the day. It was empty now except for the night-hawk's blankets and war-bag. Cloudy pushed Jennings inside, dragged out the herder's stuff. He hesitated, then untied Jennings' hands.

"This is a damn sight better'n you deserve," he growled. "Lay low and they'll let yuh be—maybe." He backed out.

Chance was already some rods away, walking with the lax uneven stride of a drunken man toward the bed tent. Cloudy looked after him, turned and went up to the hovering group of cowboys.

"Some of you fellows pack in wood and start a fire there and there." He pointed an authoritative finger. "The kid's all in. It's up to you boys to see Jennings stays put till the sheriff gits here. Build your fires so the tent's lighted on both sides and keep your eyes peeled. A rabbit's a wolf alongside that thing in there, but that ain't sayin' he wouldn't try to make a get-away if you give him the ghost of a show. And say." He lowered his voice, motioned them closer. "Best way in the world to keep him quiet is to drop a few gentle remarks now and then about hangin' him to a limb. Wait! Wa-i-t a minute!" His voice took a harder note. "I'll kill the man that lays a hand on him. Get that? Give the Rockin' Arrow a black eye like that, and all hell won't hide yuh."

He paused, waiting for that to sink in. "His goose is cooked. The kid worked on him like a guilty conscience. Got a full confession signed and in his pocket, ready for the sheriff when he gits here. And get this, boys. The longer Jennings is let live, the longer he'll suffer. The tortures of the damned is his right now. He's got the horrors, just thinkin' what's comin' to him. A word dropped now and then—that's all. And don't overdo it, or you'll scare him to death."

"We get yuh, old-timer," a tall cowboy gave laconic assurance. The group broke up, straggled off to the nearest thicket after dry branches for the fire.

Cloudy turned to Johnny Williams, who had tacitly assumed the responsibility of guarding the prisoner. "Who's on watch—down at the creek?" he asked in a low voice.

“Well, I put Curly and Pat down there to guard the body,” Johnny replied. “And say, Cloudy, I sent one of the boys out and brought in the boys on day herd; had ’em turn the cattle loose. Chance never said anything about it, but I knowed damn well there wouldn’t be no work done for a few days, anyway; not till the cor’ner sets on the case and the funeral’s over and done with.”

Cloudy started. Of course there was the funeral to be held. He had not thought of that aspect of the case. He had been so engrossed with helping Chance get the murderer that the ceremony of burial had never once occurred to him. He doubted whether Chance had thought of it either. Certainly he had not mentioned it, and there were certain details of preparation which must be attended to without much delay.

“Sure, you done the right thing, Johnny. You kinda keep an eye on things, will you? I’ve got to go look after the kid. Sa-ay, that boy’s a sure-enough wolf when he gets started—but he’s kinda caved in, now it’s all over.”

“Yeah, I noticed that. I ain’t su’prised. All this was a shock to ’im.”

Chance was sitting on somebody’s bedroll outside the tent, holding a cup of coffee and spilling twice as much as he drank. He looked up with a start as Cloudy came walking toward him.

“Oh, it’s you. Say, Mom’s got to be told right away. You ride over and tell her, Cloudy. And go to Shirley’s and ask Nell to go stay with Mom. And ask Mom—”

“Hell, what’s the rush?” Cloudy got a cup and poured himself a much needed cup of coffee. “No use fogging over there now and getting your mother outa bed. Wait till morning and go yourself.”

“No, I’ve got to be here. I’ve got to see the sheriff. You know I’ve got to see him, Cloudy. I’ve got that confession to give him. But I won’t give him that other—Dad’s tally book—I won’t show that till I have to. I bluffed him with it. You saw how I bluffed him, Cloudy. I made him think it was all wrote down. And it wasn’t. Not a dog-gone thing. But he thought there was. He thought it was all there. I got the truth out of him though, didn’t I? You tell Mom I made Hugh Jennings come through. You tell her I kept her name out—tell her it was something else. It was, too—you heard that about the squaw, didn’t you? You could swear in court that it was about a squaw, and his half-breed son—that’s what he killed Dad for, to keep him from telling. You want to remember that, Cloudy. Mom don’t come into it at all. You can swear—swear—”

Cloudy did, but not as Chance expected. And although he had no intention of going inside, Chance found himself sprawled on somebody's bed and a pillow being tucked under his head. Cloudy was still swearing in a low, tender kind of rage that was somehow infinitely soothing. Yet Chance resisted such coddling.

"D-don't be a dog-gone chump. I g-got to wait for the sheriff. You know I've got—to wait—I can't go to bed— Here! I don't want my b-boots off— Dog-gone you, I ain't going to bed! Say, you're as bad as Aunt Kate! I s'pose you'll be whackin' me over the head with your horn in a minute. I'll have Jack take a shot at you—" Then his brain cleared a little and he shut up, alarmed at what he had been saying.

He needn't have worried. Cloudy merely thought he was out of his head. He pulled off the other boot, spur still buckled on it, and drew a blanket gently over Chance's shoulder.

"You lay still and get yourself some sleep, or I'll brain yuh. There ain't a thing to worry about, kid. The boys are on the job, and I'll be here—"

"When the sheriff comes—I gotta see him. You call me, or I won't—you give me your word you'll call me when the sheriff gets here, or—"

"Oh, all right!" Cloudy rose from his crouch beside the bed, stood with his hat-crown grazing the ridgepole. "I'll call yuh—when it's time. You go to sleep."

"Sleep!" muttered Chance with dull sarcasm, though his voice sounded drugged. "Lotta sleep I'll get—I don't th-think."

Cloudy said nothing at all. He stood just within the tent and waited. Within five minutes he backed cautiously out and tied the flaps shut.

The sheriff and coroner arrived at dawn, but Chance remained oblivious to that fact for another two hours at least. For energy may be burned as fast by nerves and brain as by great physical exertion, and Chance was sunk deep in the sleep of exhaustion, renewing his forces for the further pull upon his emotional self. It was Cloudy, who had played a more passive part in the ordeal of trapping Jennings, who walked forward and met the approaching horsemen some little distance from the tent.

"The boss is asleep," he announced heavy-eyed, and touched his hat to the officers. "This thing has hit him hard. So if you can get along for awhile —"

They could. They wanted breakfast first thing, anyway.

"And the inquest can be held any time later," Jim Whelan the coroner remarked. "From all I hear, it's just a matter of form mostly. Too bad."

The sheriff, a big, quiet-faced roan called Larsen, spoke now. "Too bad the killer escaped. Not much chance now of ever apprehending him. Unless, of course, the body offers some clue." He shook his head. "Not much chance, though, at this late day."

"Don't matter," Cloudy said, and turned to look at the night-hawk's tepee. "Our boss rode out and glommed the feller that done it. Got a confession out of him. I heard the whole story myself. The boss wrote down the main facts and had the feller sign it. In his own book, wrote with his own pen. And I'm a witness to that, too. We brought him in and put him in the tepee tent over there, where you see them boys on guard. I'm tellin' you now, Mr. Larsen, so as to save the kid—my boss—from goin' all over it again. He's Thede Moore's boy, that was up in the Klondyke when his father come up missin' last summer. All this is pretty damn tough for him. But he sure as hell went to the bottom of the thing and it didn't take him so long, either."

The sheriff, dismounting stiffly at the chuck wagon where the cook was getting breakfast, eyed Cloudy with some doubt. "After combing the country as I did last summer, it hardly seems possible young Moore could lay his hands on the murderer so easy. You sure you got the right man, Henley?"

"Well," Cloudy said mildly, "I just got through tellin' yuh he confessed. Y' see, we found Thede's tally book put safe away in his tobacco can. Slim, here, seen me take it outa Thede's breast pocket. He wrote in that book about how it happened. Chancey, he took that book over and read parts of it to the murderer. It sure done the business. He come through, finally. Like I told yuh."

