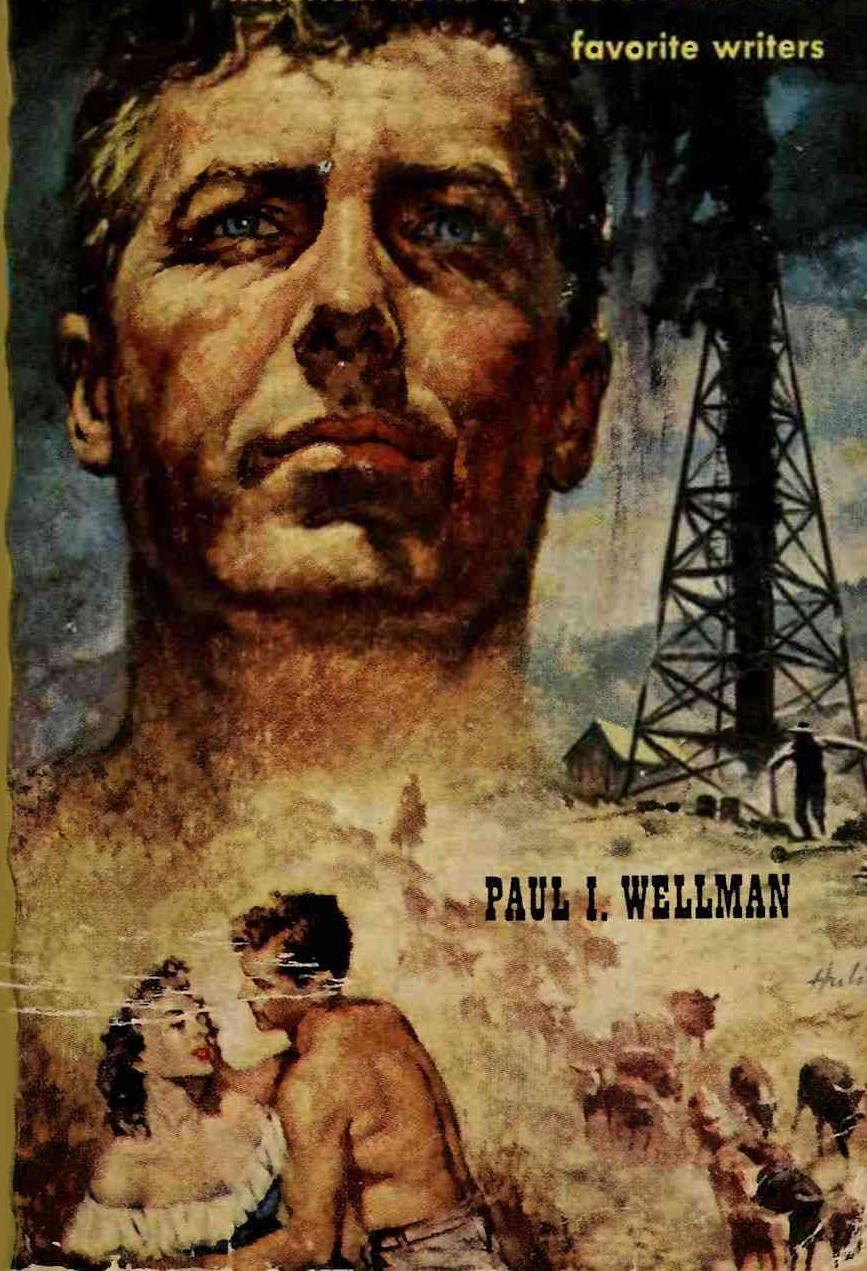


JUBAL TROOP

From cowpuncher to oil baron — in an epic
historical novel by one of America's
favorite writers



PAUL I. WELLMAN

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“*Wellman novel has EVERYTHING!*”^[1]

Some people said that Jubal Troop was ruthless, cruel, that he could make love to a man’s wife, then kill him when he was found out. Others could tell you of his insatiable quest for wealth, how he crushed old Doc Shanks and August Yodel. But what did those who were closest to him think of Jubal Troop?

Naoma daughter of a tattered band of Rawhidlers—thieves without equal, robbers on occasion, murderers often—she loved Jube all the days of her life, even through the lonesome nights when he shunned her in his hungry search for power and another woman’s love.

Reb Haizlipp . . who could look into a gambler’s eyes and tell if he had filled a four-card flush. Reb was Jubal Troop’s partner for years, loved him like a son until his last agonized breath.

Sam Gooney, Mesa, Paquita, Webster Grattan, they all knew Troop, felt the contradictions in this bitter, lonely man. Jubal lived by the law of survival, the only law of his rugged High Plains, a new country which never lost its toughness, even as it became crisscrossed with giant cities, oil kingdoms, and the strongholds of civilization.

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[1] Springfield, Missouri, *News and Leader*

Other books by Paul I. Wellman

ANGEL WITH SPURS
THE BOWL OF BRASS
^[1]BRONCHO APACHE
THE CHAIN
THE COMANCHEROS
THE FEMALE
^[2]THE IRON MISTRESS
THE WALLS OF JERICHO

[1] Published in a Pocket Book edition.

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PAUL I. WELLMAN

Jubal Troop

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Jubal Troop

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To my son

“P. J.”

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Jubal Troop

BOOK 1

The Woman at Teton

1

The sprawl of awkward, unpainted shacks across the bitter Dakota landscape up ahead should be Teton. To Jubal's half-dormant mind came a faint stirring of gratitude. The terrible wear of the cold pressed back against his brain; those shanties meant shelter, and fire . . . and perhaps a noggin of red liquor to lift the soggy droop of his weariness.

This last thought was discarded as soon as conceived. He remembered now that he had no money, not a piece of silver in his pocket, and bartenders, notoriously, were cold towards one without money. Moreover, his first need was for food. His long, slack young body contained always a gnawing hunger, a malignant creature within him, eating at his vitals. He sighed in the listless resignation of physical and mental exhaustion.

Jubal Troop was a youth still, not entirely out of his adolescence. He was eighteen years old, but on this day he rode as if he were eighty, his chin sunk low on his chest and his back humped against the frigid wind. A tattered Hudson Bay capote, a combination of coat and hood, made from coarse blanketing and worn usually by trappers and Indians in Canada, covered his lean body down to his thighs. The capote was faded and ripped, its elbows and back rubbed thin. Low over his face came the hood and, like a cowed monk, he peered out from the opening; but no monk ever showed such a face—so wide through the cheekbones, expressionless, spotted with the scraggy hairs of an immature beard, and with raw frost sores all over it. The youth's nose was large and bony and his mouth was wide and tight, unsoftened by any touch of lightness or humor. But it was his eyes which claimed and held prime attention. They were bloodshot with the winter wind and exposure; but in spite of this they were arresting. Oddly they changed color with every change of his emotions—protean eyes, just now a washed blue, like skimmed milk, which gave to his features a stare so blank that it was startling.

Old blue jeans, very shiny with grease and wear, incased his legs, and he sat on a battered “center fire” California saddle, from the wooden tree of which the leather of the cantle had been torn loose, but which was in no way more disreputable than the wretched claybank pony upon which it was cinched. This beast, its spiritless head hung low, scarcely seeing the road with its rheumy eyes, shuffled along the trail on clumsy, stick-like legs covered with long hair so that they had the appearance of being feathered. As to other gear, the pony’s bridle was a rope *jaquima*—a knot around the neck and a twist around the lower jaw, such as the Indians sometimes used. The youth carried no weapons, not even a revolver holstered at the side which, in 1885, was an almost indispensable adjunct to the costume of any man in the cattle country. And this in itself was the most complete proof of the depth of his destitution.

Afar in every direction stretched the frozen yellow landscape, glinting here and there with splotches of white snow and ending in the distance in bare, yellow hills, their outlines as sharp as a knife against the cold blueness of the sky. It was unseasonable cold—a “dry blizzard” such as the high plains know so well, sweeping suddenly and without warning down from the northwest, carrying a mere flurry of snow but tumbling the temperature from the hazy warmth of late April to below zero, as if midwinter had returned again after all the dreary struggle to shake the clutch of the cold off the land.

Not even the diminutive dots of distant cattle broke the bareness of the landscape. This was cow country, but the shivering creatures had sought refuge in any creek bed or dry gulch they could find to break the killing bite of the thirty-mile gale which whistled across the bleakness.

Little more of life was apparent in the town ahead. As Jubal approached, he could see smoke wavering from the chimneys, eddying momentarily, to be blown flat by the wind; hinting that in those houses there were human beings trying to keep warm. Once a hurrying figure, heavily wrapped, with back bent and white puffs of frozen breath blowing like jets of steam from its head, crossed quickly from one of the buildings to another. Through the town from east to west, a cold serpent ran—the steel rails of the railroad which extended its single track west toward the Montana mines, and east to civilization. The trains passed once a day, and to the tracks Teton turned its slovenly and unsightly back . . . disorderly heaps of rubbish and rusted tin cans at the rear of squalid little stores and saloons. But there was a small depot building, with a freight shed adjoining, both painted the poisonous mustard yellow which some railroads of that day affected. And down the track a quarter of a mile, by the single visible piece of switching, lay the

thing which justified Teton's existence—the livestock loading yard whence, each spring and fall, went the trainloads of cattle which were the only export and source of income this country knew.

With painful slowness the claybank pony reached the environs of the town and came to a stop in front of the station. His rider dismounted, tied him to a ring in the hitchrack, then stumbled inside the building, leaving the horse to bear the cold with patient resignation.

Jubal had sought the railroad station first because experience had taught him that the railroad would give a transient the privilege of warming himself. Most other places were not so charitable. He found the interior gratefully pleasant. There was a pot-bellied stove in the center of the room, with benches on three sides, the fourth being occupied by two ticket windows with brass grills, from behind which came the soulless staccato of a telegraph key. The room smelled of stale tobacco and coal smoke. It also possessed a blending of other nondescript odors, among which that of horse manure, brought in on muddy boots, was not the least ingredient. Jubal was not offended by the evil redolence of the place. Standing before the roaring stove, he removed his mittens, then threw back on his shoulders the hood of his capote, and spread his arms to the heat.

The door opened again. Shivering with cold inside his buffalo coat a big, florid man entered. He was not young nor yet old. His heavy, rather grim features were not obscured by a short mustache and a close-cropped beard which covered his chin but was shaved clean from his cheeks and jaws. About his firm mouth were deep lines, and his gray eyes squinted through slits which, with his burned skin, spoke of a lifetime spent out-of-doors. Approaching the stove, the newcomer pushed a fur cap back on his head. With a mittened hand he wiped his brown mustache. The mustache gave back a hard, pebbly feeling through the mitten.

“Breath freezing on them mouth whiskers of mine,” the man said to Jubal as if they were acquaintances of long standing, although this was the first time either had seen the other. The stranger stood comfortably wide-legged before the pot-bellied stove with its cherry red girdle of heat and took off his mittens. Next he removed his fur cap entirely from his head, and finally opened the great buffalo coat and held it apart to the warmth. He placed an experimental hand on his mustache where the icicle had formed.

It was melting. He wiped the slushy accretion away.

Voicelessly the two men regarded the stove with its bright belt of red-hot incandescence. The stove seemed valorous, swelling its pot-belly defiantly and daring the cold outside to invade the room. Waves of heat rose all around it in a dim, almost invisible haze which seemed an optical illusion, as if some film was blurring the eyes so that the wall opposite had queer, momentary, partial distortions. It became a temptation to accede to the impression of the film and wipe away the blur from the eyes.

In spite of the heat waves and the cherry glow from the stove, the cold continuously penetrated into the room. Through a thousand microscopic cracks and crannies the level gale outside whipped in. Fine arabesques of frost covered the two windows so heavily that it was impossible to see through them without first scraping the blear from a pane. The cold attacked strongly toward the stove and the stove beat back valiantly with its heat waves. There was a meeting point about halfway between the wall and the heater, where the temperature was neutral and comfortable. Inside this zone it was too hot for comfort, and one's face and shanks baked; outside it was too cold and one was forced to button his outer garments. There was, in fact, no place in the room where a man might really be comfortable; for if he stood exactly at the neutral line he found it so narrow that one half of him would be roasting while the other half froze.

But the two men did not consider this condition uncomfortable. They were accustomed to discomfort and to their minds this misheated waiting room was pleasant, as indeed it was, compared to the savage rigor outside.

Jubal noticed that the stranger wore a heavy gold watch chain across his waistcoat. The close-cropped beard had some gray hairs in it. The man had not spoken since that first remark about the ice on his whiskers and Jubal made no effort to reopen the conversation which his own silence had killed. By now the youth was beginning to thaw, the stiffness of the cold going out of his bones. His face had lost its pinched look and his brown hair, faded in places by the rain and sun, and much tousled from lack of a comb, seemed to curl in comfort.

The man with the short beard looked sidewise at him and cleared his throat. Jubal thought he was going to say something; even anticipated uneasily the question, but the stranger apparently reconsidered his impulse to speak.

Silently, almost desperately, Jubal waited. In the backward arch of his brain a mass of dirty brownish shapes poured in a slow flow across the landscape almost like the sluggish flow of some viscous liquid—a big flock

of sheep. Behind came a wagon, the green paint on its body cracked by sun and rain; its canvas tilt, discolored by the elements, bulging out over its widened sides. Precariously on the seat in front perched the driver, a foot dangling over the side and resting on the brake handle, guiding his team of ponies while his crazy equipage leaped and swung and sidled, sometimes over the boulders, sometimes around them, checked on the steep declivities by the foot on the brake, hurried up the equally steep acclivities with yells, dust, and whip-cracking.

That sheep wagon had been Jubal's home for the past eleven months—eleven endless months and empty months. A little burning core of anger rankled in his heart as he remembered how he had left Miles City, after Bob Brolund, the sheep owner, paid him off. Yet he knew his own ignorance was at fault.

The driver of the sheep wagon was also the cook of the outfit, a lean, hang-dog Portuguese from El Cerito, California, and his two companions were Mexicans from the Sacramento valley. The whole outfit had been brought across the Sierras and Jubal had joined it after it arrived in Montana. That had been a last resort. Cattle as yet were comparatively few in the Northwest. He had wandered into the country riding the remuda of a trail herd from the Cherokee Strip for John Hankins and the Lazy-H. Arrived at the Powder River, he fell out with the trail boss, who refused to pay him a full man's wages for full man's work. When he did not get the pay, Jubal quit. Which was a mistake. The little money he possessed was soon spent. He even sold his pony for food. It was the prospect of starvation which drove him to herding Bob Brolund's sheep.

Jubal had been only seventeen then. He did not know . . .

Those months in the mountains. A daily schedule of dull monotony, six or eight miles a day, letting the sheep graze at their own pace, each animal taking a bite or two, hurrying a few steps, stopping to crop again, and once more hurrying on. After the flock passed, the ground was littered with round black marbles of dung. Also the broad trail looked as if it had been sheared and then plowed, a raw, verdureless weal across the landscape.

In the mountains only a few of the sheep ever remained near the path. Like their wild cousins of the Rockies, the beasts are natural mountain climbers and most of the flock scrambled continuously along the steep hillsides, nibbling anything green, forever scattering into smaller and smaller groups, and tending to go ever higher, *baa-baaing* and rushing insanely in this direction and that, raising an appalling dust and racket in

their search for mountain grass, briars or squaw bush. Then did Jubal and the Mexicans become leg-weary and short of breath. It was their duty to outclimb the sheep and keep them as much as possible in the lower levels. Without dogs they would never have been able to accomplish this, but the three dogs with the herd, almost humanly intelligent, with barking and nipping kept the sheep from scattering too widely. Invariably as evening approached the stupid woolly creatures became easier to handle, packing closer and closer when the shadows lengthened, as if they feared the approaching darkness and clung together for the comfort of numbers.