Privately, he was thinking that sheriff Larsen was pretty darned thick-headed, and he'd maybe need to draw a map before he was through.

The sheriff was studying the astonishing facts while he absently filled his pipe. "H-m-m. Sounds like Thede, all right. You got the prisoner over there, eh?" He nodded toward the little brown tent, where three cowboys squatted on their heels, smoking and watching curiously the scene over by the chuck wagon.

"That's what." Cloudy stifled a yawn. He had not slept and the sheriff's deliberateness bored him. But Larsen was a good sheriff; every one conceded that much, even though he had been an officer too many years to let even a captured murderer excite him.

Larsen cast an appraising glance over the breakfast preparations and started for the tepee, lagging the first three steps while he got his pipe going. "Who is 'e?" he asked casually, squinting at Cloudy through tobacco smoke.

“The last man you’d ever expect,” Cloudy retorted, falling back a pace. “You’d likely call me a liar if I said his name. Go see for yourself.”

Sheriff Larsen gave him a sharp glance but he did not press the question. He knew Claude Henley pretty well, even though he did not take the liberty of calling him Cloudy to his face. Without a word he lifted the flap nearest his left hand, drew his big forty-five and stood to one side.

“Come on out,” he commanded quietly and waited.

Within there was no sound, nor any stir. Larsen canted an eyebrow at Cloudy, his eyes narrowing.

“He’s in there,” Cloudy answered the look. “A field mouse couldn’t of crawled outa that tent and nobody see him go. Go on in. He won’t hurt yuh.”

That last remark proved rather dangerous; at least for Cloudy. The sheriff went in cautiously, gun first. There was a grunt, a lengthy pause, and Larsen backed out again, with a shocked look. He straightened, confronted Cloudy, gun at half aim.

“What kinda rannigan is this you’re trying to run?” he demanded, his voice now hard and hostile. “Hugh Jennings is laying in there with a knife in his heart. Been dead for hours, by the looks. What about it?”

Cloudy’s eyes met the sheriff’s stare full and unafraid. “Why, nothing, far as I know. Jennings is the man that killed Thede Moore, all right enough. I heard him admit it and tell why he done it. He was scared stiff he’d be hung. I s’pose—”

“Never mind what you s’pose. I want the facts. What made you so sure he wouldn’t hurt me? You knew—”

“I knew he was a damn coward,” Cloudy retorted wearily. “All the boys here can tell yuh we put him in there last night, alive and plum batty, he was so scared. They can tell yuh I’ve been no closer to this tent than I am right now. Nobody’s gone near him. All we done is watch outside.” He looked at the grouped cowboys, looked at the tent, back at Larsen. “There ain’t a man in the outfit been in that tent since I tied the flaps shut last night at dark. If Jennings is dead with a knife in him, then he stuck it there himself. To make sure he wouldn’t hang,” he added grimly.

Whelan had stooped and gone into the tent when Larsen came out with the news. Now he thrust his head out, crooked a finger at Larsen.

“You touch the body, Chris?”

“No. Didn’t need to.”

“Come in and take a look, then. Suicide, on the face of it.”

The sheriff hesitated, looked at Cloudy, at the gaping cowboys. He shook his head. "I'll take your word, Jim." His stern gaze went again to Cloudy. "Didn't you search your prisoner before you put him in there?" His tone was eloquent of his contempt of amateur catchings.

"I did, yes. Left his gun in his dining room, where we glommed him." Cloudy refused to be disconcerted.

"What about the knife, then?"

"Why," Cloudy explained with patient politeness, "I expect he had it on him. I never looked for any knife."

"And you say you searched him for weapons!"

Cloudy shook his head. "You got me wrong, Sheriff. I said I took his gun off him. Jennings is supposed to be a white man. I never looked for a knife on him."

"The knife," said Jim Whelan, coming out and wiping his hands on his handkerchief, "the knife fits the scabbard inside his belt. Hilt stands up in plain sight when the knife's in its scabbard. Regular hunting knife. Don't see how you missed it, Henley."

Cloudy looked up from pouring tobacco into a cigarette paper. His fingers were perfectly steady. "Why, I told you I never looked for any knife," he repeated. "The kid didn't, either." He caught the string of his tobacco sack neatly between his teeth, drew the sack shut, while he glanced unperturbed from one to the other. "You see, folks, Chance and me, we're used to white men's weapons. We don't go much on knives, nohow."

The sheriff grunted, put away his gun and muttered something about damned careless ways of handling prisoners. The cook, his apron slapping him in the face and winding itself around his bare arm as gusts of wind caught it, was whanging a frying pan smartly with the poker.

"Might as well eat," the coroner suggested, hurrying off to the creek to wash. "Hold both inquests after breakfast."

Cloudy cupped his match blaze in hands that shook a little now that the crisis was past. He got his cigarette alight, walked to the bed tent and untied the flaps. Inside he heard a yawn, a muttered "Dog-gone!" He went in and sat himself down beside Chance, who was sitting up, blinking and running his fingers through his hair, trying to clear his wits after seven hours of heavy slumber.

Cloudy laid a palm against Chance's chest and pushed him down on his back. "Here, you're s'posed to be asleep yet. Lay still while I talk and tell yuh things. No hurry about crawlin' out yet for half an hour."

“Sheriff here? He oughta be.”

“Here and wrappin’ himself around a big breakfast. I want to talk whilst the boys are all eatin’, outa the way.” He looked at Chance studiously. “That sleep done yuh some good, but you look like the tail end of a hard winter, nevertheless and just the same. You been worryin’ your head off, all spring. Yesterday kinda put the cap sheaf on, far as you’re concerned. So I—”

“I’m all right. I’ll hold up my end, I guess—”

“Dry up. I’m talkin’, right now. It’s like this, kid. There ain’t a thing you can do here, no more. Larsen and the cor’ner, they’re in charge; and any red tape, they’ll wind it up all accordin’ to rule. They—”

“Sure. That’s what they’re for. But Jennings—I’ve got to—”

“Anything you got to do, I done it a’ready. Me and the sheriff has had our talk, and there’s no more to be said. I told him you was kinda laid out and you better not go makin’ me out a liar. So you lay still for a spell. You hear me? Now, kid, what I want to say is, it’s your place to ride on in to the ranch and break the news to your mom your own self. It’d hurt her terrible if you sent somebody. Time like this, she needs you and your girl with her. No outsider is goin’ to fill the bill.”

“You ain’t an outsider. You’re like a brother. Mom feels—”

“I ain’t a brother, though, and Mom don’t feel the same towards me as she does you. Not in a time like this. There’s things I can do and will do. Ride in to town and get a—coffin.” He saw Chance wince and went on quickly. “I’ll make all the arrangements—I s’pose she’ll want the funeral at the ranch. It’s sure going to be tough on her, kid, and you’ll have to stay right with her and leave all the rest to me. I’ll have Johnny stay right here with the outfit till I get back, and then we’ll come on in to the ranch. You needn’t worry about sendin’ word around. The boys’ll see that everybody’s notified.” He hesitated. “I s’pose it better be Sunday, don’t yuh think?”

“I s’pose so.” Chance had thrown an arm across his eyes. Only his mouth showed, with his underlip drawn between his teeth.

Cloudy’s fingers closed on Chance’s shoulder. “It’s sure hell,” he said softly, “but it ain’t as bad as it has been. The worst is over. You don’t want to forget that.”

Chance took a deep breath. “Yes. We’ve got the dirty dog that done it,” he said, in a stifled tone that yet held a grim satisfaction. “If he don’t go and crawl outa that confession—I tell yuh, Cloudy, I’m afraid of all that money—and the slick lawyers he’ll hire—” His head turned wearily on the pillow.

“He’ll try and slime his way out somehow. Claim he signed that in fear of his life or something. I’ve heard lawyers talk and argue. Pay ’em money enough and they’ll make a snake look like a mud turtle.” He heaved himself to an elbow. “And if they do, if they wiggle him out somehow, I’ll kill him!”

“Say, cut it out!” Cloudy expostulated in a worried whisper. “Lemme tell yuh something, kid. Yuh know we put him in the tepee tent—”

“And he got away? Cloudy, if you let him get away—”

“Shut—*up!* No, he’s there yet. I went to show him to the sheriff— Say, you mind that bowie knife in his belt, that we neither of us seen or thought a word about? Well—there was some talk of lynchin’ last night, and Jennings musta heard it. He figured he’d beat ’em to it, looks like.”

“You mean—”

“That’s what. Deader ’n a door nail.” Cloudy leaned and put his mouth within six inches of Chance’s ear. “And I’d sure love to see the high-priced lawyer that can talk him outa that!” he whispered, grimly exultant.

Voices, the measured tread of two men approached the tent. Cloudy got up, parted the tent flaps and ducked through. “Want to see the kid, Mr. Larsen? I just woke him up and told him you’re here. He’s getting up—be out in a minute.” He smiled with disarming friendliness, took a last pull at his cigarette and went off to get his delayed breakfast.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

CHANCE FACES LIFE

A DAY for the inquest and its official routine, and the hauling of Hugh Jennings' body over to the Cross J ranch house accompanied by the sheriff, where it was turned over to Mart Higgins, who heard the whole story with amazement not to be mistaken for guilty knowledge of the crime. Larsen had privately wanted to make sure of that in his own mind, before he considered the case closed. And since he obligingly agreed to convoy the despised man's corpse to town and break the news himself to Eccleson, undoubtedly Larsen was wholly convinced that Jennings' crime grew out of a private quarrel with Thede Moore.

Another full day was spent in riding here and there to ranch and round-up camp and the little shacks of homesteaders, giving the day and hour set for Thede Moore's funeral. No man was missed, for no man would grudge his last tribute to a man so liked and respected by his neighbors.

While they waited the third day for Cloudy, the Rocking Arrow boys spent hours searching thicket, sunny slope, deep shady nook where wild flowers grew. Grain sacks dripping with creek water held sweet scented masses of fragrant color. Wild rosebuds half opened, violets of purple, yellow and white, which the boys called Johnny-jump-ups and cursed for their languishing limpness even while they sniffed appreciatively their perfume; deep-tinted larkspur, crane's-bill, dainty blue harebells with their delicate long stems which yet withstood the ordeal better than the violets; crisp disdainful lady-slippers, barbaric Indian paintbrush—in June the rangeland of the Rocking Arrow yielded gorgeous treasures of bloom.

The boys remembered how Thede Moore had loved the wild flowers, how he would lean limberly from his saddle to pluck a stalk of larkspur more vivid than its sisters, how he rode the round-up with flowers tucked under his hatband like a romantic boy. They remembered too how he never rode off to the ranch without a nosegay for mom tied to the saddle horn, a dampened handkerchief wound around their stems to hold them fresh for her hands.

It was for this that they ranged like wild turkeys, seeking every blossom he had loved. Afterwards, by the creek, they pushed their big range hats back from foreheads white as a woman's, and sorted and sprinkled and studied color combinations. They worried because the rosebuds wilted in

spite of their care, and they worked and sweated to resuscitate their Johnny-jump-ups. They were as unself-consciously in earnest as though this was an ordinary duty of round-up time. It never occurred to any one that they were being especially fine and thoughtful.

In the cool of that third evening Cloudy came into camp, driving a livery team hitched to a spring wagon he had borrowed somewhere in town. A long wooden box was roped in the back of the wagon, one end thrust nakedly out over the lowered end gate. Cloudy's saddle horse trotted behind at the end of a ten-foot lead rope.

As they had done on that eventful evening when Hugh Jennings was brought into camp, every man in sight converged toward the arrival. Cloudy pulled up before the extra tent where Thede Moore's remains had been placed, and with a spiritless nod to the group he climbed down over the wheel like an old man.

"I had one hell of a time getting anything I'd want a friend of mine buried in," he said, with the bald abruptness of nerves worn ragged. "Had to wire in to Great Falls, finally. Then the train had to be late, uh course. I come right on out as quick as I could—and considering everything, I made good time."

"Fine," Johnny Williams soothed him. "You go get yourself outside some supper. We'll unload—"

Cloudy's haggard eyes blazed. "Hell, yuh think I can't finish my job? Think I'll eat now, before *he's* laid out decent in his coffin like a white man? All these months he's had to lay out like a dead horse, and now— Get away from that rope. I know how I tied it—the damn' thing kept slippin' back on me—"

Nerves. He'd cave in all of a sudden, the way Chance did, was Johnny's thought. But he stepped back, letting Cloudy have his way. The long box came down, its descent carefully eased by strong arms showing white in the dusk as their shirt sleeves reflected the faint light. With muttered words of direction, a sharply released breath or two, they carried the box away to fulfill its melancholy purpose.

So all that was left of Thede Moore went home in a satin-lined casket, with the lid screwed down tight inside its rough wooden box. Beneath the driver's seat, where Cloudy jealously sat to complete the task he had undertaken, the cook's washtub was filled with a moist and fragrant mass of bloom. Behind the wagon, the Rocking Arrow men rode two abreast, hats pulled low over somber eyes, voices subdued. After them came the cook, jolting on the high seat of the chuck wagon, expertly guiding his four-horse

team with less profanity than any of the Rocking Arrow men would have believed possible. Piled high with rolled bedding, tent and gear, the red wagon chucked steadily along in the wheel tracks left by the others. Last of all, the saddle horses came trooping docilely along the fresh trail, following the lead mare's tinkling bell. Thede Moore could not have asked for a finer cortège. To be followed to the grave by his own round-up outfit—that would have been his wish.

Chance felt keenly that it was so, when he rode out to meet the mournful little cavalcade. Mom felt it was a vague sense of appeasement, as she stood on the porch and wiped away her tears to see them come. Nell Shirley's arm was around her, Nell's silent sympathy was a comfort and support. The anguish of uncertainty seemed somehow healed with the gentler sorrow of watching her dead come home to rest in the place she had chosen. At least she would know where he lay, and she could plant flowers on his grave and tend them and feel that he was not quite so far away.

Thede Moore's bones were buried with all the funeral ceremony decreed by custom. If a vague dissatisfaction lingered in the minds of his men, a feeling that his murderer had been allowed to sneak out of paying as he should, no one mentioned it. At least he had paid, and his name and place blotted out from among his fellows. The thing to do was forget him.

Chance tried, but a feeling of emptiness, a sense of flat anticlimax clouded his mind. Emotions that had surged high within him, sweeping him at the last out and beyond his own personal self, ebbed swiftly as a full-moon tide and left his days as stagnant as tide-flat mud. No current of purpose now flowed through his days. The fate of his father had been solved, his murderer brought to justice; of a grim and secret kind, that justice, but Chance was satisfied, and so was Cloudy. So was the law, for that matter.

But now, Chance felt that life was stale and unprofitable. All he had to look forward to was marrying a sweet girl whom he did not want for a wife and plodding through the seasons like the cattle on his range. He would play the game as well as he knew how, of course. It wasn't Nell Shirley's fault that he didn't love her. He had, when he asked her to marry him. At least, he had thought he did. He had asked her three or four times before she finally promised. He wouldn't take no for an answer—fool that he was. He guessed it served him right for not knowing his own mind, but it did seem an awful price to pay for making a mistake.