Eventually they passed down into the Montana plains for wintering. And here unrolled the most unpleasant part of the experience. Endless days of nothing to do. Feliz, the Portuguese cook, who was also boss of the outfit, knitted woolen socks all day long; Jubal, unable to knit, scrambled to the high pinnacles of the ridges in pursuit of diversion. On the highest points he often built cairns—perpendicular pillars of rock six to ten feet high, as thousands of sheep herders had done before him and have done since. Those cairns cost great labor. Sometimes he had to go a quarter of a mile for materials to finish one of them. When completed, they would remain for half a century or more, but Jubal did not build them with any idea of providing monuments. He did it to escape the awful boredom of his life . . . day after day of beans, salt pork and sinkers; of bedding on sharp pebbles, often with the rain beating in his face; of endless hours of watching the mindless idiots that sheep are, and keeping them together as the change was made from one grazing ground to the next.

Jubal knew of the contempt and resentment in which cattlemen held the sheep herders. It was based partly on the belief that sheep destroy a cattle range, eating it down and so defiling it that no herd of cattle will thereafter use it. But there was another reason for the scorn and loathing . . . men, left alone by themselves for months at a time . . . with no women . . .

Jubal was sure the Mexicans were crazed. In the night-time he sometimes heard a sudden commotion in a distant part of the sleeping flock, and the *baaing* of a ewe, caught perhaps in a bush. The first time such a disturbance occurred, he sat up and drew on his boots, preparing to go and disentangle the creature. But the Portuguese motioned him to lie still.

“You want to rest—yess?” growled Feliz. “One of the Mexicanos . . . weel take care of eet.” Something in his voice made Jubal relax into his blankets, a curious, shocked wonder in his mind. After a time the ewe quit bleating and the night became silent once more. There was no diminution in

the number of the flock next day, and nobody commented upon, or appeared to have noticed, the noises of the dark hours.

After that Jubal kept aloof from the other men. He cultivated a surly bearing and never took part in the talk around the campfire. The Mexicans were abominations. He wanted nothing to do with them.

Early cold came down upon them that fall. The high tableland on which the outfit was situated was subject to temperatures as bitter as any in the Northwest; but there was this advantage from the sheep growers' standpoint: its plains were swept by constant winds and large areas of grass remained bare of snow, enabling the sheep, which did not seem to be affected by the cold, to find a sufficiency of forage. The snow itself was advantageous, since the sheep could eat it and the herders melt it for drinking water, supplying themselves, their dogs, and the cook wagon ponies. Shortly after the arrival of cold weather, Bob Brolund sent down a second wagon from Miles City and when the temperatures were too severe to permit sleeping in the open, the two vehicles served as small canvas homes on wheels. Each had a tiny stove mounted on a tin floor. A wide shelf was built out over the sides of each equipage and these, next to the sheltering canvas which arched above, served as bunks. Jubal lived in the cook wagon with Feliz. The two detestable Mexicans shared the other conveyance. Feliz continued to prepare the food and boss the outfit.

To live, sheep must keep traveling. As they pass over ground, they denude it of grass and edible bush; even the white sage, once it is frostbitten, they seem to relish. So the house wagons followed the flock two hundred miles south and then, zigzagging, as far north. It was during the northward trek that Jubal bought his Hudson Bay capote from a Crow Indian, paying four dollars for it, all the money the boy possessed.

Gradually the long winter came to an end and lambing time was at hand. This was the period of greatest and most disagreeable labor. Every man in the outfit prepared to convert himself into a midwife for the sheep. Between the Mexicans there was some horrible jesting as to the type of offspring this or that ewe would bring forth. Jubal had long ago lost stomach for this sort of thing, and when Bob Brolund arrived at the camp, bringing with him two men from Miles City to help with the lambing, the youth quit his job and asked for his pay.

Two days later, with one hundred and seventy-five dollars in his pocket, and riding the shabby claybank pony, Jubal rode into Miles City. There he made the mistake of drawing the roll of bills from his pocket when he paid

for a drink. Suddenly he discovered that he had unanticipated friends. Drinks were pressed upon him by generous hands. He awoke next day with a crushing pain in his head, his new friends gone, and with them his money.

Loathly sick at the stomach from the debauch and the knockout drops, he went to the livery stable where he had left the claybank pony, and handed over, to pay his bill there, the only cashable possession remaining to him—his six-shooter. That afternoon he started eastward aimlessly, to run into the “dry blizzard” and at last reach Teton, in the heart of the cattle country, where sheep herders were despised as vermin.

3

Minutes had passed as these thoughts twisted in Jubal’s mind, and now the stranger half coughed again. This time the question, which Jubal half expected, wholly dreaded, came:

“Meanin’ no offense, pardner, but are y’u from the sheep country?”

Jubal was fully aware whence came the surmise, as well as the uselessness of denying it. You cannot live eleven months of your life in the middle of a flock of three thousand ranging sheep, without having the peculiar, pungent odor of the creatures permeate your clothes, your hair, the very pores of your skin. Jubal *smelled* sheepy. There had been no opportunity to bathe since he left Montana, and no chance to obtain new clothing, even had he possessed the money.

Miserably, Jubal stared at the stove. He must answer the question and yet in some manner he must palliate the unpardonable offense of being what he was—a sheep herder, the scum, the offal, the excreta of humanity, according to the cattleman’s notion.

“I couldn’t find nothin’ else to do,” he began defensively.

“How long y’u work at it?”

“Eleven months—followed a bunch in the Bitter Root Mountains an’ wintered ’em in Montana.”

A long silence followed. Then an unexpected shift in the line of conversation.

“Y’u headed somewheres now?”

“Well, no. I’m lookin’ for something to do.”

“Can y’u ride?”

“Some.”

“Folks in these parts calls me Shep Horgan,” said the man with the beard. “I got a little brand south of here—the Split-S she is. What might I call y’u?”

He was observing the strict rules of Western etiquette. There were reasons why many men in the West did not wish to reveal their true names.

“My name’s Jubal Troop,” came the reply.

He’s mighty young, thought Shep Horgan. Must have slept out in that blizzard, judging by those cold sores. Wonder he lived at all. He’s hungry right now. Aloud, he said:

“If y’u want a job, I might fix y’u up until after roundup at my ranch.”

“I’d be obliged,” said Jubal, trying to keep the eagerness out of his voice, and so the compact was sealed.

“Well,” began Shep, briskly, “that ought to call for a drink. Shall we step over to Pretty Sam’s bar?” He looked keenly at the youth. Jubal hung back. He sought to excuse himself because he had no money and he was ashamed to confess it. But Shep Horgan discerned the reason for his hesitation.

“Drinks are on me,” said the rancher, kindly. “An’ since y’u are goin’ to work for me, the chuck’s on me, too. Come on, we’ll go to Hungate’s. They got a bar in connection with their restauraw.”

Gratitude leaped into Jubal’s eyes. Above all, just then, he needed something in his belly. Next to that, a job. And here was a man offering him both. With nervous stumbling, he blurted out some sort of thanks. As they opened the door, a fiercely howling blast of knife-edged wind and a few flakes of snow rushed into the deserted waiting room.

4

Shep glanced at Jubal’s face with its cold sores and sparse blond stubble.

“I’ll stake us both to a shave.” It was the quintessence of tact, the way he said it. The West, gauche in some respects, cultivated an often surprising courtesy.

At Jubal’s nod, they both turned into Teton’s solitary barber shop, which was owned and operated by a thin, long-faced citizen named Crawford Hatch, whose semi-sideburns and solemnity lent him the appearance of a stage English butler. He was not a butler, however, and there were diverse

stories concerning him. Unlike most men of his calling, he almost never spoke. But it was remembered by Teton that the finest display of double-jointed profanity ever heard in the town had occurred when a wandering dog found its way through the open door of the barber shop one hot summer day and mistook for a tree the gaunt, pepper-and-salt trousers leg of Crawford Hatch, who stood solemnly clipping the hair of Doc Hampton. The dog's error, Teton agreed privately, was understandable, because there was nothing more tree-like in appearance than Hatch's leg; but the explosion which resulted not only confounded the animal, but filled with admiration the entire town which had heard experts swear before and had a nice discrimination in such matters.

Shep ushered Jubal into the establishment and saw him ensconced in its solitary chair. For the first time the youth experienced the ministrations of a barber. Never had he supposed anything could be so luxurious. To recline at length, feeling the warm towel placed tenderly over his sore face, then deft finger-tips at work, the warm lather and the gentle, clean pull of the razor with its soft tearing sound . . . it was the most voluptuous experience he had ever known. Hatch silently wiped the lather away at last, dried Jubal's face with tender solicitude for the sores, and lifted him back to a sitting posture. A few minutes of work with the scissors on his hair and his appearance was amazingly changed. Almost startled, he viewed himself in the cracked mirror. Wide through the cheekbones, wide between the strange eyes, cheeks dug out gauntly, strong nose and strong chin, the traces of adolescence were still in that face but it gave promise of a virile and compelling maturity; promise of something which men would respect and women find attractive or hateful, but never uninteresting.

A few minutes later Jubal was thankful beyond words that he had visited the barber before he went to eat.

HUNGATE'S FAMILY HOTEL AND RESTAURANT

Home Cooked Food and Bar

ran the sign above the door of a two-story clapboard building which they entered. The "restaurant" occupied the entire lower floor, except for the kitchen in the rear and the small bar at the back of a reception room at one side. The ceiling was low, and the furniture consisted largely of six check-cloth-covered tables, with chairs, and two roaring wood-burning stoves. A gust of wind and snow-laden dust whipped in as Jubal and Shep entered, and the former was instantly conscious of two things: a rich, almost

maddeningly good aroma of frying ham and onions; and a small, dark young woman, with lustrous brown eyes which somehow had a feline look, eyebrows too heavy for beauty, and a little, pouting mouth, with a lower lip suggestively full.

“Jubal, this here’s the old woman. Y’u can call her Mae,” introduced Shep, boorishly expansive. “Mae, this here’s Jubal Troop. Goin’ to help us for a while at the Split-S.”

She made a little grimace. “‘Old woman’ indeed!” she smiled, extending a small hand. “Shep’s almost twice as old as I am.”

Jubal was conscious that her eyes were roving over him from head to foot with the curious, intent appraisal which a woman nearly always bestows upon a man when she first sees him . . . the instinctive valuation of a potential factor in her life. No woman, however she may pretend, is ever completely indifferent to a man. Instinct tells her that there is no predicting how he may in some manner influence her future. Her position in life becomes easier or more difficult in proportion to the manner in which she wins or loses the fealty of the men about her. Consciously or unconsciously, her personality is interwoven with scores of male creatures—her husband, if she have one; her father and brothers; her lovers, past or present; her hopeless and abject admirers (of which no woman ever had too many to please her); her casual masculine friends; even the far personalities to whom she is no more than a momentary pleasant impression as she passes along the street.

Jubal’s boyishness caught Mae. He has a broken-toed boot, she was thinking. Shabby overalls. That horrible, greasy jacket with its hood, what do they call them? Slim hips and broad shoulders . . . not bad . . . he smells! Suppose he’s been out on the range when it was too cold to bathe. They all smell at this time of the year . . . all the men in this God-forsaken part of the world. *He* smells different, what is it? Face, broad like an Indian’s . . . those sores . . . ugh! There is something about his eyes, though . . . they change color . . . they are so savage . . .

“I’m mighty proud to meet you, ma’am,” Jubal was mumbling. He was awestruck. How trim and dainty she looked in spite of her stiff, tight-corseted basque. Something took hold of his throat and eyes, fight against it as he might. He could feel his gaze being pulled down in spite of himself to the luxurious bulge of her bosom, and in the smallest fibers of his being he appreciated the way that the muffling voluminosity of her dress failed to conceal the supple plumpness beneath. She was so fragile. Yet, somehow, so filled with a strange potency that his own sensations shocked him.

Mae understood the involuntary look and was not displeased. The instinct to experiment with men was always strong in her; and she had a subtle, purring satisfaction in trying out her weapons on this youth.

He's staring at me like a stupid fish, she was thinking. Hasn't he ever seen a woman before? At least there's no mistaking that look . . . he can't keep his eyes off my front . . . he might be fun . . .

She was only twenty, and he eighteen, but in the wisdom of the world she was a generation his senior: it was a wisdom born in her too, and sharpened by experience.

"If you will excuse me, there are some things I must attend to," she said, departing for her room upstairs. A warm smile which she tossed over her shoulder to him left Jubal stunned—and faint. Perhaps it was hunger. He heard Shep, who had viewed the whole scene with the heartiest good will and with not an inkling of what was going on in the minds of the two, genially inviting him to eat. Jubal stumbled eagerly to the table.

Ham and onions. Hot soda biscuits. Molasses—larrup, they called it on the range. Coffee. The food went down in hot, satisfying gulps. No physical demand is more poignant than hunger. No sensation is more pleasurable than dulling its raw edge. After the first huge, hearty bite of fried ham, Jubal forgot about everything save the delight of filling his stomach. Steaming up to his grateful nostrils rose a warm fragrance of the meat, gravy and hot bread.

At length Jubal leaned back in his chair, the skin drum-tight across his belly, and grinned sheepishly at his host. A warm surge of gratitude to the big, kindly man across the table welled up inside him. He would pay back this kindness. He would work for Shep as he never had worked for any man—for Shep and Mrs. Horgan. In the innocence of his mind, Jubal considered them one flesh and one soul.

The night still lay heavily when Jubal awoke. The darkness was absolute in the narrow, low bunkhouse, but he heard the scratching of a match against the rough pine wall and a tiny flare of orange light pricked out in the blackness. In the small circle of illumination appeared the foolish, good-humored features of Friendly Smith, his loose lips half agape, revealing the yellow buck-teeth behind them, his eyes squinting and bleary with unwashed slumber.

Friendly already had his hat on. Jubal wondered if he removed it even to sleep. In common with most men who have for most of their lives done their sleeping outdoors, Jubal always dressed “from top down.” When you spread your blankets under the stars on the ground for the night, the little square covered by your bed becomes, in effect, your sleeping room. You remove first your boots, because you do not wish to soil your bedding. Next come your chaps, if you wear them, or overalls if you wish to remove them. Coat, jacket or vest follow. Rarely is the shirt removed, since this is considered your slumber garment. Lastly comes the hat which is placed on top of the small bundle of clothing beside the saddle on which you rest your head. In the morning this order is reversed. On goes the hat first, because it is on top of the heap. Next come the upper garments, followed by the nether, and finally the boots. After that the bedroll is wrapped up and tossed into the chuck wagon.

So ingrained in Jubal was the habit of dressing and undressing in this fashion that in later years after he had forsaken the range, he still “dressed from top down” when he arose in the morning. But in this respect Friendly Smith was unique. He removed his hat almost never. The last cigarette, smoked as he sat in the darkness on the edge of his bunk, always revealed in its brief glow the dim outlines of the battered old Stetson, pushed back on the cowboy’s weak, good-humored face.

Friendly, having struck the match, lit an old lantern and a stronger, steadier light threw into semi-revelment the interior of the bunkhouse. Six bunks were shown, only two of them exhibiting any signs of present use. Along the shadowy walls hung a heterogeneous collection of articles—spurs, an old boot, bridles, lariats, an empty cartridge belt, slickers and other paraphernalia. Knocked together to serve as a card table, a rough pine table stood at one end of the room with two or three dry goods boxes near it. The interior smelled faintly sour from perspiration.