Still, he wasn't any quitter and he'd go on with it. He had to. He couldn't tell Nell he was sorry but he had forgotten all about her for a few months

and then found out he didn't love her any more. He remembered too keenly how enthusiastically he had made love to her just before he went away. No, she was too fine a girl to be hurt if he could help it. She loved him. She was always doing little things she thought would please him, and she was so sweet and good to Mom. It was a dog-gone shame he didn't love her any more. Maybe, after they were married—

There it was. Jackie coming toward him, the tossing sea at her back. Jackie, and his heart squirming and twisting as if hands clutched and wrung it agonizingly. It wasn't her wish—she wouldn't want him to go through hell like this just because he unexpectedly remembered—

Hours afterward, perhaps, the mad fit of longing would pass and Chance would take up the dull routine of life again. He would tell himself angrily that he would have to quit thinking of Jackie like that. It didn't do a dog-gone bit of good, and it wasn't fair to Nell. It was yella. He'd tell you those. And yet, how could he quit thinking? There wasn't a minute of the day or night when he didn't know she was right there behind his thoughts. He never knew what was going to bring her out so plain it seemed as if he could hear her voice, touch her— Always there, like an exposed nerve in a tooth, liable to jump so it almost takes your head off. Well, it was a good deal like that. His ache for Jackie was always right there, ready to grab him when he least expected it. It hit him sometimes so hard he could just yell, it hurt so to be away from her and to know it was for always. Sometimes he was about ready to throw up his hands and quit; walk away from Mom and the ranch and Nell and everything else, and go to Jackie—

Only, he couldn't be a quitter like that. Even if he could, he'd always hate himself, and so would she. Two of them hating Chancey Moore for being such a yella dog. No, he'd go through with the deal. Marry Nell and settle down to be a plain old cowman like his dad had been, and hope that his feelings would wear out sometime, or die, or something; just so they left him in peace. But all the same, he didn't think much of God's way of doing things. He'd tell you those.

One day when the round-up was over and haying had begun, he suddenly awoke to the fact that even with the short postponement of the wedding which he and Nell had decided upon, in deference to his mother's reawakened grief, the time they had set—the time Mom and Nell had set, rather—was only a week off. There is one disadvantage of having days drag by, one after the other, without much notice because they hold neither joy nor hope; suddenly they are gone, and a dreaded event confronts one without warning. There is a shocked feeling of having been taken unawares.

Chance was riding back from the farthest meadow, having gone to choose for his men the place where the next long stack should be. Some one had remarked that they ought to have that meadow slicked up by the end of the week, because this was only Tuesday. At the moment Chance had thought nothing of that, but suddenly he remembered that it was Tuesday he was to be married. Next Tuesday.

Panic seized him. He fought it, faced it, curled his lip with scorn for his own cowardice. Nell was a good girl and a sweet girl, and it hadn't been so long ago that his wedding day so close would have seemed the best luck in the world. A year ago he would have thought so. She hadn't changed any. He was the one. It was time he braced up and got hold of himself.

He did, after a little. But then Cloudy hunted him up and told him that he was due to drift. His war bag was packed and if Chance didn't mind, he'd ride in and catch the noon train. He hadn't said anything before, because he didn't want the boys all up in the air, ying-yanging about his pulling out. He'd leave his horse at the livery stable and Jim could lead it out next day, when he went in after grub.

It was all matter-of-fact, as if Cloudy frequently went to South America and they found nothing in the trifling incident to discuss. They avoided each other's eyes. Chance gave Cloudy his check, told him he'd have plenty of time to cash it before the train got in. It was always late, anyway.

Cloudy said it beat hell how the railroad would go and make a schedule and then tear a bone out trying not to keep it. But he hoped it would try and come within two or three hours of it this time, because he had to catch the through train east on the "High-line," and he'd be damned if he wanted to lay overnight in Havre. He always did hate that burg.

Chance guessed he'd make it, all right. And he must be sure and tell him how Argentine stacked up with Montana and to draw a map of the right way to pronounce them South American punchers; whether it was go-cho, or gow-chow, or what.

Cloudy said he would. He managed some sort of laugh and said it sure would be a hell of a note if he got down there and didn't know what to call himself. And so long, and he wished Chance all the luck in the world.

He had been tying on his battered old suit case while they talked. Now he swung into the saddle and, still avoiding a direct meeting of Chance's eyes, he waved his hand aloft in the gesture they called the "high sign" and rode off at a swift gallop. He did not look back.

Perhaps he could not trust himself to look back, but Chance was hurt to the quick. The way he and Cloudy had chummed together all this while, you'd think— Chance swallowed, saw Cloudy disappear around the nose of the hill in a cloud of dust, and turned away.

Some impulse lifted him to the saddle again and sent him riding off up the creek to the Shirley ranch. Nellie cared, anyway. He did not own that he was driven to her for comfort because a friend had shown indifference, but he felt for the first time a little of the old eagerness to see Nellie, to hear her laugh and to watch the little dimples come and go in her cheeks.

Nell met him at the gate, having seen him come galloping up the road. She walked beside him to the house, Chance's arm around her trim waist. In the shade of the porch he kissed her three times, vaguely hoping that numbers would answer for ardor.

Nellie was in a gay mood. She showed him a ruffly organdie dress she had just finished, and two fine linen handkerchiefs she was making; one with Mexican drawn work all the way around, and the other having an elaborate butterfly of Battenburg in a corner. Both were tightly stretched on square frames and neither looked like a handkerchief, so far as Chance could see. When he told her so, Nellie tousled his hair and made it stand all on end. And she told him that she had been reading a love story, and the bride and groom had gone on a wedding tower; and couldn't they? She'd love to have a wedding tower and go to Niagara Falls and have their picture taken, he sitting like a poker and she standing with one hand draped over his shoulder.

Her eyes were impish, but Chance answered her seriously.

"I won't be able to take much time away from the ranch. If Cloudy had stayed, we could go wherever you like. But he's gone, so—nothing doing. I'm sure sorry—"

But Nell was staring at him as if she hadn't heard. "You—what was it you said? Who's going—?"

"I said Cloudy won't be here to look after things while we're gone. Took a notion to try South America." Because of his hurt, Chance's tone was harsher than he realized.

"You—do you mean he's *gone*?"

Chance half rose, alarmed by the way her face was whitening and drawing together in a pinched, cold look. "What's the matter, Nellie? You don't feel sick, do you?"

"I'm—all right. You were saying—"

“I said Cloudy’s gone to South America, so our trip’s cut short. I thought he’d stay till I got back, but he didn’t. He left this morning.” Chance was watching her uneasily.

“Oh. I—t-th—I—didn’t know—”

Chance jumped, but his fingers barely touched her as Nellie crumpled to the floor at his feet.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

BY THE SKIN OF HIS TEETH

CHANCE was scared. He gathered Nell up into his arms, laid her on the old-fashioned sofa, with her head to the foot so that it would not be too high, and rushed out to the porch well for a dipper of cold water. He was on the point of shouting to her mother, placidly picking green peas in the farthest corner of the garden, but some inner monitor warned him to leave Nell's mother out of this. He hurried back, saw that Nell was still and white as a corpse, thought again that he should call her mother, and again decided against it. He was sprinkling the last of the water on Nell's face, watching her with frowning intentness, when her lashes began to quiver, she gave a gasp and opened her eyes.

At first she stared blankly. Then she flushed, looked away confusedly and tried to sit up. "W-why, of all things! What happened? I—I didn't go and faint, did I?"

"You sure did." Chance was too perturbed to be anything but exact. "You went down like a ton of brick before I could even catch you. How d' you feel now? Want me to go call your mother?"

"No—no, of course not. I'm all right." Nell struggled up, sitting before him weak and shaken, but valiantly trying to make light of it. "I can't imagine what made me do a thing like that. I—I feel so utterly silly! I've been sewing too steadily, I guess. But Aunt Jennie sent me the goods for two summer dresses, and I wanted to get them made—"

"You better cut out the sewing," Chance advised absently. "If that's what ails you—" He was watching her through narrowed eyes. For the first time in his life, he doubted Nell Shirley's truthfulness. "You sure it's the sewing, Nell?"