Friendly was out of his bunk, shivering in the icy air, his breath puffing whitely from his mouth, his lean shanks pressing tightly together in their baggy gray underwear as he groped for his pants. The warm hardness of the bunk seemed to clutch at Jubal’s thin body and an exercise of will power was required to leave the covers. Tension went over him as the sharpness of the air struck him and tiny prickles of gooseflesh sprang up all over his body. With teeth chattering he jerked on his overalls and pulled down the Hudson Bay capote over the shirt in which he had slept. Last of all, and with some effort, he worked on his stiff, cold boots—a long hard pull, the toes wriggling to ease their way into the stubborn leather, and at last the whole

foot slipping in with a surprising push which squeezed a puff of foul, unwashed air into his face.

Jubal could hear Friendly swearing. “Damn a one-hoss joint like this. When I was workin’ fer the Circle Bar, the Chink cook kep’ a fire in the bunkhouse all the time in cold weather. Hyar ye have to rustle fer yerself. If ’twasn’t near warm weather an’ roundup, I’d ask fer my time an’ go to ridin’ fer someone else.”

Jubal was familiar with the whining complaint. For the two weeks he had been at the Split-S, he had heard it every morning with scarcely a variation. Friendly Smith, the inadequate, was lucky to have a job at all. Only because Horgan’s ranch was small and not so desirable to work in had he been able to secure this employment. All the same, Jubal was glad it was Friendly and not some more captious cowboy with whom he had to live. He was still wearing the sheep herder’s rig, and he would have to continue to wear it until the few dollars Shep was hoping to obtain for the claybank pony at Teton could be converted into clothing more suitable. This circumstance Friendly Smith did not seem to mind, or even to notice. Jubal thanked his stars that it was this dim intelligence which shared his quarters for the time being, instead of some dare-devil, intolerant dandy of the plains, with silver conchos on his chaps and whizzing rowels on his spurs and a lofty scorn and hatred for anything which smacked of sheep or sheep herders.

Beside the door was a bucket and from this Friendly and Jubal splashed icy water over their faces and hands, then wiped on a dirty towel which hung from a nail, and stepped outside. Night still hung over the plains. A half-moon seemed to sail rakishly through a sea of small, silvery clouds and the country was bathed in an opalescent sheen. Behind the moon and the clouds, the sky was a deep blue except for the burning points of stars. Only in the east a mounting brightness like polished steel made an edge of opaque black out of the horizon, foretelling the dawn. Before the two cowboys the ranch house windows glowed yellow, the light dappling the flat sod outside. The Split-S was an outfit so small that Mrs. Horgan did the cooking and the men ate in the kitchen with Shep and his wife.

Outside the back door the two cowboys scraped their boots meticulously from force of habit—although the ground was bone dry—and diffidently entered the kitchen. It was warm within and Jubal, always hungry, felt the saliva well up in his cheeks at the rush of pleasant odors. The usual menu for breakfast, apparently—raised soda biscuits, sowbelly, white gravy, and black

coffee. But he had no complaint concerning the diet. So long as his aching young body was filled he cared little what filled it.

Mae Horgan, in a printed calico dress with a gingham apron tied over it, was at the stove. She looked youthful and bright-eyed, her hair dark with a cluster of little curls at the top of her forehead, and the color showing fresh in her cheeks. The strong marking of her thick eyebrows accentuated her naturally fine and delicate skin. Even in the lamplight her good looks were undeniable.

As usual, she was wordless and aloof, moving with a silent impersonality, bringing more biscuits and pork to the table. The men also dispensed with conversation. Talk was superfluous when the business at hand was eating. Their jaws champed in unison, Shep wiping his short beard with two fingers after drinking coffee from his saucer; Friendly's bat ears wagging each time he chewed.

Shep's orders after breakfast were brief: "Remember an' keep the stuff north of them sand hills. Murphy & Allerdice is good people, but no use gettin' brands mixed. Plenty of water in Beaver Crick now?"

"Yep," replied Jubal.

"O.K. Y'u better take that little roan hoss, Easy Moses, today. He ain't been worked much since winter an' y'u may have to take a little pitch out of him." Jubal nodded. Taking the "pitch" out of a fresh horse was very much a part of the day's work.

6

The horses stirred about restlessly in the corral. These were true cow ponies, small and short-coupled, their manes and coats still shaggy from winter. Most were buckskin or bay in color; a few had the dark stripe down the back or across the shoulders which indicated their distant relationship to ponies of the old prehistoric forests, and which often may be seen in stock which is permitted to breed down. One or two were pintos, called "paint horses" by the cowboys, and there was a roan or so in the group. But there were no black horses; a black cow pony was a rarity in that day, and still is. And there were no mares in the corral. Cowpunchers detest mares for working stock; a gelding has more stamina and intelligence. His lariat looping widely in his hands, Jubal entered the corral. The roan horse, Easy Moses, shied and dodged, but the noose settled over his head and the pony permitted himself to be led meekly forth. Outside Jubal tied Easy Moses' head close to a corral post and swung the big, forty-pound saddle over the

shrinking back. As the weight descended, the little horse hunched himself and grunted, but the man cinched the saddle on carefully, placing a foot against the pony's side to give greater purchase as he took up every inch of the slack in the girth—for a loose cinch might mean broken bones, or death. The big saddle seemed to cover the small animal from head to tail, but it was the belief among cowpunchers, with some basis in fact, that by distributing its weight over a large part of the horse's back, such a saddle was less tiring than a smaller one.

Now remained the final act of mounting and riding. As he untied the bridle reins from the corral post and gathered them above the horse's withers, Jubal could see the roan's wicked little ears flatten.

There is a definite technique in mounting a horse, especially when he is half-wild and likely to bolt or buck. Holding the reins in his left hand, Jubal stood far up by the roan's left shoulder, out of reach of any spiteful rake from a hind hoof. With his right hand he quickly turned the stirrup so that, facing the rear of the pony, his left foot could be placed in it, clear to the high heel. All this was done very rapidly, but even so the horse began to swing and edge away. Jubal's right hand, however, shot to the saddle horn and grasped it. Now was demonstrated the reason for standing far up ahead of his mount's shoulders. As soon as the man's weight made itself felt on stirrup and saddle horn, the roan leaped savagely forward. But Jubal was already swinging up and that jump actually helped him into the saddle. His right leg went over the cantle and he landed squarely in the seat, whereas, had he started his swing from farther back, he might have lighted behind the saddle entirely.

Two bounds forward and the stubborn roan head went down. The horse "swallowed his head" as the saying was. It's coming now, Jubal thought. His diaphragm seemed to double up and his head snapped as the beast began to buck. Great, jolting, stiff-legged, zig-zag "goating" with a squeal of rage behind it.

"Give him the gaff, Jube!"

"Look at that fuzztail *kettle*! Peel him! *Peel* him, cowboy!"

So ran the encouraging cries from Shep and Friendly. But the long, slack rider in the Hudson Bay capote was not shaken in his seat. With an instinct for balance as nice as that of any tightrope walker or trapeze performer, he shifted his body to each tempestuous, shocking bound of the animal beneath him. And now he took a hand in the fight. His quirt fell and his spurs bit deeply into the horse's flanks.

“That’s it! Stay in yore tree an’ rake him! Give him the old tin pan belly!” yelled Shep.

But Easy Moses, the roan pony, was satisfied. This thing had ceased to be fun. One or two more spasmodic “crow hops” he made, then suddenly seemed to forget all about bucking, and cantered away.

7

Thus Jubal began his days, and each evening he ended them by riding a tired horse into the home corral. And thus the weeks passed swiftly and the belated spring came on in glory. Each morning he set forth as dawn came up in the east and the plains were bathed in sweetness. The emerald of the grass was tinted with the buffalo bean’s purple sprays and there were white acres of prairie anemones, while the russet and yellow of gorgeous gaillardias splashed the landscape everywhere.

Three ever-present birds of the plains always greeted him. The meadowlark poured forth his cheerful warble as dawn cracked the horizon, then chattered and sang on the ground and in the air all the long day. In the swales down by the creek, the redwing blackbird gurgled his liquid call, *kong-klaleeeee*. Lastly the night hawk, rising in late afternoon, mounted in ever-widening spirals; his narrow, crooked wings with their single white bar, giving a double beat of pure joy at each harsh peet he uttered. Until finally, having climbed to the top of his invisible ladder, at sunset, he dove like a gray plummet, headfirst toward the ground, bringing up thrillingly, just short of destruction, with an arching of his wings below him, so that the air ripped through his feathers with a hollow, booming sound.

There were days, too, when sudden, dashing thunder showers roared across the prairie. First a gathering of piled up clouds in the heavens, dazzling white above and purple black below, with a distant, portentous muttering, coming closer and closer until the sun was wiped out and the whole world lay hushed in frightened expectation of some dread eventuality. Then a sudden, piercing flash and an explosion which shattered the air, clapping ear-splittingly and rocking the earth with its vibrations, to be followed by the rapid, steady roar of the rain. The drops gathered on the brim of Jubal’s hat, and dripped off while he pulled his slicker closer and closer about him for protection; for at last he had discarded the old capote for better garments brought by Shep from town.

Such storms passed quickly over and left a fresh, washed landscape behind them. Jubal rejoiced in the life. His weeks at the Split-S had been

good for him. Long since the cold sores had healed, leaving his skin tanned and smooth. His new, wide Stetson hat became him, and his new, clean overalls turned up broadly at the bottom to reveal his neat, new boots. The pure joy of existence was his—the clean, inexplicable joy which comes not from love, nor yet from philosophy, but from the simple delight of feeling warm blood course luxuriously through the veins; of overflowing with splendid health.

8

A great, dark mass of cattle extended across the flat plain and the muttering thunder of the herd's bellowing welled up to the blue bowl of the sky. It was the beginning of the roundup and Colonel Slayton, portly and hard-bitten, was the roundup chief. The colonel, a gentleman "of the old school," owned the Goose-Egg outfit. He sported massive gray mustaches and imperial, his boots were always polished, his wide hats were handmade especially for him and cost one hundred dollars apiece—a thick-necked, heavy man, with bags under his eyes and a dewlap telling of too much rich living, but still with a lively eye for a woman's figure, and well enough liked by the cattlemen.

It was the last circumstance which had made him roundup boss for the six outfits of the Teton country which were pooling that year. Murphy & Allerdice, the Pot-Hook, Horgan's Split-S, the 7 L, the Hog-Eye, and Colonel Slayton's Goose Egg were the interests involved. Some of these cattle companies looked more than a little askance at each other—"antigodlin' like a bull at a bastard calf" was the phrase—and it needed an umpire to keep them on civil terms with one another.

In this year of 1885 the cattle industry was at its peak, with a market eager for more beef than the plains could furnish. Some of the cattle companies were veritable inland empires. Control of water was vital. Ranchmen who had been lucky enough to establish squatters' rights to permanent, adequate water supplies became rich automatically. The more cows a man had his brand on, the greater was his wealth. And it was water rights which determined how many cattle he could brand.

It was custom, almost law, in the plains never to fence the country, save for necessary corrals and perhaps small pastures for milk cows. The rest of the range was open, free to anybody. Free, that is, to anybody who could find, and keep, water. Many a bloody ranch war was fought over a stream, a series of water holes, or a lake. Line riders prevented as much as possible the cattle of rival ranches from drifting over on forbidden water. Yet often

small alien bands would wander through. This might create a dangerous situation between two ranches eventually. It was to maintain a semblance of order and friendliness among the cattlemen that frequent roundups were held on different parts of the range, to separate the cattle of the various outfits, brand the calves properly, and shift all wandering stock back on the proper grazing grounds.

Colonel Slayton felt his importance as roundup boss. His bearing and voice were pompous as he discoursed from his saddle to a group of the other ranch owners.

“Boys, them owners is hearin’ what’s what, right down from Mount Sinai, an’ it’s Lord Gawd Almighty hisself that’s a-givin’ out them pronouncements,” commented a small, lame cowpuncher called Limpy Jim Smith as he stood with a group near the chuck wagons watching the conference of the bosses.

“Dunno what they’re windjammin’ about,” remarked another of the group, a tall fellow with a wall eye. “Gawd knows we’ve combed them sandhills until I cain’t see how thar’s a haid left in ’em.”

Whatever apprehension was felt regarding the requirement of more herd gathering was settled by the break-up of the owners’ conference.

“Everybody’s satisfied,” Shep Horgan told Jubal. “The herd stands as she is. We start cuttin’ right away.”

Jubal threw himself on his horse and rode toward the herd. All cows with calves must be cut out and separated from the other cattle. Glad of the chance for action, his pony worked its way slowly into the herd. Like a centaur Jubal rose above the sea of long, sleek bodies, which seemed close enough together to have permitted one to step from back to back and so walk across the entire weaving, horn-spiked mass, whose outer edges were hidden in the dimness of the rising haze of dust. About horse and man, however, always there was a little island of space where the cattle edged away. Jubal could see other cowboys, their bodies lofty above the cattle, seeming to sail like ships on an ocean of strange waves. All were riding on the same errand.

Jubal saw a cow with a calf at her side. Riding slowly and carefully to avoid causing undue alarm among the other cattle, he worked the cow to the outskirts of the herd, then started her across the open to a smaller herd a few hundred feet away, “held” there by two or three cowpunchers. This was the nucleus of the “cut herd.” Within an hour the cut herd had been swelled

tremendously in numbers. Grimy with sweat and dirt, his lungs full of dust and his teeth gritty, Jubal rode with fierce zeal. By the close of day the sorting neared an end. Most of the unbranded calves together with their mothers had been moved to the cut herd. The other cattle were started out toward the range, where as soon as they were left alone they began to break up into small groups, to graze, and to work their way gradually back to their old haunts.

By the time this work was finished, darkness was settling down over the landscape. Jubal turned to where a small fire licked up toward the star-spattered sky limning the outlines of two cook wagons as the flames shot brightly upward. This was the grub camp and Jubal, with eagerness, unsaddled and turned his horse into the rope corral of the cavyyard. He was starving.

“H’lo, Jube. Got them sleepers all topped? Come over hyar an’ put on the feed-bag. I’ll fix ye up, special.” It was Friendly Smith. Inept at anything else, he had surprisingly shown talent as a cook, and was now helping old Mose Montgomery, the gnarled, gray, cantankerous top chuck-wrangler. Jubal ate and replied to Friendly’s questions.

“Will they get this work done tomorry, do ye think? Where is the next stand—over on the Pot-Hook, likely? Where’s Shep? I expect the boss has rode all the way back to the Split-S to sleep with that good-lookin’ heifer of his. Don’t blame him much. Wouldn’t mind sleepin’ with her a spell myself—heh, heh—only thar wouldn’t be much sleep.”

He sniggered with insinuation. Jubal could stand only a little of this—and then he had to go away somewhere to keep from screeching at Friendly Smith or throwing something at him. The foolish good nature of a simpleton like that ought not to protect him forever. Sometimes he almost drove Jubal crazy.

Out under the stars Jubal selected a place to lay his bedroll. Long lumps lay scattered here and there—sleeping men already “turned in.” He unrolled his blankets and kicked off his boots and overalls. A strong whiff from an old pipe came to him, rancid and penetrating—Mose Montgomery’s briar. Wonder if Shep *had* ridden all the way back to the Split-S, Jubal was thinking. Maybe it’s worth it. Must be all right to have a woman like that . . . keep the bed warm for you. What about women’s bosoms . . . didn’t it *smash* them . . . to do certain things? . . . Mustn’t think about things like that. . . .