"I don't know what else it could be. I've been straining my eyes over those pesky handkerchiefs." She barely flicked his face with a glance. "My goodness, you must have tried to drown me! Just look at my nice starched collar." She laughed nervously, patting and brushing, talking very fast. But she still avoided his steady, questioning gaze, Chance noticed.

"You sure Cloudy ain't got anything to do with your fainting away?"

That brought her gaze upon him. "Cloudy? What in the world could he have to do with it?"

“Search me. That’s why I asked, I s’pose. Looks kinda funny to me. Minute I said Cloudy’s headed for South America, you keel over in a faint.”

“Why, Chancey Moore! If you’re going to be jealous—” She got up, steadied herself with a hand on Chance’s shoulder, shaking her head at him in pretended despair. “I do hope I’m not going to have a jealous husband on my hands,” she said, with a tremulous little laugh. “Why—Chance, do you think I’d ever be disloyal or—or a sneaky little flirt?”

“Sure not. But sometimes a person finds out they’ve made a mistake, after they’ve gone and tied themselves up with a promise. If I thought for a minute—”

“Chance!” Nell turned wide, anxious eyes up at him, then dropped her gaze as she leaned her head against him. “Have I ever said or done a single thing to make you think—”

“No. Only if you did care for—”

“I care for you, Chance. Too much to do one thing to make you unhappy. I—maybe I haven’t seemed very effusive—I can’t talk about those things. But I want to be a true and loving—w-wife—” Her voice broke. She hid her face against him.

“Poor kid—” Chance held her to him, stroked her wet hair mechanically while he stared out over her blonde head into the yard where an old hen scratched and scolded her pinfeathery brood. “I wasn’t jealous. I didn’t mean to hurt you—don’t you know I—”

“Oh—I’m just—nervous and silly to-day.” Nell was no weakling; she got herself in hand again. “I know you care so much you’d—I don’t know what you’d do if anything happened to—spoil our marriage. There won’t. Not if I’ve got it in me to be the kind of wife you deserve. I may—I hope you—” Suddenly she laughed and could not talk for a minute.

“I guess you’ll be a thousand times too good for me, no matter how hard I try to live up to you. It’s me that’s got to walk the chalk. I tell you those.”

“Then there’ll be two of us walking chalk,” she said brightly; almost too brightly, if Chance had been noticing tones just then. “Well, that’ll sure make us a model couple, won’t it, Chancey boy?” She tilted her head and smiled up at him.

Almost she caught the hell of misery in his eyes. Chance smiled just in time. “Sure oughta be. Dog-gone right.”

“And you’ll forgive me this time for fainting—or for picking such an embarrassing moment for it, rather?” She ducked her head and bit his hand teasingly. “I’ll give notice ahead, if I know in time.” She turned abruptly

serious again. “I want you to believe me, Chance, when I say I’d rather cut off my right hand than give you one hour of doubt or—or heartache. Will you?”

“Yeah. Sure does, all right,” Chance replied when he felt dimly that she was waiting for an answer. He had no idea what she had said, but he had caught the word heartache and responded to it involuntarily. He knew so much about heartache. He was half mad with the pain of it now, seeing with pitiless clarity the hell of “walking chalk” all the days of his life, trying to be a model husband for Nell.

“I’ve got to go now. So long—take care of yourself.” He felt as if in another minute he’d be shouting curses against the God that had let this thing happen.

Halfway home, riding as if fiends were right behind him, a thought lurking behind his misery exploded into a purpose. The truth. Before it was too late he would have the truth. Not from Nell Shirley—she was too stanch; the kind of woman who would smile with a knife in her breast, if she thought it was her duty to smile. Not from Nell. Cloudy. He’d get the truth out of Cloudy.

Mechanically he squinted up at the sun. He’d make it. He had to make it. Cloudy was halfway to town by this time, but he’d catch him there. The train would be late—it always was late. He’d catch Cloudy and choke the truth out of him if he had to. Dog-gone right.

It was perhaps characteristic of Chauncey Moore—Chancey by name, chancey by nature—that he took his haste deliberately, as it were. The big gray he was riding had been under the saddle since breakfast. While he was by no means fagged, he was not fresh after making the rounds of the hay meadows and loping up to the Shirley ranch and back. Chance thought of that and turned into the home pasture, chased Stepper into a fence corner, tossed a loop over his head and led him at a gallop to the stable.

He took time to smooth the saddle blanket, set the saddle just right, cinch it not too tight but tight enough. He did not take the time to tell any one where he was going or why, however. The dust cloud he laid along the trail and around the point of the hill was two hours later in the day than Cloudy’s had been, but it began to rise no longer than five minutes after Stepper first yielded to the pull of his master’s rope.

A hot wind that scorched the face blew out of the southwest, but Chance knew only that it killed his speed a little. He had named this horse Stepper because he could step when he had to. Now he saw that the horse made good his name, yet he used his strength cannily. As when in the boat with Whitey,

he refused to waste energy in rowing unless he knew that he was heading toward shore, so now he would not let the horse wind himself galloping up a long sandy hill. But on the level stretches he made up for that.

He would not hope. He dared not hope. He knew if he did, and that hope was false, all hell would open before him. All he dared anticipate was the truth; to have a question answered truthfully, on Cloudy's word of honor. Beyond that he would not think.

Halfway, he knew that the train would need to be late. Already it was time for it to slow down at the little red station, and because he was banking everything now against time, at every hilltop his eyes went automatically toward the south. In that clear atmosphere he should be able to see the smoke for miles, though in the broken land down towards the big river the ridges and canyons would hide it, except for glimpses now and then.

He was coming up out of a coulee, the wide valley before him, when he saw the thing he dreaded. Turning north from the river it was climbing the long grade ten miles out from town. Before he had more than entered the long lane into town, the train would have come and gone, taking Cloudy with it. Unless it stopped and waited—and trains didn't wait for anybody. Then, "Shucks!" he cheered himself aloud. "Most likely it's a freight. Maybe it's going the other way."

He had to ride down alongside a ridge for a few hundred yards. He spurred Stepper into a run and came thundering up again where he could see. It was the passenger, all right. The way it took that grade up from the river settled any possible doubt in his mind. It was the noon passenger, running no more than a half hour or so behind time.

Country bred, used all his life to meeting emergencies on horseback, it never occurred to him that he could ride on in and wire ahead of the train, asking Cloudy to take the next train back or else wait for him in Havre. It would have been perfectly simple to catch Cloudy by telegraph, but Chance did not think of it.

What he did was to swing off the main road and cut straight across the prairie to the north. That gave him a shorter line to Havre than if he followed the railroad, but with gullies to cross, one rough stretch of prairie-dog town where he would have to watch out that Stepper didn't break a leg, and of course less speed than the train. But he knew that somewhere along the line the train would stop to take on water, and he counted on two regular stops at stations, not counting the prescribed halt at the junction four miles out of Havre. It wasn't much of a chance, but it was the best he knew, and he took it on the run.

Once he prayed a little in his heart. But then he remembered what a mockery had been God's answer to his last prayer, and his teeth came together with a click. No, he'd be dog-goned if he'd ask any help from anybody; God or anybody else. He'd catch Cloudy if he had to trail him clear to New York. He was out after the facts and he was going to get facts before he quit. He'd tell you those.

Funny—while he pressed forward with all the speed he dared ask of his horse, Chance kept thinking of that last fight he had made in the water, after the dory was smashed beneath that big wave. That was a slimmer chance than this, but he had made it; by the skin of his teeth, but at any rate, by enough to mean life. It seemed to him that this was more vital than getting ashore had been last fall. And if he could win by a hair's breadth then, he'd win now.