Jubal turned on his side. Another reek from the strong old pipe floated past. Forever afterward the smell of an old pipe always carried him back to

quiet under the stars, clear night air fanning his cheek, coyotes bickering wildly in the low hills, and a feeling of utter and ununderstandable discontent.

9

It seemed he had scarcely closed his eyes when a harsh squall awakened him. It was Friendly calling from the cook fire. The east was graying with soft rays of pink mounting through a thin mother-of-pearl brightness. All the rest of the sky was still dark, with brooding stars and an all-pervading hush beneath.

The men began to roll out from their blankets. A strange noise was in the air—the chorus of coughing and throat-clearing with which a group of men seems always to greet a new day. Shep Horgan rode up as Jubal finished his breakfast.

“Never got to bed hardly at all last night,” he told his employee.

“Ride all the way to the ranch?”

“Yep. Too much ridin’. This work here jest about cleans up my stuff. But I want y’u, if y’u will, to stay with the roundup outfit until it gets through the circuit. Friendly Smith’s quit-in’ me—hired to the Goose Egg as a cook. That suits me perfect. I would have let him go anyway when the roundups was over.”

“You ain’t stayin’ with us?”

“Me? No, I’m goin’ back to the ranch. Somebody has to stay with the missus. I couldn’t very well send y’u,” he leered archly at Jubal, “so I have to take care of it myself. That puts y’u in charge of the Split-S interests. It’s the same as if y’u was ranch boss, only y’u have only yoreself as a crew. But y’u have the Split-S say an’ vote.”

As he walked to his horse, Jubal strove to keep from letting it be seen in his walk how proud he was.

“Jube Troop, you work on the number four branding crew,” Colonel Slayton instructed him. Jubal had been expecting the order. He was good enough with the rope, but not of a class with some of the experts present. Therefore, instead of roping calves, he would work on the ground. Limpy Jim had been assigned to the same crew.

“Goddam it! Whenever there’s dirty work to do, it looks like I get it,” Limpy Jim was growling. “I kin rope as good as any of them fellers—Wall

Eye, anyhow!” he added disgustedly.

Jubal took his assignment more philosophically. There was no time to complain anyway. Already the ropers were riding toward the branding fires with calves dragging on the ground at the ends of their lariats. Limpy and Jubal leaped upon their first animal.

“Neck him!” and Jubal knelt on the calf’s neck, doubling up, with an expert movement, one fore foot, while Limpy stretched a hind leg to its full length. Held thus, the little beast was helpless.

“Iron!” yelled Limpy. “Pot-Hook!”

“Pot-Hook, tally one!” cried the checker by the fire.

The iron man came running, his branding tool cherry red, and the calf under Jubal’s knee surged and bleated at the searing pressure. A second man with a razor-sharp knife stooped and castrated the creature. Then Jubal and Limpy released the calf to go to its mother which nervously had been circling near.

Neither the branding iron nor castration seem to hurt calves much at this age; in fact the only thing which really seems to agonize cattle is to dehorn them with a saw, when their heads are fastened immovably in the stanchions and their bodies thresh wildly and helplessly about. Grown cattle have been known to faint from pain and shock while being dehorned.

But another calf was being brought up.

“A necked calf!” exclaimed Limpy. “You hoolihan him, Jube.”

Instead of having been roped by its hind feet and dragged to the fire, this calf was noosed about the neck and was therefore bucking and pulling to escape. Jubal knew the trick of “rassling down” a calf. As the animal came near him, he seized the taut rope with his left hand near the neck. Reaching over the calf’s back with his right hand, he grasped a big roll of the loose skin on its belly, near the flank. Frantic jumping by the calf actually helped the cowboy. As it leaped, Jubal’s knee went under it; he pulled up strongly on his hand-hold of loose skin on the other side and the calf was upset. Jubal let it fall stunningly and it lay there momentarily gathering its wits while Limpy hurried forward to help stretch it out for the brander.

So passed the hours, until they were wet with sweat and blood. Branding is hot, tiring, disgusting work, but the men were not allowed to rest for one moment. Like fiends the branding crews leaped to their fires and back again, the dust rose and eddied, the sharp smell of scorched hair and hide

permeated the atmosphere, the monotonous voice of the checker called, and the heavy roll of the bellowing herd beat upon the ears like the thunder of surf on the shore.

10

As the roundup shifted from one locality to another, Jubal uncovered a new talent. He shone brilliantly through the rest of the season, not because of his skill as a cattle handler, but because of the way he performed as “lookout” for the Split-S. Old cattlemen nodded with approval at his keen, sharp attention to details. It was noted that no Split-S calves were “branded over” by other outfits, and none were allowed to go as mavericks.

Because he was the youngest man in the camp, he was the “kid” to the other cowboys, and at first much crude sport was made of his adolescence. But with the respect of the bosses came acceptance by the men. And so, two months later, with the roundup circuit at an end, Jubal found himself standing with Limpy Jim and Wall Eye, in cordial friendship at the bar of Gooney’s saloon, preparing to swallow a glass of whiskey. It was an occasion, and Jubal felt happy because these men unquestioningly esteemed him.

“Here’s how,” said Limpy politely.

“Mud in yore eye,” added Wall Eye with punctilio.

“I likewise rises an’ bows,” returned Jubal meticulously.

They drank. The raw liquor seemed to burn all the way down as Jubal swallowed it. He restrained an impulse to strangle.

“Have another,” he said.

“Don’t care if I do,” responded the others in a breath.

Once more they filled and tossed off the fiery spirits. Limpy and Wall Eye looked at each other.

“Anything doin’ in town?” asked the former.

“Mag Woods’ place is about all.”

“Any new stuff?”

“One blonde from St. Paul. Name is Jennie Matthias. Some of the boys that’s been thar say it’s all right.”

“Reckon I’ll go look Jennie over,” said Limpy Jim. “Want to come along, Jube?”

Jubal shook his head. He was frightened by creatures like Jennie Matthias. There was good reason, too. Sometimes cowboys came into camp full of profane expressions of the exhilaration they had experienced with some Bismarck Annie or Silver Kate. And frequently their profanity changed in a few days from delight to consternation and anguish. Jubal heard frequent allusions to “lady fever,” “Cupid’s catarrh,” and “the old rau.” In a general way he knew what these things were and how they were connected with places like Mag Woods’. Go-Hungry Regan even had holes in his neck—holes you could have stuck your finger into. He kept them plugged with cotton and the yellow pus oozed into the plugs so that when he pulled them out at night they were soaked saffron and green. Go-Hungry laughed about it, said it had been hanging to him for three years, and he never missed a day in the saddle. But it scared Jubal to see him.

So he shook his head at Limpy’s invitation.

“Hell’s fire, it won’t *hurt* you none!” grinned Limpy, the satyr. “You’ll never be a man until you learn to ride some other things besides hosses.”

But Jubal turned back to his whiskey and the cowboys clanked out of the saloon. The liquor was beginning to take effect now, and Jubal gazed pleurably about the busy interior. Pretty Sam Gooney, the owner, sat at a poker table with half a dozen men. He was an eye-filling personage, a portly man with a long, blond mustache and a wide black hat, who always wore a frock coat and richly embroidered vest. His black trousers were tucked into boots shined afresh three times a day by Sneet Peters, the Negro handy man, who waited on customers at the bar, emptied the slops and also took a hand at augmenting, with his banjo, the “orchestra” in the dance hall, which occupied a wing of the saloon building. Other members of the orchestra were “Professor” Troot, who played the battered piano with a furious virtuosity at times, disguising with wonderful skill the fact that the instrument had several silent keys; and Spenner Johnson the fiddler. “Professor” was thin, bald and woebegone. Spenner was short, plump and jovial. They resembled each other in this: they were both consistent drunkards.

Jubal faced the bar and saw the black countenance of Sneet Peters on the other side of it. The Negro was a silent, self-effacing creature, an anomaly in this northern world of white men. He obeyed orders, but expected nobody to

speak in a friendly manner to him. Now he stood regarding Jubal with a question in his eyes.

“Pour another,” said Jubal a little thickly. He gulped it down. Then he smiled at Sneet Peters.

The Negro reminded Jubal of his childhood. There were plenty of things about Jubal’s childhood of which he did not like to think. About the only pleasant things about it were connected with people of Sneet Peters’ race.

Jubal’s mind went far back to the Mississippi where he was born in the cabin of a dirty little freighter, of which his father, Captain Eli Troop, was owner and captain. The boy’s mother was a girl from Natchez named Wanda Garden. She lived without benefit of clergy with Captain Eli, a broken river pilot, but when her baby was only a few weeks old, she died.

Therefore Jubal grew up under the care of Lena, a mulatto girl, a tawny, insinuating creature with large liquid eyes, who was his nurse and companion. Upon her deeply cushioned bosom she cradled him. Through croup, colic and teething she nursed him, and watched lest he meet disaster when first he began to toddle about the narrow deck. Almost Jubal’s first recollection was the strong smell of her Negro body as she lulled him to sleep.

As he grew older the boy made friends with Jeff, the dusky engineer of the little steamboat. It was Jeff who taught him to fish for grunTERS and told him long, pointless Negro stories in the shade of the pilot house.

These were Jubal’s only friends, and when Captain Eli, his kidneys kicked loose in a saloon brawl, died when the boy was eleven, Jubal began the drifting which eventually took him West, remembering with something like nostalgia the dark, kindly faces of his steamboat companions. That was why, standing at Pretty Sam’s bar, he smiled at Sneet Peters, the Negro handy man. And Sneet, surprised, then delighted, grinned broadly in return, his black face cracked across with gleaming ivory.

11

A different Jubal returned to the Split-S after the roundups. The two months which had been occupied in the big swing had come at an important period in his transition from adolescence to manhood and without knowing it he had changed greatly.

But if he did not know of his transformation, someone else did notice it. Mae Horgan saw him from behind her curtains when he arrived. Her first

sensation was surprise; followed by pleasure. Somewhere in the last two months the awkward, shambling boy had disappeared in the trampled earth and dead ashes of the roundup camps. In his place returned a man, tinted with the warm fire of life, sleek assurance in his movements, an aura of power about him.

Almost at once Jubal became aware of the woman . . . in the countless ways whereby a woman can call herself to a man's attention. She asked him to do her little services, such as saddling her pony, and these services she rewarded with smiles which were more than casual. She walked past him in the house and the tiny breeze created by her passage bore to him the light fragrance of her. She brushed, with apparent innocence, his knee with her thigh at the table, sending little electric spasms chasing themselves over his body. There was warm intimacy in her voice and a hint . . . always a hint . . . of vague possibilities beyond.

Within a week, Mae Horgan had Jubal's feelings stirred until they were chaotic. She was Shep Horgan's wife and he owed very much to Shep. In spite of this, however, Jubal found that he could not keep his mind from her. The heady lure of her obsessed him. He tried to idealize her, to place her on a pedestal as a being concerning whom certain kinds of thoughts were sacrilege. But in spite of that conscious effort, at times there was something about her which made his blood race wildly, when he longed to place his big, coarse hands on that shapely body of hers . . . to do unthinkable things to it.

Jubal was no innocent. All his life he had lived in the most primitive kind of human society and he knew full well what made the world tick. This knowledge filled him with fear of himself and Mae. In one respect he was a woeful greenhorn. It did not occur to him that the woman might be playing with him. All he knew was that he suddenly began to think about her, to dream about her with a terrible lawlessness which seemed desecration to her as well as criminal disloyalty to Shep.

Mae Horgan was desperately discontented and at times this showed in her face. Her mouth was bitter-sweet, her heavy brows did not arch with bright spirits. It was not merely that she was weary of the unchanging plains and the hollow monotony of her life, and the lonesome hours she spent by herself; there was in her a deeper, more poignant disappointment.

Her marriage to Shep. She was twenty and he twice that. The marriage was an impulse, all unconsidered. The middle-aged rancher was visiting in Indiana when she met him. His mother and brother lived on the farm next to Luke Weston's. Luke was Mae's father. The cattleman prolonged his visit after he saw the round-faced, dark-haired Weston girl. To Mae, the man represented romance, adventure, excitement, the very things which her thrill-craving nature demanded. But the whole consequence of her experience of him was to turn out a grinding disappointment. Not even at first was there the romantic interlude which a woman feels is her right at least during the honeymoon.

Like most girls, Mae Weston spent her adolescence steeped in many-colored imaginings. Love was an orchid dream which, when it came, would be wonderful beyond conception, would drug her senses in ecstatic delirium, would sweep her away and lift her forever to a plane where petty annoyances and troubles would find it impossible to obtrude themselves upon her. This was her attitude in spite of the fact that Mae was a prodigiously practical young woman.

In that day every girl shared one thought, one ambition, and to that end devoted her life's talents—to win a man and marry him. To this legitimate end Mae utilized endless hours of experimentation, trying this and that arrangement of her hair, studying the kind of clothes which best became her, practicing a gait, a conversational mode, expressions of the eyes and face. With passionate patience she devoted herself to such inquiry, in the hope that she should be able to create the ultimate impact upon men when she came into proximity with them. There was a studied grace in the way she sat; also in the manner in which she stood, feet close together, swaying slightly to one side at the waist, with a rounded hip thrust out ever so little; also in her walk, with head high like a princess.

Coquetry, the weapon of all women, came naturally to her; and the discovery that she possessed beautiful eyes was one of her early thrills. The country boys of the surrounding farms were raw material ready at hand for her to practice upon, and with the innocent heartlessness of a kitten she employed upon them all her little weapons. Before she graduated from short dresses, she was practicing her technique unflinchingly, and after she "grew up," she was never without her circle of awkward, callow admirers, upon whom she constantly experimented, watching with thrilled amusement and sometimes almost with terror their headlong reactions.

Early Mae discovered that men could be made to do things. Without exception they would act along an indicated line at the stimulus of the

merest unspoken, scarcely appreciable hint of the vaguest kind. It need not hint at any particular thing, even, so long that it indicated there was a potentiality of *any* sort. All this could be accomplished on her part with unassailable innocence, and having maneuvered a youth into a hot-blooded advance, the defense was sure and easy. To gaze, wide-eyed, shocked, astonished at such an interpretation of any action she might “unwittingly” have committed. To be hurt, angry or frightened.

And here again, the men nearly always fell into certain grooves of behavior. They became abashed, apologetic, contrite, and were her slaves from that time forth, to toss aside, or further to experiment with as suited her mood. Or they were angered and left her in a fury. Occasionally a man failed to fall into either of these categories. For these was reserved the last and deadliest battery—laughter. Ridicule invariably cooled the blood of the most impetuous.

The young men of the country about were at her feet, yet there was none in the neighborhood whom she wished to marry. And then one day Shep Horgan appeared. From the first sight of him she determined to have him. The thing was ridiculously easy to accomplish. Yet even this was disappointing. She did not love the rancher, but she wished him to love her as abjectly as possible. Instead he was dishearteningly matter-of-fact about everything. His courtship was short and almost gruff. His proposal was couched in the terms of a business proposition; but she accepted it. Even when he kissed her after the final words of the wedding ceremony, there was a stiff awkwardness about him.

That Shep had been good to her, Mae admitted to herself. He was considerate, tried in every way to save her from exertion and hardship, and, as if understanding something of her boredom, took her at every opportunity to Teton when he went thither on business trips. But Teton . . . it was no better than the ranch itself. Fat, shrill-voiced Mrs. Hungate at the hotel was the only woman she really knew there. In the few tawdry stores one might purchase hats of modes two years old, and goods fit only to be traded to the Indians. The men were as uncouth as so many savages . . . with the exception possibly of Mr. Gooney, the man who owned the saloon, and whom they called Pretty Sam. He, at least, dressed with some degree of care, although his clothes were a little garish. And he had a soft-voiced courtesy and a gentle way of acting toward women. For the rest, the solitary events of the day at Teton were the diurnal arrivals of the trains, one from the west and one from the east. Otherwise the town possessed no entertainment and she had small desire ever to go there. She had married

Shep Horgan to escape the monotony of rural Indiana; she succeeded only in exchanging it for the deadlier monotony of the Dakota plains.

Mae's starved emotions demanded some relief. This took the form of unreasoning resentment against Shep. For months it was unexpressed. She became cool toward him. At first he tried with clumsy geniality to win his way back to a cordial footing with her. He brought in the latest anecdotes from the range, but these usually were bawdy and she showed her disapproval. Even the best of Shep's jokes were not funny to Mae, although he guffawed loudly when he recounted them, slapping his knee and rearing back his head to laugh, his mouth opening widely in his short beard and his eyes squinting to mere cracks above his tanned cheekbones.

Bored to a state of frenzy, she one day could no longer control herself. "You laugh like a hyena!" she screeched. He stopped laughing and stared at her, bewildered. Almost she laughed in turn to see the big man thus quenched, but instead she stared back at him, her face suddenly gone expressionless. The incident passed, but having learned the power of cutting remarks to appall him, she frequently used them, not so much to hurt him as to relieve her own desperate spirits. There was, of course, a certain pleasure in the knowledge of her power to wreak such havoc on him.

One thing only, on several occasions, prevented her from leaving Shep and returning to Indiana. It would have given too much satisfaction to the neighborhood back there. Against her parents' wishes she had married Horgan; that the foreboding predictions of the gossip mongers should be borne out would be too toothsome a thing for them to gloat over. She could never endure that. So she bided her time, hating Horgan, though she looked at him from a standpoint curiously detached, as though he were outside of her life . . . even when she lay in bed with him and felt his male harshness against her tender body.

Somehow, Mae was passionately certain, there were things in life better than her present existence afforded. When she regarded herself in the cheap mirror of her bedroom, it was a pretty figure she saw, unspoiled by childbearing, the waist small, the breasts firm and yet delicately round, the hips widening softly, then tapering toward round, plump legs. She had never permitted herself to deteriorate. The little cluster of curls on her forehead was kept crisply winsome. Her face had a fresh prettiness in spite of the brows which were too thick, and the sullen bud of a mouth. Staring at the mirrored image in keen appraisal, she could not deny her own

handsomeness. It was a body and a face made for something better than Shep Horgan's casual take-it-for-granted. A body to cause a man's pulses to leap, to bring a choke to his throat. Mae felt defrauded. Her own pulses never leaped, but that, to her female instinct, was not so important. It was the triumph of seeing a man become clay in her hands through the desire she would stir in him, which was important. . . .

After Jubal returned from the roundups, with his loose young back filled in, his bold young face richly tanned, and the curious changing color of his eyes even more noticeable by contrast, Mae felt a new interest in existence. He was the only hand at the ranch, now, in this slack season. Mae was glad that the other man, Friendly Smith, was gone, with his loose, slabby mouth and foolish eyes. A feline sensation took possession of her as she toyed with the youth who remained. Presently she was certain that Jubal was poignantly aware of her whenever she came near him; there were signs of which a woman is always conscious. At the table he kept his eyes averted from her, and he was ill at ease and silent when she was about. Once or twice when she teased him with her archly innocent air, he stumbled hurriedly from the house.

Jubal was no match for the woman. She was only two years older than he, but he was an awkward boy compared to her assured maturity. In her presence he felt weak as water and his own callowness filled him with sick embarrassment.

All this was perceived by Mae and it delighted her to torment him. He was young . . . too much so, really. But that caused him to contrast more sharply with Shep's middle-agedness. Jubal's youth was a matter concerning which he was sensitive, and she seized every opportunity to make him writhe over it. Little gibes and innuendoes she constantly employed, but whenever her intuition warned her that she was overdoing the persecution and angering him, she could become soft and winsome as a dove, creating carefully tantalizing openings, and speaking in the innocent, intimate way which left his adolescent mind confusedly groping, not sure it had heard aright, but instinctively reaching toward the rich, warm promise hinted.

So the summer passed and then for a time Jubal was relieved by the fall roundups which necessitated his absence from the ranch for two months. Even then, however, Mae Horgan was with him. In his thoughts. In his dreams.

When he rode back to the Split-S as the first crimping autumn mornings put an end to the roundups, there was a new sort of tenseness about him. His

beard was hardening now, as he could tell when he shaved, and his shoulders stretched tautly his blue hickory shirt. About his movements there was an animal grace and power. New confidence surrounded him.

He shunned the woman. As much time as possible he spent away from the ranch house, working on the corrals, riding the lines, or looking over the water holes. Mae found her position with him suddenly reversed. Jubal could have chosen no course more surely designed to fix her attention upon him.

14

Every week or so, someone from the ranch went for the mail. It was forty miles to Teton and back, a full day's ride on horseback and usually an overnight trip with the rig. Whenever possible the rancher hitched up a pair of mustangs, half-broken to the buggy, and took with him his wife on such errands. Then there would be a spirited scene for a few minutes as Shep and Jubal backed and sidled the shying, quivering little beasts into place, the rancher gingerly hooking the tugs while Jubal held the ponies' heads. With Jubal still holding the bits, Horgan would assist his wife into the seat, wait until she had adjusted her dress, her bonnet, and the parasol she invariably carried, then climb in himself. It was good judgment to secure a firm grip on the reins before the shout, "Let 'er rip!" would send Jubal leaping to one side as the mustangs, at a full run in two strides, went whirling down the trace of a road which led straight north toward the distant town.

For a mile the team always ran at its best, with Shep coolly guiding it, his tobacco quid in his cheek, and Mae clinging, half-frightened, to her seat. This was the critical period because the buggy was not as strong as it had once been, its spokes being much loosened by dry weather, and a general decrepitude showing all over it. At the end of the first wild dash, the horses steadied, and after that, Shep used to say, they were as gentle as a pair of old maid school ma'ams.

If the weather was bad, or the woman did not feel like taking the trip, Jubal would saddle his roan horse, Easy Moses, which he had purchased from Shep, and ride to town alone. Jubal knew everybody in Teton now, and he enjoyed the visits. The largest building in town was Pretty Sam Gooney's saloon. There Jubal always stopped first. He had a glass, nodded at the saloon man, exchanged jokes with Professor Troot and Spenner Johnson, and gave Sneet Peters a friendly grin before he departed to begin the conducting of his business.

The smallest building in Teton, as the saloon was the largest, was the little missionary chapel at the other end of the street. Jubal never saw the inside of it, but the exterior looked down-at-heel, with the cross askew over the door. Hatch's barber shop, Hungate's hotel, the Boston Store, and Drew English's place were other establishments. English operated a butcher shop, but his life's great interest was undertaking. He had purchased Teton's only establishment of the latter kind and moved it into the second story of the building occupied by his shop. Over the door of this unique double enterprise hung the following sign:

DREW ENGLISH
Undertaking and Fancy Meats

It usually gave visitors a qualm, but Teton was accustomed to it and there had never been any question as to the type of joints and roasts sold by Drew English to his customers. He did a good business in his meat shop, but he never ceased to complain bitterly about the disheartening state of health which made undertaking unprofitable in Teton.

15

With the first frosty days of autumn the green began to disappear from the borders of the creek, although the summer's heat had long ago reduced the great sweeps of buffalo grass to a brassy yellow. Mae Horgan had for days been talking of going to town and the time came at last when Shep found it necessary also to go. Long before dawn they dressed for the trip. Mae donned her silk dress, the blue one with the bow at the waist, and took a final glance into the mirror. It was still black outside, but the kerosene lamp threw a bright sparkle of high-lights upon her dark blue taffeta, her gleaming hair all combed and curled, and her eyes, brightened by her reddened cheeks which she had pinched vigorously to bring the blood to the surface. They were to start for Teton immediately after breakfast.

Behind Mae stood Shep in a dark wool suit, the trousers tucked into newly polished boots. He smiled a little fatuously at his wife's small, straight back. In spite of the sharpness of her tongue and her bitter ways, Shep could not help being fond of her. Even when her temper was ugly, she was beautiful to him. If he was not demonstrative, it was because he did not know how. To express his feelings was completely beyond him. She was youth and poetry and beauty to him, the more precious because he definitely had doffed his own youth.

Mae could feel Shep's eyes on her, and she stiffened. She was in no mood for any clumsy gallantries that morning. She was in a hurry. Breakfast remained to be eaten and there were important last minute details to care for.

"Honey, y'u shorely look sweet . . ." his big, humming voice. Like a lazy, bumbling summer bee. She knew the words by heart. It was, apparently, the only compliment Shep could think up.

"Some of these days, we're goin' to take a vacation, an' go clear to Chicago," said he with rising enthusiasm. She hated his enthusiasms. "I'll show them Easterners what the plains can produce in female good looks—"

"Yes?" Her rising inflection was scornful. She had listened to that before, too. "Chicago! I'll never see it, and you know it." She laughed a light, bitter laugh. "I'll rot right here in this desert!"

She felt a surge of sincere self-pity, submerged in another sensation. She had stabbed him and she knew it. An easy thing to do—simply extinguish his occasional enthusiasms. He used to have them frequently, blundering in to her with unreasoning swellings of optimism, and she would laugh secretly to see the hope and light fade out of his eyes when she finished with him. Without looking at him now she knew exactly his expression, his face falling, half hurt and half sullen. Mae whisked on an apron, pushed Shep aside and went into the kitchen.

When Jubal came in for breakfast, he could tell that Mae had been at Shep again. Lately he had begun to resent this, out of his friendship and masculine loyalty to Shep. His eye noted their attire.

"If y'u will, I'd like y'u to help with the rig after breakfast," were almost Shep's only words.

It was warm, almost hazy as they stepped out into the dawning day, but for some reason the two mustangs were unusually fractious. Some time had passed since the animals last were hitched to the buggy, and now their heads had to be snubbed down tightly to a post so that the harness could be put upon them.

"Y'u would think it was going to storm, the way them hosses act," commented Shep.

Jubal swept the morning skies with his glance, but there were only a few light clouds and the breeze was from the south. He went to the open shed and hauled the buggy out by its tongue. Something is going to have to be done about that buggy, he thought. The iron tire on the left front wheel, for one thing, needs to be tightened before long or the wheel's going to pieces.

The ponies were led out. Each man took one and began to back it into place beside the tongue. The rancher's horse was a pinto, a veritable little demon which seemed obsessed with a vindictive determination not to do what was wanted of it, side-stepping, backing, shying and raising a prodigious dust and confusion. Shep's nerves already were frayed from the morning unpleasantness with Mae, and now he did something which was rare for him. He lost his temper.

"Get over there, y'u son-of-a-bitch!" he suddenly cried out. His boot thudded into the horse's ribs. Holding it by the bits, he kicked it furiously again and again. Head high, eyes starting, the pinto whirled around. Its hunched-in rump with tail clamped tightly down, swung against the side of the buggy. A crash and a splintering sound. The horse shied away, but the old rig collapsed, its left front wheel, the weak one, smashed.

Shep's anger was over in a minute. As he calmed the trembling pony he laughed, a little ashamed.

"Never lost my patience in my life, 'thout having something happen like that," he said. "Guess I'll have to ride, an' Mae'll have to stay behind."

"I'll saddle up an' go for you," suggested Jubal.

"No, y'u better stay hyar. It's business."

"I'd shorely like to go, Shep." There was an odd note in Jubal's voice. "I can take care of any errand you want."

The woman had come out from the house and was behind her husband, looking at the wreckage.

"I'm sorry as I can be, Jube." The rancher misunderstood the cowboy's tone. "I hate to gig y'u out of a trip to town. But this hyar's a meetin' of the ranch owners at Teton."

Mae Horgan made a little grimace of disgust and turned about. For the first time Shep heard her footsteps.

"We busted the rig, honey." He turned with an apologetic grin. As if anybody could fail to see that. She walked rigidly back to the house without answering, and the door slammed behind her.

Shep's eyes were ashamed as they met Jubal's while together they worked at tightening the saddle and adjusting the stirrups on opposite sides of the pinto horse, now suddenly converted into a mount.

“So long.” Horgan rode away. Jubal watched him, a sinewy man on a little, spring horse; then a small, scurrying figure; finally a dot in the distance. The cowboy went into the bunkhouse.

16

It was a long morning. Jubal worked for a while attempting to repair the broken buggy, but he was no wheelwright and the splintered spokes and felloe baffled him. After two hours of tinkering, he gave over the attempt and managed to back the crippled vehicle into the shed.

For the first time he now noticed that the brightness of the day was gone. Those little, fleecy clouds had thickened and a haze overlaid the entire sky.

“Looks like a storm coming,” he said to himself. He hoped Shep would reach his destination before it began. Then he thought of Mae. She would be there by herself. *By herself*. A prickly feeling came into his chest at the thought.

He hurried to do a few necessary chores, to divert his mind from something which it had not dared fully to grasp. Jubal brought a couple of cows with young calves into the corral where they could be fed easily. He usually held two or three horses in the corral and turned the remainder into the big pasture to forage for themselves, because the supply of hay was too scanty to feed the whole saddle string over any considerable period of time. Horses always could take care of themselves. Far better than cattle. Cows did not seem to know how to paw off the snow to get at the grass. He had seen cows keep alive when the snow lay deep, by following a herd of horses and eating where the latter had cleared away the white covering. By the time Jubal finished preparing for the storm, afternoon was at hand, and the sky was a vault of lead.

“Is it going to snow?” asked Mae Horgan when he went up to the ranch house to eat his noonday meal. She was wearing a loose wool dress, which clung to her and did not conceal her soft curves.

“I’m afraid so,” replied Jubal. It was the first time he had ever been absolutely alone with her and the thought shook him. She intended that it should.

“What if Shep can’t get back?” she asked.

“Oh, he’ll get back. This can’t be much of a blizzard this early.”

But at the words he looked out of the window. The day had grown dark and snowflakes were swirling across the panes. It had begun to blow, too,

from the northwest. "Blizzard quarter." His heart, for some reason, sank.

By the time they finished the meal it was snowing hard. At first the ground melted the flakes, but soon it began to whiten rapidly. The temperature was dropping steadily. It might go to zero before morning. When Jubal stepped out of the house to return to his own quarters, the snow was coming so hard that it blinded him. Shep could not travel in that kind of a storm. He would lose his way. The cattlemen's meeting would not end before mid-afternoon. Unless the storm ceased quite soon it was doubtful if the rancher would reach home at all that night.

Jubal chopped a big pile of wood. Part of it he carried into the bunkhouse where he built a fire in the stove. Then he took several armfuls to the ranch house kitchen. Mae came from the bedroom as he brought in the last load.

"How does it look?" she asked.

"Bad."

"Do you think Shep will get back tonight?"

Jubal was silent for a long time. Then he shook his head.

In spite of the snow, which by then was several inches deep and drifting everywhere, night came down black as a well-hole. Jubal struggled over to the ranch house for supper. He possessed no heavy coat and he shrank from digging out the old Hudson Bay capote.

"You're cold," cried Mae. He was shivering.

"Not much. I'll warm up quick." He spread his hands toward the stove.

They ate silently. Jubal, half afraid of the woman, could feel that she was stealing queer glances at him. When he looked directly at her, however, her gaze was always straight ahead, her heavy browed face, with its fine eyes and the pouting rose-bud lips, devoid of expression. The meal was nearly over before either of them spoke.