Skin of his teeth it was. Whenever Chance thought about that ride afterwards, his heart gave a flop. Like a cat watching a field mouse scudding through the grass, tantalizingly close yet always just out of reach, he had raced northward with his eyes fixed upon that train. Sometimes he could see only the smoke of it, sometimes it was like a brown snake sliding swiftly over the prairie. The agonizing feature of the chase was that he was never so far behind that he gave up hope of beating it in.

At the last, he came pounding down to the junction a few seconds ahead, and a new element injected itself into the race. From the west, the through train came snaking out of the hills, the three of them converging swiftly toward the same point, the junction where the Montana Central track merged with the Great Northern.

The eastbound train slowed for a soft roadbed where a late cloudburst had swept down a wash and taken out a culvert. Chance was halted by the same flooded wash. The trail across it had caved badly on the farther side, leaving an undercut gravel bank ten feet above yellow mud and water. Only a man drunk or crazy would think of forcing his horse to attempt the jump.

Chance gave one look and pulled Stepper away, loping down alongside it toward the branch line. With a derisive whistle the engine roared past him, the smutty-eyed engineer grinning at the glowering cowboy, whose horse was rearing and plunging along the right-of-way. Chance was scarcely conscious of amused trainmen or of Stepper's panic. He was watching the car windows as they slid past, hoping for a glimpse of Cloudy.

When the train left him a clear track, he forced Stepper up the hill and across the culvert on the two planks placed since the cloudburst, by some one also evidently anxious to ride across—though never so anxious as

Chancey Moore. Terrified by the entire proceeding, Stepper leaped across that culvert as though he had been shot from a cannon; but the train had come to its prescribed full stop, the brakeman had run ahead, signalled and swung on as a coach passed him before Chance could overtake it.

There remained the through train, now inching across the fresh fill on the main line. As it gathered speed and came on to the junction, Chance leaned and jabbed smartly with his spurs. And with that final urging, Stepper forged ahead. Already the train was halted, waiting for the signal, when Chance tore up alongside the rear platform. Like a frog going into a pond, he leaped to the bank, clawed up it and caught hold of the rail as the train moved.

“Look after my horse!” Chance yelled over his shoulder at a gaping switchman. “I’ll be back!”

Legs trembling so they would scarcely support him, he stood braced on the platform, staring giddily back at the sun-baked prairie. He drew the back of his hand across his face, lurched and righted himself as the train went rocking forward toward Havre, hooting now and then at Cloudy’s train, clicking over the hot rails ahead. He reached automatically for his tobacco and papers, though it was useless to attempt rolling a cigarette out there on the platform, even if he weren’t shaking like an aspen leaf.

“I sure enough done it,” he said finally, with his boyish grin that would not own defeat. “By the skin of my teeth. Dog-gone right.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

CLOUDY COMES CLEAN

THE little traveling Chance had done had always taken him in some other direction. He knew in a general way that a through sleeper from Butte to Havre and on east from there was picked up here by the through train on the "high line"—possibly so called because it ran close to the northern boundary of the northwestern States. Cloudy would be in that coach, he thought. But maybe not. Maybe he'd be up front in the smoker, talking with some one he knew.

Chance would have to find him before the eastbound train pulled out. He went over the railing and down to the ground as if he were climbing over a corral fence. By the time the train had come to a full stop, he was running to the rear of Cloudy's train which had pulled in on a siding. The through coach would be the last. He climbed on, went through it from back to front, scanning every section as he passed. Travel seemed very light. A few bored passengers looked back at him with languid attention to his evident haste, but none was Cloudy.

He reached the front vestibule, pushed open the door to the next coach, strode down the aisle and out at the other end. Day coach, chair car, smoker, he searched that train to the locked door of the baggage-and-mail car, but he saw neither Cloudy nor any baggage that looked familiar. All the coaches were nearly empty, the passengers having gone their way, either to their destination or to the eating room at the far end of the depot.

Chance almost ran down the platform, bursting through the swinging screen doors and almost colliding with a lady coming out. He never saw her, though she gave him an outraged glare calculated to shrivel him with shame. The smell of coffee and sandwiches and pie made his mouth water, but he ran a questioning glance over the munching patrons and backed out. Cloudy was not there.

He spied the short-line conductor hurrying home with a black lunch kit swinging from his hand, and he took after him, overhauled him and questioned him anxiously. The conductor was in a hurry to get home, but he obligingly racked his memory for a passenger such as Chance described. Yes, two or three got on at Big Sandy, but he never paid much attention. He did punch a through ticket, though. He was sure of that, because—

“How long before the train pulls out?” Chance could not stand there talking.

With the purely mechanical motion all trainmen acquire, the conductor tilted his watch out of his pocket into his palm, flicked it with a seemingly futile glance. “Three minutes,” he stated tersely as he slid the watch back out of sight.

Chance turned and ran, calling his thanks over his shoulder as he went. The short-line sleeper had already jarred into its coupling on the eastbound train. The bell was ringing, the engine emitting asthmatic snorts and gasping as the air pump worked. Passengers were hurrying from the eating room, chewing toothpicks; some of them, at least.

“Cow-boy-y, yo’ sho’ enough in a hurry,” a porter whom he had bumped into expostulated uselessly. Chance never heard him. He dashed up past the porter at the steps of the short-line sleeper, bumped his shoulders down the narrow corridor, looked anxiously for a big gray Stetson showing above the high-backed seats. No Cloudy anywhere. Outside, a throaty rasping voice was singing out “Al-l a-bo-erd” with inflexible finality. He turned and ran out, took the steps in one swing down to the platform. Maybe Cloudy had never boarded the train at all. Maybe—

Chance meant to wire back and find out, or else— He gave one last anxious look at the train as he turned toward the depot. There was Cloudy, just disappearing up the steps two cars ahead.

Chance whirled, straddled the arm of an astonished porter just reaching for his little stool, rushed up the steps as the train began to move. He tore through that coach, completely oblivious of his staring audience, dashed into the corridor and bumped head-on into Cloudy coming from the coach ahead.

“What-tha-hell?” gasped Cloudy, grabbing his hat. “Where d’ yuh think *you’re* goin’?”

“I come after you. Pile off—you gotta go back.”

“Like hell,” Cloudy bluntly retorted. “What’s eatin’ you, anyway?” He pointed through the window where the little town was sliding swiftly behind them. “Pile off nothin’. Here. Get in here and get it off your chest. Anybody hurt?”

“Where *was* you?” Chance demanded accusingly, as Cloudy pushed him into the smoking room and down upon a green plush settee. Now that he had found Cloudy, he saw that it was not going to be so easy. Cloudy wasn’t the kind you could choke things out of unless he wanted it so. The way he was looking at and through Chance made Chance feel like a kid ten years old.

“Where was I? Well, I was in the waiting room, writing a letter I wanted to get in the mail. If it’s anything to you.”

Chance got himself in hand. He eyed Cloudy. “Was it to Nell?” He hadn’t expected to open the subject quite so abruptly, but there it was. The question had popped out without warning. “I bet it was,” he added.

“That,” said Cloudy, “is none of your damned business.”

“Bet your life, it’s my business.” Chance was into it now. “I like to rode my horse to death, tryin’ to catch up with you. I want to know what there is between you and Nell.”

It was as if Cloudy’s invisible self withdrew behind his eyes, closed a door and locked it. Yet his face scarcely changed at all. It smoothed and hardened a little, perhaps—Chance could not be sure. He only knew that Cloudy had somehow intrenched himself ready to do battle.

Yet his manner was not warlike. “Say, what’s got the matter with you, kid? Here you’re going to be married in a week, you’ve been right with me all spring and summer, and all of a sudden you jump me like this. Do I look like a dirty double-crosser?”

“I never said you was, Cloudy. I just want to know the truth, that’s all. If you and Nell—”

Cloudy cut in upon him there. “Why don’t you ask—her? She’d likely tell you all you want to know.”

“I did ask her.”

“Well? Wasn’t that enough for yuh?”

“No,” Chance said stubbornly, “I be dog-goned if it was enough! If it was, I wouldn’t be here.”

“She didn’t tell yuh—”

“She laughed at me. She said she’d cut off her right hand before she’d hurt me—”

“And still that wasn’t enough for yuh! Hell, what more do you want?” Cloudy’s eyes softened. “Kid, you better go on back and take what the gods offer yuh. I don’t say you deserve a wife like that; not if you don’t trust her, you don’t. But if you play the game straight, she will. You can bank on that. At least,” he added cautiously, “that’s my impression of her.”

In his shirt sleeves, his face grimed with dust and perspiration, Chance sat and stared out at the speeding landscape. He saw nothing of what passed before his eyes. Instead, he saw that his half-formed hope was fading into nothingness and that the empty years stretched on ahead, dry as the prairie

outside. He might ride to New York and talk all the way and he would get no more out of Cloudy. Unless—

“Cloudy, I’m going to tell you something. Maybe—if I’m a yella cur to tell it, all right. I’ll be one, then.”

He took a deep breath, stared fixedly at the wall ahead. “I been playing the game the best I knew how. But there was things happened—in that shipwreck—I’ve never told a word about it. I—”

Interruption came. The conductor pushed aside the green curtain, thrust head and shoulders inside. Cloudy showed his ticket, said something about Harlem, reached into his pocket for some silver. When the man was gone and the heavy green plush stopped swinging behind him, Cloudy touched Chance on the arm. “Go on. What was it, about that shipwreck?”

Chance started as if he were half asleep. “I was in a boat—little rowboat—two or three days—I don’t know how long. Rest of ’em cashed in, one way and another. I kept thinking about Nell and Mom—I sure loved Nell. I did then. Up to the time when I woke up in bed, two or three weeks afterwards; maybe longer—I don’t know. I’d been in the water quite awhile, swimming and drifting—tide slammed me up against a rock. I never knew what happened. Not for a long while. There was an awful fine family took care of me. Woman and her old maid sister they called Aunt Kate, and a kid—Hazel, her name was—about ten. And—Jackie.” He had to bite his lip hard when he spoke that name and the ache that gripped his throat made him swallow hard and turn his face away.

“Who was he?”

“A—a girl. I laid there and I never remembered a thing. I never even knew there was anything to remember. That big scar on my head—that was what done it. Got my head laid open—leg broke, busted up generally. Jackie—I never saw her for a long time—just heard her voice talkin’ in the next room. Hazel used to come and set by the bed and talk—you know how a kid of that age is, sometimes. Tell everything she knows. So I knew it was—Jackie—she swum out and hauled me ashore.

“I—Cloudy, you’ll never understand—you don’t know what love is. I —”

“Oh, don’t I?”

“No. Nor I didn’t, either. Not till then, I didn’t. I s’pose, maybe, if I’d remembered about Nell— But I don’t know. I don’t s’pose anything would have cut any ice; only I’d have put up a fight against it. It wouldn’t have done any good. It just had to be that way, I guess.”

“Why in hell didn’t you say something when you come home? Tell Nell—or tell—*somebody*?”

“ ’Cause I was playing the game. Soon as I remembered, I did. That was just before I got home. We—we was just about to go and find us a—preacher—when—well, it all come back to me. About Dad and Mom and—Nell. Everything. So I come home. I had to do the square thing. Jackie made me come. She—we both knew there wasn’t anything else to do. And then,” Chance said bitterly, “just here this morning I rode over to see Nell, and when I told her you was starting for South America, she went down like I’d knocked her in the head with an ax!”

“Nell did?” The words seemed jarred out of Cloudy as the car lurched around a curve.

“She sure did. So I took in after you to find out—”

“Hell,” said Cloudy. He hesitated, got out his tobacco and papers. It was not altogether the rocking of the train that spilled tobacco on the seat. “All right, kid. I’ll come clean. I’ve been crazy about Nell since the first time I laid eyes on her. You was, too—or I thought you was—so I never let on like I cared. I thought she wanted you, and anyway—well, I wouldn’t step in and try and cut you out. I ain’t that kind of a hairpin.

“I thought I wasn’t. But last fall, when you didn’t show up or write a word—well, things kinda come to a head, all of a sudden. You know how it is. We neither of us started it—it just happened. Took us both by surprise.

“Seems she’d been eatin’ her heart out, thinkin’ all the while I didn’t care nothin’ about her. She likes you, all right—more like a brother, though. It was me she loved, from the day we first met. That’s what she said, finally, when we both woke up to how it was. But here she was, engaged to marry you when you got home. And she was square. I wanted to be too. It was hell, but it looked like there wasn’t anything we could do.”

“I’ll be—dog-gone!” Chance made whispered comment and did not know that he spoke a word.

“We did give ourselves one loophole. We agreed that if you didn’t show up in a year from the time your mother wrote to you to come home, then Nell would write and tell you how it was with us. And we’d explain things to your mother and get married. But if you did come back and wanted to go on with the engagement, we’d just take our medicine and say nothing. We didn’t either of us intend that you should suffer for our damn foolishness. We’d oughta had an understanding long ago, before you asked her. So we

was prepared to pay—only we did give ourselves that one ‘out.’ And then,” Cloudy grimly added, “you come home.”

A drummer in a gray checked suit came breezing in at that moment and sat himself down opposite, lighted a cigar and drew a deck of cards from his pocket. “You boys feel lucky to-day?” he ventured hopefully.

“Dog-gone right!” Chance grinned then laughed in sudden exultation.

“How about you, brother?” The drummer’s glance turned to Cloudy.

“Me? I’m so damn lucky I’m scared to death.” Cloudy spoke softly, as if he feared some spell would break.

“All right, I’ll ring for a table—”

“Not for us. We get off at the next station. Come on, kid. I’ll have to go round-up my grip.”

They went out smiling, faces alight.

At Harlem, which was the first stop this fast train made, they descended hastily to the platform. Still much inclined to laugh over nothing, they wheedled the conductor of a freight into carrying them back to the junction. Two cowboys spending their hard-earned coin in one hilarious spree and going home broke, he guessed. And because his own pay check had a way of melting overnight sometimes, he grinned in sympathy and let them stow themselves away in an empty box car.

At the junction the switchman lavishly explained that he did not know the furrst dorn thing about harses at all, and would not lay a finger on this wan if he could; but he had kept wan eye upon the baste, and if they looked they wad see him over there forninst the fince, eating grass.

At that moment Stepper spied his master and came over, whinnying his relief. Having rolled on a nice soft patch of adobe where water had recently been standing, Stepper was mud from his ears to his tail and the saddle was well plastered, but the two only laughed uproariously and called it a joke. Like the freight conductor, the old switchman would have sworn they had been drinking.

Chance scraped off the saddle with a tie splinter, finished with a handful of grass and made a flying leap without touching the stirrups. “So long,” he shouted exuberantly. “Too bad Stepper ain’t twins.”

“Bet a dollar I beat yuh home, just the same,” Cloudy retorted gamely. “Stepper’s bushed and my horse’ll be fresh. I’ll tell ’em you’re comin’.”

“Like fun you will! Any message you’d like to send up the creek?”

Cloudy's laugh froze. "You ride up there and I'll tear yuh apart, kid! I'll deliver my own message, if it's all the same to you."

Chance laughed and rode away.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

TREASURE TROVE AHOY!

IN the bow of the squat grimy fishing boat from Toledo, Chance half rose to his feet, pointing an eager forefinger.

“Round that point’s where I done my ramblin’ around in circles for three days and nights,” he announced. “All same Jonah that Mom is always telling about; only I’d about as soon be riding in a whale’s belly as that dog-gone boat. I tell you those.”