"Jubal."

"Ma'am?"

"I don't want to stay here alone in this storm. I've never been alone in a storm before. It frightens me." She sounded like a small child, seeking assurance.

“Why, Mrs. Horgan, there’s nothing to be scared of. I’ll be right down at the bunkhouse. You could call—”

“Jubal!”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Are you going to leave me all alone in this storm?”

“I—I don’t see how I could help much, ma’am.”

“Yes, Jubal, you can. You must! You’ve got to stay here. In the house. Do you understand?”

“But I—do you think it would be right for me to do that, ma’am?”

“Right? What’s wrong about it?” She was sharp, and her voice by its tone arraigned him for thinking thoughts which were evil. Without justification.

“It will be *perfectly* all right,” she continued. “Shep will approve. I will make you down a bed in the parlor. But you can’t let me stay alone tonight, do you hear?”

Mae took Jubal’s hat from where it lay on the floor near his chair and hung it on the wall. The simple action gave him a strange feeling. It was as if the hanging up of his hat was symbolic of something which he did not quite dare to formulate in his most private thoughts.

17

Over Mae there came a different air, suddenly: She seemed doubtful, shy of him.

“Thank you for staying,” she ventured after a time.

“It’s all right.”

There was a lengthy silence. The wind outside shook the window sash and Jubal arose to put more fuel in the stove.

“Guess I ought to bring in some more chunks,” he said.

A moment later he staggered back into the house, his arms piled high with a small mountain of firewood. It was still snowing hard. She closed the door behind him and watched with appreciative eyes his supple back as he laid his burden on the floor by the stove.

“You’re very strong, aren’t you?”

This was an obvious appeal to his ego, but Jubal responded. He was proud of his lithe fitness. The spring before, when she first had seen him, he was a gangling kid. Now . . . he looked down at himself with a smile a little self-conscious.

“I guess I’ve changed a right smart since you first knew me.”

Immediately he wished he had not spoken. The words brought so forcibly to recollection his former callowness. He was suddenly very ashamed of what he had been, before her. But apparently she had not heard him.

“Don’t you ever get lonesome out here?” Her eyes were dark, engrossed.

“Why, no, ma’am. I hadn’t noticed it.”

“You would if you were a woman. Nothing but bleakness. Nobody you can talk to . . . that you really want to talk to.” The shadows of her lashes fell under each eye, imparting a suggestion of pain. Jubal felt violently sorry for her. After all, what did this barren country offer a woman like her? No wonder she sometimes became a little short with Shep. Jubal believed he could understand her viewpoint, and he wished there was some manner in which he might help her.

Mae moved away, leaving him sitting. An unexpected sense of deprivation came over him. He realized for the first time the enjoyment of her close presence; and when she walked away like that he experienced a feeling of inferiority. She was preparing to wash the supper dishes.

“Can I help you?” he blurted.

“If you want to.” She bestowed upon him a quick, grateful smile. He picked up a dishtowel and reached awkwardly for a plate. The blood was pounding queerly in his ears, and his fingers trembled. He fought to control himself. But Mae gave him no chance to do so.

“Jubal, do you know what?” Her voice was soft and blurred.

“No, what?”

“I’ve always wanted to talk to you . . . like we are, tonight. Just alone.”

In some manner she put into it worlds more than the mere words said. He felt an unaccountable sense of power. It was blunderingly masculine to pat her shoulder with awkward playfulness.

“I’m not anything much to talk to,” he blurted.

The pat was unnecessary and she shrank from it. She pushed him away, her head bent to one side, her eyes downcast.

“Don’t do that,” she said almost inaudibly, as if it were a plea. His arm fell. There was a thickness in his throat and his ears were hot. He could have kicked himself. To take a liberty like that with her!

“I’m sorry—I didn’t mean—”

But she lifted brave eyes to him. He could see that she was trying to overlook the stupidity, to forget it, and a warm flush of admiration for her went through him.

“I guess I better go now.”

Her hand went out. “No, you mustn’t! I understand. We won’t let it happen again, will we?”

They finished the dishwashing in silence, but each time their eyes met, Jubal’s head sang. In some manner this woman had taken possession of his entire horizon. He had thought little about her that morning. Even as late as noon she was no more to him than in the weeks past. But now she crowded every other thought from his mind, obliterated his senses with the feeling of her presence near him.

“Will you help me move your bed?”

Jubal almost started at the inquiry and his face was hot. He nodded.

The bedroom adjoined the kitchen and a little fire was going in Mae’s heating stove. It was the first time Jubal had ever seen her sleeping place. Fluffy curtains were on the windows. On the golden oak dresser with its white lace table runner, lay a ruffled yellow satin pincushion. In addition to the yellow-ocher of the pincushion, a tortoise-shell comb, brush and hand mirror, together with some other feminine articles reflected back to Jubal from the darkness of the looking glass. Opposite the dresser was a commode, also golden oak, with a blue and white china water pitcher standing in a blue and white china wash basin. Drawers below were for clothing and at the foot of the commode, Jubal saw a little door, which, he knew, closed off the compartment in which the bedroom vessel was kept. Two or three pictures were on the wall, and a chromo: “Home Sweet Home,” embellished with blue forget-me-nots and pink cherubs. Between the two windows stood a big double bed, its covers primly smooth. A faint, sweet scent hung about the place. Her room!

“Would you come in here, Jubal?”

She led him to a set of shelves against the wall, curtained off from the bedchamber with flowered chintz. Pulling the draperies aside, she revealed rolls of bedding on the highest shelf. Below were other articles, such as garments and linen, smelling of moth balls. Mae whisked a small, white lacy thing out of sight and flushed slightly. Again Jubal lost his sense of security. In sheer desperation, he reached up and pulled at the nearest roll of bedding. A cascade of blankets tumbled to the floor, and Mae gave a little cry. Jubal had dislodged a whole shelf full of bedding. He stepped backward and collided with her. Instinctively he reached for her to prevent her from falling.

She was in his arms, her face queer and ashen. There was something drawn and quivering about her mouth. In her eyes a question . . . a question only he could answer. His head spun and it seemed he could not breathe. She was sinking away from him. Blindly he clasped her body with his hands . . . felt her gasp on the mattress of the bed, his mouth covering hers.

18

It was not until daylight that the reaction came. Jubal stepped out-of-doors. The snow was over and although the sky was still overcast and the wind was blowing fine crystals in a white mist across the country, he knew that Shep Horgan must be on the way home.

Jubal walked slowly to the bunkhouse and kindled a fire. Then he flung his hat in a vacant bunk and sank down on his back, looking at the boards above, his breath white in the unwarmed air of the place. He could not understand his own thoughts.

At first there had been a slight repulsion . . . a feeling which always seems to come when sex is accompanied by a conviction of guilt. The woman had soothed him. It's all right, darling. Don't worry, dearest. We couldn't help it. It was right, somehow, for us. Nobody will ever know. She murmured those reassuring things over and over. At last he was able to kiss her once more, feeling her lips tremble on his, her body pressed to him in fierce importunity.

He would have pulled away from her, to lie alone and think over the incredible thing that had happened. But she was wise. The first moment of remorse in a man's mind is for the woman the fatal moment, and he must not be allowed to dwell upon it. Mae kept snuggling up to him, pressing her breasts against him, seeming to say, Here is life, warmth, love, why don't you take it? Eventually she felt his flesh grow warm again.

Then she permitted him to go. It was a different story now. She would make herself difficult of possession, so that she would be enhanced physically and emotionally to him. She put him away. For a time.

Jubal was amazed by the strange frankness of the feminine nature. He was a man, used to looking at things straight, and she was a woman accustomed to the euphemisms of femininity. Yet his were the thoughts which reeled away from the acceptance of what they two had done, with its Pandora's box of implications; while she faced it calmly, unperturbed, and with a realism which was beyond him. Try as he might he could not fathom what was going on behind that smooth white forehead, with its dark brows; but her eyes, looking up at the ceiling as they lay side by side, were serene and almost dreamy. Considering his own cyclonic feelings, Jubal marveled at her.

Now as he lay in his own bunk, the thought of Shep tortured him. Good old Shep. The man who had taken him in when he was starving and cold, who had befriended him, given him a job, trusted him. Shep, betrayed by the very man to whom he had been a benefactor. Jubal hated himself, the more so because some instinct had warned him that all this was going to happen.

But what was done, was done. The look on her face when he held her . . . queer, ashen, with drawn, trembling mouth. She appeared on the verge of crying, but he knew tears were far from her. What followed seemed as natural as the act of breathing.

Still, he would hate to face Shep.

The sound, muffled by snow, of a trotting horse, came from without. Jubal stepped from the bunkhouse to see Shep dismounting. Mae was watching with enigmatic eyes from the door of the ranch house.

“Good meetin’ of the ranch owners?” asked Jubal, assisting Horgan to unsaddle.

“Pretty fair. Everything all right here?” Shep was casual. His mind was somewhere else. The price of calves.

“O.K.,” said Jubal, carrying the saddle into the shed.

BOOK 2

The Husband and the Blizzard

1

The first snow melted and the long weeks of mild early winter passed, especially long to Jubal. Gradually, however, he began to lose the oppressive sense of guilt over his disloyalty to Shep. This was partly due to the rancher's own attitude. Shep, never suspecting the quaking ground under his home, followed his usual routine, laughing jovially, slapping Jubal on the shoulder, telling indecent stories with relish. It was difficult for Jubal to believe that a man, if he really was severely injured, could conduct himself in such a manner. A remark of Mae's came to him: *What he don't know won't hurt him.*

When Mae uttered that, while Shep was snow-bound in Teton, it had sounded brutal to Jubal, but now he began to believe it was wisdom. That one mad night had not changed Mae. She was still Shep's wife, no different than before. So Jubal reasoned, desperately trying to convince himself. But in his heart he knew that she *had* changed . . . even as he had changed. Nothing ever could be the same again.

The surest proof was Mae's attitude. She glowed like a coal of fire when she was near him, giving him little smiles, quick sidelong glances, and employing all the other pretty tricks which women know how to use toward men to whom their hearts have gone out—her feeling for him was so evident as to be frightening, since there was constant danger that her husband might notice it. Sometimes she took alarming risks. Far more matter-of-fact was she about their changed relationship than he—and far more daring. Once, with Shep in the very next room, she seized Jubal's face between her hot palms and pressed her mouth to his in a long, strangling kiss. Panic-stricken, he tore himself away. Fortunately Shep did not appear. Jubal watched constantly, however, to avoid a recurrence of the episode.

Occasionally Jubal rode with Shep to look over the range. The cattle were doing well, since as yet there had been no long period of severe cold, but those rides were ordeals to Jubal because Shep constantly talked about his wife. The simple, confidential talk of a man with his friend. The rancher could not understand Mae's coldness toward him. He asked Jubal, young

enough to be his son, for advice. And Jubal, at each new proof of Shep's belief and trust, carried an ever-increasing conviction of his own treachery.

Late in December an unseasonably warm wind came and for days there was weather like that of late spring. So warm did it grow that flies were seen buzzing feebly in the winter sunlight. A longing to depart from the Teton country began to eat at Jubal's heart.

Mae seemed driven by a sort of desperation. Again and again she schemed and maneuvered to be alone with him. Twice she succeeded in sending Shep away from the ranch for an hour or two, then came breathlessly to Jubal. But the strange distaste persisted in him. On the first occasion he evaded her by pretending that his horse was sick and must be doctored. He "drenched" the astonished Easy Moses, who had never felt better in his life, using a nose-twitch and a bottle, and although the medicine was water with a little axle grease to thicken it, the roan horse displayed such satisfactory reluctance to swallow it that Jubal succeeded in using up the time until Shep returned. But the second time Mae thus came to Jubal, she discerned his attempts to temporize, and he looked into her eyes in which a strange medley of emotions struggled. There was a hurt there, and shame at being thus disparaged, but over all there was blazing anger and lacerated pride.

2

More snow flurries and brief thaws, and Christmas passed. Mae was furious with both Shep and Jubal that day. The men went away by themselves to drink a quart of whiskey in celebration. For the moment she did not know whom she hated more, her husband or Jubal.

Then came the last day of 1885, the day before New Year's.

Mae had a plan. "I wish you'd go for the mail today," she told Shep that morning at breakfast. "I need some goods. I'll give you a sample to match at the Boston Store."

Jubal surveyed Horgan across the table. "I could run that errand for you," he suggested.

"No, I want Shep to do it." The woman almost glowered.

"Now look hyar, Mae," began her husband indulgently, "Jube could do that for y'u jest as well as me. I wasn't aimin' to go to town this week. Besides, there ain't much doin' on the ranch, an' there's no reason why he shouldn't get off a day if he wants to."

“But the goods is *important*,” she cried.

“Why, there ain’t nothin’ so tearin’ hard about matchin’ a piece of taffety.” Surprise was in Shep’s voice. “A body’d think y’u was wantin’ to get rid of me.”

So much truth was contained in that chance shot that Mae fell silent, and Jubal was instructed by his employer to ride to Teton for her. The woman was dangerously quiet when she handed up to Jubal in his saddle the sample of cloth to be matched. She displayed none of her former interest in the errand.

As she heard the horse’s hoofs softly thunder away, she entered the house, white-faced, and seated herself in her bedroom. All the concentrated bitterness of the universe seemed to be decocted into the draught she was forced to swallow now. Her little hints, the sidelong glances from the corners of her eyes, her eyebrows raised insinuatingly—all had been ignored by Jubal. *Ignored*. She could not conceal that from herself.

To Mae the experience of being brushed aside by a man was new and painful. Never before in her life had it occurred to her, and now with this thought came the jolting realization that of all the men she had known in her life, Jubal Troop was the one above all she really wanted.

“He wouldn’t even look at me when he rode away . . .” she whispered to herself, alone in the bedroom. “Not even a look . . . after all we’ve been to each other. . . .”

Then anger shook her body. To be disappointed was one thing. To be flouted and dismissed by a raw, uncouth boy . . . She began to cry, not sobbing, but with a sort of hissing exhalation of the breath, the tears running down her nose, her face disfigured with mouth twisted and bitter lines in her cheeks.

Shep’s big, clumping feet at the door. She made a few ineffectual dabs with her handkerchief, but the rancher was already before her.

“What, honey, y’u cryin’?” To have him commiserate her was the last straw. Shep was uneasy. He had seen Mae in a mood similar to this before. When she was merely unhappy, she sobbed. Once or twice—early in his experience of her—when she had been very happy, she had cried, but had smiled while the tears came, which amazed and awed him, but was not particularly alarming. This soft hissing sound, however, with the occasional sniffs, the woman sitting, her head buried in her hands, her slim shoulders quaking . . . it was something more dangerous than either joy or sorrow.

“What’s the matter, honey?” he asked again.

Shep stepped nearer. “Is it anything I’ve done?” he asked stupidly. He did not remember any recent offenses. Perhaps refusing to go to Teton . . .

“No!” She shook his hand from her shoulder. “Let me be! Go *away!* Can’t you see I hate you?”

“Hate me?” The rancher was aghast. “Hate *me?* What for?”

She did not answer. “It wasn’t because I sent Jube Troop for them goods instead of going myself, was it?”

Mae stopped crying. Her eyes fixed themselves on her husband’s face in surprise and apprehension. There was something in the way he uttered those words . . . yes, in his eyes comprehension was dawning.

The woman stared . . . *Shep Horgan knew.*

Her heart leaped wildly and then became as cold as a piece of ice. He knew; there was no possible reason for further masquerade. What would he do? She felt very helpless and very frightened all of a sudden. Then, instinctively, blindly, she struck out.