“Chancey, don’t be unreverent,” his mother reproved him primly. “You was both in God’s hands. I must say,” she added, with some inconsistency, “I don’t see how you stood it. It’s much as ever I’m keeping my breakfast down right now, and we haven’t been out an hour hardly. How you ever stood three days and over is a mystery to me, Chancey.”

“You can stand most anything if you have to,” said Chance, gazing eagerly ahead. “Man, oh man, but it’s good to be back! I never thought I would. Didn’t seem like one chance in a million things would ever straighten out. Did it, Mom?”

“God was just trying you, Chancey; giving you leave to work out your own salvation. If you had come to me first thing and told me—”

“That would only have made you feel bad, Mom. And it wouldn’t have done a dog-gone bit of good. You never knew a word about Nell and Cloudy; you know dog-gone well you never. You wouldn’t believe it, even when I told you the other day. You wouldn’t listen to a word till they both rode over to see how you was taking it. It wasn’t till you saw ’em acting like a couple of love-sick—”

“Sh-sh, Chancey! The wind’s blowing right back their way. You want ’em to hear you?”

“For all I care, or them either.” Chance cast an amusedly tolerant glance over his shoulder. “Them two don’t know whether they’re afoot or a-horseback right now, and they don’t care. Man, oh, man! I sure—”

“Whale Cove, d’ you say?” The walrus-faced skipper of the tubby craft they had chartered for the trip had caught Chance’s backward look and seemed to think it directed at himself.

“Yeah. That’s where we’ll have to land, I s’pose. That’s where Walt Freeman always keeps his boat. Sorry, Mom. You and Nell are going to have to walk a mile or two. I’d oughta told you before, maybe. Whale Cove’s down the coast quite a ways from the house.”

“Oughta brought along a bunch of saddle horses, kid,” Cloudy came out of paradise to fling his unexpected jibe. “I’ll bet this little wife of mine never walked a mile in her life; not all in the same day, anyhow.”

“Well, *I* have,” Mom declared hurriedly, wanting to forestall any embarrassing love-making before the strange boatman. “I’ve walked and drove an ox team with a gad, coming out from Kansas to Colorado, when I was a girl. I’d enough sight rather walk than ride in this jiggly boat. It don’t do nothing but squeam and squirm along like riding in chinook snow.”

“Can’t find no fault with this water to-day, ma’am,” the walrus-faced skipper defended his chosen highway. “You think this is squeamish, you oughta be out here some day when the wind kicks up a sea from the southwest. That’s what I call squeamish sailin’! Ca’m as a pond to-day, ma’am.”

Mom said nothing to that and the skipper returned to the matter of landing. “No use puttin’ in to Whale Cove, if that ain’t where you’re headed fur. All the gear you brung along, thought mebbly you was figurin’ on campin’ out or somep’n. If it’s Freeman’s place you want, I can run yuh in closer’n Whale Cove, easy as not. Set yuh ashore right alongside them spoutin’ caves, almost.”

“You mean that little shut-in bay with the bottle neck through the rocks?” Chance’s eyes lighted.

“She’s the one. Tight little harbor—”

“Jack—Miss Roche, Freeman’s stepdaughter, keeps her dory in there. I never thought anything bigger ’n a dory could get in and out.” There was the old thrill making Chance’s blood jump when he spoke of Jackie. “I know Walt Freeman always kept his boat at Whale Cove.”

“’Twasn’t because he had to. Reasons of his own—he a friend of yourn?”

“Not what you could notice. Dog-gone right, he ain’t.”

The skipper spat over the side into a sparkling blue dimple where slow swells moved gently past. “Walt Freeman ain’t got no more boat. Confiscated. Got too brash with his crooked work and the Gov’ment took in after ’im. Got his boat, but Walt, he left his crew in the lurch and got

away. Most of his men is layin' in jail now, waitin' for their trial to come up. Walt's fambly is pullin' out and goin' back east somewheres."

"They ain't gone yet?"

"Well, no—I don't know as they've gone yit. Feller was tellin' me about it. Seems like there was an Injun come over with a letter to this feller, askin' him to run up with his boat and bring 'em off with their stuff. His boat's bigger'n mine," he explained carefully, lest they think he had been discriminated against. "I guess they're movin' out all their furniture."

"Didn't he say when?"

"No, I don't recollect his sayin'. I'd of heard about it though, if they'd showed up. I'm most sure they ain't went."

"Sure not!" Cloudy cheered Chance from the stern. "That ain't your luck, kid. They'll be here, all right, all packed up and ready to pull out with yuh. Surest thing yuh know."

"You don't know a thing about it," Nell put him in his place with a proud assumption of her wifely authority. "You're just guessing."

"He's guessing right," Chance grinned with the intrepid lift of his chin which Jackie had so loved. "'Course they're here. Chancey by name, chancey by nature. I'm willing to take the chance, all right."

"Let's hope she is too," Nell teased.

"Ah, you seem to think, just because *you* wasn't willing to take this Chance—"

"'Tain't Whale Cove you want, then? I got to know right sudden, 'cause I'll have to put 'er about—"

"No! That closest little bay, as quick as you can get there," Chance urged, forgetting altogether his playful sparring with Mrs. Nell Henley.

"Can't go no faster than the wind'll take her," the walrus-faced skipper snubbed him.

Chance said no more. Familiar landmarks were beginning to appear. There stood a giant spruce he remembered. Now they were passing the rocky point where he had sat with Jackie, one day when this was all the world he knew, and watched the waves while they talked of their plans or leaned together, blissfully content to sit there in silence.

It was Mom who broke the spell for him. "Chancey, I do feel awful meeching; four of us walking in on folks we don't know and never saw in our lives, and them up to their eyebrows in work, even if they ain't gone and moved."

“If they’ve moved, you can’t walk in on them. And there’s only three of you to get acquainted with. It’s like home to me, Mom. And you said you wanted to meet them and thank ’em—”

“Pretty kind of thanks, I must say; lightin’ down on ’em like a tribe of grasshoppers, Chancey. Why, there ain’t a neighbor or a place we could stay, s’posin’ they’ve got their beds all tore up and packed.” Mom turned and looked back the way they had come, as if she meditated a retreat even now.

“I don’t know what ever possessed me to let you talk us all into coming along,” she worried. “Nell and Cloudy could just as well as not have had their weddin’ trip to Yellowstone Park or some place, and I could have gone visiting your Aunt Hattie.” She stared uneasily at the forested shore. “I never knew it was all wilderness, just as God made it, or I never would have thought of piling in on strangers without leave or license—”

“Boat off ahead,” the skipper announced, pointing a grimy finger. “Somebuddy out fishin’, looks like.”

Chance pivoted on the forward thwart. “It’s—Mom, it’s Jackie!”

“Your girl? My stars alive, what’s she doing away out there all by herself? Why, if a storm should come up, that little boat would sink, sure as the world. It ain’t bigger than a gravy boat. Why—”

Chance was not listening. He stood up and waved his big hat over his head. The boat sailed nearer, floating serenely over the quiet water. Chance cupped his hands around his mouth and gave the shrill cowboy call that in the deep woods had been his signal to Jackie, though he could not tell when nor how he had ever learned it. It carried far on a day like this.

The slight figure in the little dory straightened, stared for a minute without motion. She sprang to her feet and stood with a perfect sureness in the frail craft; slim, pliant to the gentle rocking of the boat, one brown hand shading her eyes against the sun as she gazed.

The hand dropped to her mouth. “*Treas-ure Trove a-hoy-y!*” her old call came ringing, mellow as a distant bell.

She sat down, pushed out her oars, lifted one hand to wave greeting, then dipped the blades deep and true.

THE END

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Rocking Arrow* by Bertha Muzzy Sinclair (as B. M. Bower)]