“What do you expect?” She was answering an unspoken question, answering it desperately, fiercely. “*Sure*, I wanted you to go. Why shouldn’t I?” A shrill, hysterical laugh. Then she rushed on, her judgment gone. She wanted to hurt that man before her. To hurt him deep down . . . as much as she could hurt him, so that he would never recover from it.

“You poor fool—do you suppose I could stand this forever? You’re old enough to be my father! And you treat me like any piece of furniture. You’ve no more life in you than a corral post. It was bound to happen . . . *sure* to happen, I say!”

She shrieked the last words at him, and then stopped in the middle of the tirade. The transformation in Shep’s face was terrifying. The look of shocked, hurt comprehension settled into another expression, hard as granite. Then came a slow infusion of wrath into his features, a terrible, gradual process, which started at the corners of the grim mouth above his short beard, spread to his nostrils, and ended in the deep sinking of his burning eyes within their sockets.

Not a word came from him, but he stepped out of the bedroom, where she sat cowering, into the kitchen. She could hear him fumbling . . . fumbling for what? Was he coming back? The door slammed behind him. He had gone.

Relief brought the color back to her rich face for a moment; then panic faded it all away again. She leaped to the door and threw it open.

“Where are you going?”

He did not answer.

“Where are you going, Shep?” A wild, fearful cry. Silent, stolid, the rancher moved like a machine toward the corral, saddled a horse and mounted it as she watched from the door. About his waist was his cartridge belt, the heavy Colt revolver swinging low on his thigh. That was what had rattled when he took it from its nail on the kitchen wall. . . .

She could not stop him now and she flung herself on the bed and sobbed in earnest. Like many another woman before her, she had set up a tide of events over which she suddenly found she had lost control.

Shep would ride into Teton, hunt up Jubal, and shoot him without a word. If only she could think of some way to stop it.

Sounds came from without. A horse’s hoofs. Could it be Shep returning? She rushed to the door, half in hope, half in fear. But when she threw it open, neither Shep nor Jubal stood there. She knew that loose, slabby grin, the stupid eyes and the low, lined forehead. Friendly Smith. Once she had hated to have him near the house, but now she seized his arm with a wild fervor.

“Friendly!” she cried. “You’ve come just in time! Oh, I’m so glad! You’ve got to help me, Friendly, do you hear?”

“I—I—yes’m,” gasped Friendly, unprepared for such a greeting. “I—I—jest come over to see if I could borry—”

What he had come to “borry” he never had a chance to tell. A feminine whirlwind pulled him into the kitchen, and before her torrent of words he was perforce silent. She was scratching a note on a piece of paper, sealing it in an envelope, and through his slow mind was forced the thought that some tremendous catastrophe, the nature of which he did not comprehend, was about to occur, would occur, if he did not place that note in Jubal’s hands at Teton before somebody else arrived there. A moment later he was hustled and pushed to the door. Excited now, by infection from her sweeping passion, he threw himself upon his horse and whirled it toward the road.

“Ride like you never rode before *and—take—the—short—cut!*” he heard her scream after him through the rapid tattoo of his pony’s galloping hoofs.

Jubal, standing in front of the Boston Store, which was also the post office, with Mae's "goods" under his arm and a thin parcel of letters and papers for the ranch in his hand, saw Friendly Smith tumble from his lathered horse and come toward him at a stiff, bowlegged run, rendered awkward by his chaps and high heeled boots. Blankly Jubal stared at the stupid, bovine face, with its corrugated brow, its peering eyes, and its great, loose mouth, flapping with incoherent words. Friendly did not know what was in the envelope he kept dabbing at Jubal, but he knew the message was supremely important. It seemed to him hours before Jubal accepted the letter, and then Friendly anxiously waited, like a dog, in hope of learning the portent of what he had brought.

Jubal's face was puzzled as he ripped the envelope. Then his look changed to a blaze of concentration.

"JUBAL: [he read] Be on lookout for Shep I have told him. All about Us. He is gone to Teton with his Gun. I fear he is looking for you. He is Dangerous. When roused. Try and get out of town. MAE."

Between his fingers Jubal tore the letter and envelope to tiny bits and tossed them, a cascade of counterfeit snowflakes, into the street. His mind felt suddenly numb. She had told . . . but why? Shep was coming "looking" for him. That meant shooting. What earthly gain had Mae hoped to achieve by telling? Shep would be in Teton soon. *With his gun.* Jubal felt the weight of the Colt at his own side. But he was not a gun fighter. Never had fired a shot in anger in his life. Like most cowboys he carried the weapon for show more than anything else . . . to shoot at coyotes and jackrabbits, and occasionally to finish a horse or cow that had broken a leg and needed that last mercy. What could he do in a pistol duel with a seasoned antagonist like the rancher?

"Did you see Shep Horgan on your way here?" he sharply demanded of Friendly.

"Yeh," was the reply. "Passed him ten mile back. He yelled at me, but I rode on in."

Slowly Jubal's mind began to accept the monstrous facts. That is, one half of his mind accepted them. The other half still stood stunned before the implications of Mae's note. Gradually his thoughts cleared. Like a mirror, filmed with a breath, which slowly clears. Anger cleared it. Anger against

the woman out there on the ranch. For the first time Jubal fully understood the snare she had set both for her husband and for him. His mind swiftly tagged and tabulated the sly approaches and openings she had made; her seduction of him was made plain as the carefully planned work of months. He knew shame. She had victimized him; had lured him into putting his body to an indecent purpose. That was the way the thought of her affected him. In the past he had been ashamed of himself for having taken advantage of her supposed female weakness. For that he blamed himself. Now he saw all at once, in the pitiless light of his new understanding, that it was she, not he, who had made the conquest; he, not she, who had been debauched.

For a moment the bitter thoughts raced through his mind, paralyzing his volition. But presently his ideas began to marshal themselves. His body was hot as fire, but his brain became cooler.

He glanced down the street to where Easy Moses stood tethered before Gooney's. There was still time to leave town. But a swift rush of thought came. Where could he go? He knew Shep. The rancher would follow him no matter which way he headed. Somewhere, sometime, there would have to be a settlement between them. If he only could talk with Shep . . . but that idea was discarded as soon as conceived. Too well Jubal knew the stubborn, single-track mind of Horgan, which made it impossible even to think of reasoning out the matter with him.

Moreover, a rage was mounting in Jubal which snarled at the idea of flight. In the cattle country cowardice was not admired. He knew what would be expected of him in this crisis, and what would be the judgment on him if he fled from it. From this elemental trial by combat there was no escape, unless he wished to live a pariah life, subject to contempt which would forever follow him.

In heavy concentration his mind bent on the problem. Shep will come shooting, he thought. Come shooting and no questions asked or answered. I can't use a six-gun like he can. Got to do something to equalize myself. A rifle . . . if I only had a rifle . . .

He left Friendly Smith gaping in the street and walked rapidly toward Gooney's bar. Clear-cut and sharp in the pale sunlight of late December, stood out the single street of Teton. The saloon and dance hall loomed whitely, their clapboard sides high and unrelieved except for the narrow four-paned windows. Further along stood the sole brick building in Teton, with Drew English's "Undertaking and Fancy Meats" sign hanging out in front. In the same building were Hatch's barber shop and Doc Hampton's

prescription store, with the Masonic hall above. Hungate's hotel and a few other frame buildings stretched down the rutty street, and far on the opposite end was the little chapel with its wooden cross askew. After that the street crawled out into the limitless plains, and Jubal could see, miles away, the low, sharp outlines of the hills which formed the horizon.

Pushing aside the swinging doors, he entered the saloon. Two or three men stood at the bar. There was no game going on at the table, and Pretty Sam Gooney himself, resplendent as usual in frock coat, fancy waistcoat and highly polished boots, lounged at the rail with "Professor" Troot, Spenner Johnson and Bill Skagway, a Goose-Egg puncher.

"As I live and breathe, Jubal Troop!" The saloon man always talked that way. It was good business. "Step up, Jube, and have one on the house."

"Don't care if I do," replied Jubal, his face wooden.

Behind the bar, with its long mirror and its piled bottles, stood Sneet Peters, the Negro, who set out a quart of whiskey. "Professor" and Spenner, at this, tactfully drew aside. They worked for Pretty Sam. But the saloon man waved them expansively back to the counter.

"Come on, boys, we'll all have one," he boomed jovially, his red face cordial behind its blond mustache, his embroidered vest swelling with hospitality. Having waited his cue, Sneet put out five glasses. One after another, "Professor," Spenner, Skagway, and lastly Pretty Sam and Jubal, filled the little thick containers with the amber liquid. Jubal observed with pride that his hand did not tremble. He poured his glass brimful without spilling a drop.

"Gents, your good healths," pledged Gooney, gracefully.

With a chorus of "How's" the men lifted their glasses and drained them.

Jubal, preparing to make the first step in his newly conceived plan, looked directly at Pretty Sam. Shep would be arriving any minute now. Jubal had to move quickly.

"Sam, will you lend me a Winchester?"

He could feel the electric spark of surprise among the other men. Pretty Sam looked at him closely.

"What for, Jube?"

"There's a man gunning for me."

"Good God! Who?" cried the saloon man.

“Shep Horgan.”

Nothing Jubal could have uttered would have stunned them more. Pretty Sam’s jaw dropped and the color ebbed from his florid face. Spenner and “Professor” edged away from the cowboy as if he suddenly had become infected with some virulent disease. The Goose-Egg man simply stared.

“Naw!” exploded Gooney incredulously. “Not Shep Horgan! Which you’re shorely hoolihannin’ us. Why, Shep wouldn’t hurt a fly.” His gaze flickered a moment and he looked with a new expression at Jubal. “Unless . . .” his voice trailed off.

“We had a failin’ out,” said Jubal shortly. “Are you goin’ to lend me that Winchester?” It was vital that he have a rifle instead of his six-shooter. He could scarcely expect to match an experienced man in a battle with Colts.

“Why, Jube,” began Pretty Sam, his voice uneasy, “I ain’t got a gun that’d do you any good.” He was beginning to envisage complications. It would never do for him to take sides with a mere cowboy against a rancher, and that would be the interpretation placed upon his lending a gun to Jubal with which to fight Horgan. Besides the suspicion was growing in all their minds that there was behind all this something which transcended Jubal’s explanation.

Jubal’s gaze shifted to the others. Spenner Johnson and “Professor” Troot were retreating into the now empty dance hall. Skagway, the Goose-Egg man, had moved to the other end of the bar and stood studying intently his own image in the mirror. No help there.

Although Jubal’s face was still impassive, a fire burned in the core of his body as he walked out of the saloon. Down by Hungate’s hotel he saw a familiar, pie-bald pony—Shep Horgan’s. Also, a man was running toward the saloon. It was Drew English, the butcher-undertaker, small, bespectacled, with his black shoe-brush mustache bristling in excitement.

“Jubal!” he gasped. “Shep Horgan’s jest come to town. He’s at Hungate’s. He sent me up here to see if you was here, an’ tell you he was goin’ to shoot you on sight!” The little man’s eyes glittered hysterically behind his glasses.

Jubal stepped back into the saloon. The Goose-Egg man slipped out to the street. Sneet Peters disappeared behind the bar. Anxiety showed on Pretty Sam Gooney’s face.

“You’ll have to get out of here,” he said. “I can’t have any shooting in here.”

“Afraid you might lose a mirror, are you, Sam?” sneered Jubal. “Afraid you might have a mess on the floor to clean up?”

He felt a tug at his elbow. It was Sneet Peters.

“I got a gun, Mist’ Troop,” the Negro whispered anxiously. “’Tain’t much of a one, but if you-all ain’t got no otheh—”

Raging within himself at the antipathetic atmosphere around him, Jubal nodded. Without bothering to look into the justice of the matter even, Gooney had taken sides with the rancher. So had English. It was an instinctive alignment with them. Gooney, English and Horgan were bosses. Jubal was just a cowpoke. He knew that the hostility of these men would be echoed by other “business men” of the town—Hungate, and Hatch, and Doc Hampton, and Strauss the Jew, who ran the Boston Store. The town was against him, and his heart swelled with black anger against the town.

These men were all hostile. Not one of them would lift a finger to help him . . . the man against the master.

A sudden revolt of pride spoke through Jubal’s lips: “Go to hell! All of you! I wouldn’t ask one of you bastards for a favor if it was my last breath on earth!”

5

Again the tug on Jubal’s sleeve. He followed his single remaining friend, humble Sneet Peters, the Negro handy man, through the dance hall with its polished pine floors, its high white walls bedizened with stenciled flowers, and its hanging kerosene lamps. Spenner and “Professor” sat by the old piano on the little platform in the corner from which the former was wont to call dance figures as he fiddled. Sneet Peters led Jubal out of the back door.

The unkempt alley back of the saloon was strewn with empty bottles, littered with a pile of barrels. At one side, near the barrels, was a small hovel, built of odds and ends of planks and boards, sacking and canvas, and hammered-out tin cans—Sneet Peters’ home. The Negro’s face shone with perspiration as he stooped and crawled into the small, noisome quarters. In a moment he was back with a curious object. It was a gun. One of the old-fashioned Sharps’ rifles of Civil War times. Its short forestock, heavy barrel, and huge 50-caliber bore, all spoke eloquently of the use for which it was primarily designed—hide hunting. Within a decade men by the thousand had made their livelihood preying on the huge buffalo herds in these very plains, slaughtering the great, woolly beasts and sending the robes back East to

market. More recently, however, the old "buffalo gun" had been supplanted over the whole West by the light, nimble Winchester repeater.

Sneet, his black hand trembling, held out the weapon to Jubal.

"You-all take this. Heah's ca'tridges."

Jubal's hand closed on the thick barrel, he felt the weight of the gun sag his arm as the Negro released it to him. A moment later Sneet was pouring a half-dozen long, heavy brass cylinders into the cowboy's free hand. As in a dream, Jubal cocked the rifle, looked into the chamber. It was fleckless; the riflings in the barrel were sweet and clean. Jubal snapped a cartridge into the chamber. He had no qualms about using the heavier gun in the impending duel, nor would criticism attach to him for it. A man had the right to choose his own weapons and, indeed, most gun fighters would feel that the six-shooter would hold the advantage over the unwieldy buffalo gun. But to the inexperienced Jubal the long barrel gave a certain confidence.

He glanced about. The day seemed incredibly long. Less than five minutes had elapsed since Drew English came running with the death message from Shep Horgan, yet to Jubal the time seemed hours. An effort of thought was required to understand why the sun's position in the sky was not changed. Jubal felt suddenly that it had been years since he saw that sun rise; that he would never see it set. It was not yet noon, and the shortening shadows cast by the buildings of Teton appeared to be formed of some sooty substance which should be palpable to the touch. The sun, by hurrying its journey and dropping behind those cardboard edges of hilltops to the west, bringing the gray gloom of evening, would have made things easier for him . . . for Shep Horgan, too . . . but it would be hours yet before that happened. And Shep would not wait. There would be no sun at all for one or the other of them within a few minutes at most.

Spenner Johnson's face peered from a window in the dance hall. The man's fat jowls were gray, as if he were sick, and the single thin lock of hair, which he commonly combed over the front of his bald head, dangled down in his eyes.

"Horgan's headed up the street from Hungate's," came Spenner's hoarse whisper. "Professor kin see him from the windy on t'other side. Coming up the middle of the street. Six-shooter in his hand."

Jubal was warmed by gratitude. Gooney, English and the others were against him, but the humble ones, Sneet, Spenner and "Professor," were playing the friend to him.

An angle was formed by the ell of the saloon and dance hall. By looking around the end of the building to his left, Jubal might see down the street. But that would place him at a disadvantage, because he would have to step out from the building to fire. He must use the opposite end of the structure. Jubal slipped around the saloon toward his right.

The corner. For a moment his legs were like lead. When he looked from that corner, he would see Shep. Perhaps the rancher would send a bullet into Jubal's face as he peered forth. The cowboy drew air deeply into his lungs, cocked the buffalo gun, and pushed the barrel before him as he stepped cleanly out into the open.

Shep was directly in front of him . . . not more than thirty feet away. Jubal was shocked by his proximity. For an instant every detail of the rancher stood out in microscopic delineation; the grim mouth and short beard darkly blocking off the lower half of his countenance, and the thick, solid body in its sheepskin jacket, alert, legs spread, the heavy revolver half lifted.

Shep's hand went up. A cloud of smoke coughed out of it, and another. A long, yellow splinter split from the corner of the saloon just above Jubal's head and an invisibility screamed away like a lost soul. Something exploded appallingly in front of Jubal and his shoulder was driven back by a bruising impact. The entire scene ahead was blotted out momentarily by the gray fog of powder smoke. Somehow he realized it was the buffalo gun which had made the noise and smoke; its heavy kick had bruised his shoulder. The thought surprised him. Jubal had not even known when he raised the gun.

As if someone had drawn aside the veil, the smoke cleared. Something lay on the ground . . . Shep. Flat on his face, his sheepskin coat rumpled up on his back, his beard grayed with dust. Red, frothy bubbles streamed from his mouth. As if protesting this untidy end, one of his feet kicked limply two or three times. Then he lay still, awkwardly contorted.

Jubal found himself looking down at the man he had killed. For what? Because Shep Horgan had committed the sin of marrying a woman twenty years younger than himself. Jubal thought that, bitterly.

From all directions people were running toward him. Voices clamored, men's and women's, as the crowd gathered, pushing, to see a poor fellow creature stricken suddenly to carrion in the dirt. Jubal saw Pretty Sam Gooney standing near.

“You saw him shoot first,” said Jubal. To the West, that made Horgan the aggressor, Jubal’s shot one of self-defense.

Gooney, his face mottled and his eyes protruding like those of a fish, nodded, swallowing. Mechanically, his eyes still fixed on the corpse, Pretty Sam took Sneet Peters’ rifle which Jubal handed to him.

Jubal pushed his way out of the mob and walked toward his horse. He seemed drunk; his feet a part of somebody else, stepping along without sensation. Several men stared at him as they passed, but he spoke to nobody and they hurried on to the crowd around death.

Jubal said to himself:

I’ve killed Shep Horgan. I’ve killed Shep. I’ve killed my friend.

He mounted Easy Moses and rode south toward the Split-S.

6

Evening was hinting but the day still lived. A weak winter sun sloped steeply toward the western horizon, yet with a sufficiency of still untraversed powder-blue sky to promise three hours of light. Mae Horgan, her face brittle and white, stood in the bunkhouse watching Jubal roll and lash his blankets. She had come as soon as she saw him ride in from the north.

“You are sure Shep is . . .” her voice trailed flatly.

“Yes.”

She made no pretense of grief, but at the hard finality of his single word, she was silent for minutes, her eyes fixed mesmerically on him as he stooped over his bedroll.

“I had to kill him or be killed.” It maddened him to find himself justifying himself to her. His voice rose accusingly. “*You* sent him!”

“Oh!”

“Yes, you did! You sent him and it had to be one or the other of us. It was him!” Put thus into rushing words, for the first time Jubal felt a bare shadow of triumph. He had met his man with bullets, and won.

The triumph quickly faded. He felt sick instead.

“I didn’t send—no—I didn’t know—” the woman was protesting.

“I ain’t goin’ to argue. I ain’t got time.” With the bedroll on his shoulder he started out of the bunkhouse.

“Jubal—”

“What?”

Her voice was vibrant with an appeal which was almost desperate. “Jubal, I must tell you something. You’ve got to understand! Shep found out—he guessed, in some way. How, I don’t know. I tried to stop him—truly I did.” She paused, groping for words. “Jubal, you *must* believe this: I’ve been selfish. I’ve been guilty of doing shameful things. No woman ever ought to talk the way I’m talking now, but I’ve got to say it—whatever I’ve done, I love you, Jubal! Do you understand? I love you!”

He looked at her as if he did not hear her, and picking up his bundle once more started for the door.

“Jubal!” she called after him in terror.

“What?”

“Won’t you—take me along?”

Stock still he halted and stared at her. This was fantastic. In his wildest imaginings he had never dreamed of this. He had just killed this woman’s husband and, having sent one man to his death, she now coolly proposed to accompany the slayer. Jubal’s teeth showed.

“I wouldn’t have thought anything could be so low.” His voice was deadly with loathing. “You she-Judas—do you think I’d run the risk of having you stick a knife in my back like you done poor Shep?”

Stony white she went, as if he had lashed her across the face with his quirt. Finally, in a queer, flat voice, she asked:

“As a last favor, will you saddle my pony for me?”

“What are you going to do?” He was suspicious and angry.

“You needn’t worry. I won’t follow you. You’ve made that strong enough.” She spoke dangerously, as if holding by main force her rage. “I’m going to Teton—to Shep.”

Jubal stared again. The woman was beyond him. As he flung out to the corral to catch the horse, his head was whirling. One moment she was willing to ride away with him, without further inquiry about her husband who now lay stretched on a slab in Drew English’s grisly upstairs

establishment. The next, she was the conventional wife, ready to rush to her dead.

“I suppose I’ll not be seeing you again.” She had mounted her side saddle and was gathering the reins as he held the pony’s bits.

“I reckon not,” he answered shortly. “Folks in Teton saw the shooting. Shep pulled first. But this part of the country won’t be any too friendly. I’m shovin’ south.”

He watched her canter away, head up, straight supple back swaying easily to the motion of the horse. A thin high haze was dimming the day’s brightness.

7

There was small opportunity to travel far that night. By the time Jubal gathered a little food and attended to other last minute things, darkness was near. It was growing colder, and when he finally halted he had put only fifteen miles between himself and the Split-S ranch house. Easy Moses relaxed with a grateful groan when his master pulled up in a lonely clump of cottonwoods at a small water hole. The little roan had been ridden fifty-five miles that day.

Jubal did his camping chores by instinct, watered and picketed the horse, lit a fire among the gray cottonwood trunks, and put some bacon in the frying pan. But his mind was on other things. Perhaps that was why he failed to hear the drumming of horses’ hoofs until a whinny from Easy Moses was followed by a hail which brought him to his feet in the circle of firelight.

“’Light an’ have some grub!” He could not see the approaching strangers, because they were in the darkness, but the conventional greeting of the plains bivouac came naturally to his lips.

“Reach for heaven, Troop! An’ keep your hands there,” was the stern reply. As Jubal raised his arms he recognized the voice. Pretty Sam Gooney. Then a dozen men, led by the saloon keeper, rode up to the fire and dismounted. Jubal knew them all. Drew English, the undertaker-butcher. Old Man Hungate, Doc Hampton, and even Isidore Strauss, the Jew—the leading citizens of Teton, together with “Professor” Troot, Spenner Johnson and other small fry. He understood their errand before they told him.

“It’s a posse, Troop. You’re arrested in the name of the vigilance committee of Teton,” announced Pretty Sam. “You can take your hands down.” English had removed Jubal’s cartridge belt and revolver.

“I didn’t know Teton had a vigilance committee,” said the prisoner.

“Well, we—sort of just organized,” replied Gooney.

Jubal shrugged his shoulders. “Eat, gents?” he invited, indicating the frying pan.

“Don’t mind if we do,” said Pretty Sam. Hungate was prying among Jubal’s duffle.

“Chunk of bacon, some flour an’ stuff,” he announced, bringing the provisions close to the fire. “Enough to make supper for the bunch of us, I guess. Sorry to be confescatin’ yore grub, Jube,” he added apologetically. “Ye won’t be needin’ this hyar any more, an’ we might as well make use of it.”

“What are you fixin’ to do with me?” Jubal inquired after a moment’s awkward pause which followed the hotel man’s words.

There was a dead silence while the men glanced uncomfortably at each other. It is difficult to inform a person that he is about to die at your hands, especially when you know him well, and have no particular grudge against him.

“You tell him, Sam. You’re chairman,” somebody suggested.

“To make it short,” Gooney spoke up stoutly enough, although he kept his eye on the toe of his boot, “we’re goin’ to h’ist you for the killin’ of Shep Horgan.”

Jubal was not surprised. A lynching was what he already had anticipated. Once when he was a little lad down the Mississippi River, he had seen a Negro lynched for raping a white woman—or that was what they said, although he seemed to remember that later it was proved there was no raping at all. The Negro, however, died before the proof arrived. Jubal never forgot the sight of the wretched creature’s limbs, jerking and twitching in awful futility as he strangled to death . . . hanging from a railroad bridge. Now Jubal was himself to enact that grim death dance on thin air.

“You saw him shoot first, Sam.” He was glad that his voice was steady. It was not death he feared; it was the indecent indignity of it under such circumstances.

Gooney cleared his throat. “Shep shot first, all right enough. No trouble about that. But we hadn’t heard the widow’s story then.”

The widow's story? So that was why Mae had ridden away, so composed, calm and straight-backed. He had repudiated her and scorned her. This was her way of retaliating.

"What did Mrs. Horgan say?" Jubal heard himself ask.

"I think you know well enough without my telling you," replied Pretty Sam. "But if you insist on havin' it, she told-an' you could see what an effort it was for a lady like her—about you *forcin'* her, an' Shep comin' in an' catchin' you."

Jubal was stricken dumb. He realized his own helplessness. With its exaggerated respect for women, the frontier would take a woman's word against a man's under most circumstances, but when a weeping widow went to a crowd of sympathetic fools—and Jubal could well imagine the histrionics Mae employed—with a tale of outrage and of a husband's attempt to avenge a wife's honor, the cards clearly were stacked. He would never beg for mercy, and to attempt to argue for justice with these men was useless. Mae's story was so close to the truth—the only deviation being her self-justification that he had raped her—that it would do no good to tell the facts under any circumstances.

He seated himself on a hummock and held out his feet for Drew English to "hobble" with a short length of rope. The undertaker squatted near with a rifle across his knees. The other men began silently to eat.

8

When the meal was over, Jubal asked English:

"When are you goin' . . . to do it?"

"Not ontill mornin'," English replied. "We can't travel before daylight, an' this is the only grove with trees big enough for a hangin' within miles. None of us feels like havin' a remains swingin' around over our heads while we sleep." The little undertaker used the word "remains" with the professional unction of his craft. "We aim to keep you onder guard ontill right after breakfast tomorry, an' then string you up an' leave you behind when we go back to Teton."

It is the nature of man to be grateful even for a few poor hours of reprieve from death, so Jubal did not resent the thoughtless brutality of forcing him to sit at the site of his doom through the long, despairing night, in order that the members of the posse might not be discommoded either by

the discomfort of a ride through the dark, or by having a limp corpse swaying its feet above their heads in the gloom as they slept.

To pass the time, he talked with English. The undertaker was eager to recount to him the professional services he had rendered the dead Shep Horgan. Two or three times Jubal changed the subject, but the little man's shoe-brush mustache bristled with eagerness, and in the firelight his eyes shone brightly behind their spectacles.

"It's a shame, Jubal, that I couldn't have you at Teton," English said. "I would do my very best by you. You'd make a beautiful body." He smiled ingratiatingly at this compliment. "I always prefer to handle young people. Not that I hesitate at the old. I always try to do my duty to the best of my ability." He hesitated modestly and cast a smug, sanctimonious glance out of the corners of his eyes. "No man is more willing than me to perform them last tender services to our dear departed, no matter what the age and—ah—condition. But, as I say, a young body lends itself so much better to artistic effects."

He sighed. "I always wanted, as you know, Jubal, to devote my full time an' attention to undertaking. But there just ain't enough business in Teton to justify it. So I have to operate the meat shop to keep goin'. I never seen a country so depressin'ly healthy. Would you believe it, Shep Horgan's the first remains—"

"Shut up!"

At Jubal's cry of horror, Drew English looked hurt, then lapsed into the stony silence of one who has been affronted causelessly. After a time Doc Hampton came over and took the rifle. The undertaker wrapped himself in a blanket on the opposite side of the fire where he soon began to snore.

9

The hours wore on. There were no stars. The haze which Jubal noticed in the afternoon, now completely covered the sky, but he guessed it was near midnight. Midnight! That would mean the beginning of a New Year. 1886. What a hell of a way to spend New Year's Eve.

Half drowsing, Doc Hampton sat with the rifle across his knees. Presently he probed deeply into a trousers pocket and drew forth a penknife, with which he began with slow nicety to pare and clean his fingernails. Jubal watched the firelight play on the doctor's heavy, flaccid face with its gray-streaked beard. Doc had been in the army medical department during the Civil War, and he wore his whiskers like Abe Lincoln, although there was

little else in his fat features to remind one of the Emancipator. The beard jutted forward enough to conceal a weak chin and to mitigate the over-prominence of a bulbous, greasy nose. Doc squinted as he trimmed his nails, then used the point of the knife to scrape out the dirt which had accumulated under them.

Of a sudden he raised his head, his mouth half open, listening. The knife was held poised in his right hand and he stared out at the blackness on the other side of the fire. Pretty Sam was on his feet, staring too, and so was “Professor” Troot. Some of the others, aroused by the sudden movement, began to sit up, although Drew English, his mustache forming a heavy black smear under his nose, snored on.

A rapid clatter of horse’s hoofs coming from the north had aroused the men. Gooney drew his revolver and so did Old Man Hungate. The vigilance committee had no intention of permitting interference with its purpose. From a gallop the hoofbeats slowed to a trot. A moment later the men were all talking.

“Mrs. Horgan!”

“Why, ma’am, what are you doing here?”

“You shouldn’t have come, Mrs. Horgan. This is no place for you.”

The woman’s voice rose above the deeper tones of the men:

“I’ve hunted half the night for you. Just happened to see this light from that rise to the west. Have you got him?”

“You bet!” Pretty Sam’s tones reflected his pride.

“I want you to let him go! That’s what I’ve come to ask.”

“Why, Mrs. Horgan—”

“There’s been enough done already. Shep—my husband—is dead. I beg of you not to cause any more deaths. Please, gentlemen, let this man go!”

“Ma’am, this is what I feared, an’ why I said you should not have come here,” said the saloon man. “We have a duty which we’ve got to perform an’ no woman’s eyes should be affronted by seeing—”

The last words were drowned by the roar of a revolver almost under his feet.

“I think I got him!” yelled Drew English. But there was a rapid tattoo of hoofs, and he began to swear. “I must have missed.”

“What is it? Who are you shooting at?”

“Jubal Troop,” said the little undertaker. “He got away.”

Across the fire they now saw Doc Hampton lying. He began slowly to raise himself, shaking his head and rubbing his jaw.

Beside the little hummock upon which Jubal Troop had been sitting a moment before, lay the penknife, still open, with which the doctor had been cleaning his fingernails.

10

It had been an unconsidered impulse. When Mae Horgan rode into the camp circle, all attention for a moment was focused on the woman. In that moment Jubal swung his fist with every pound of his body behind it, against Doc Hampton’s sagging jaw. It was a shrewd blow; a true blow. It found the point of the chin through the grizzled bush of beard, through the soft folds of flesh under it.

Like an ox under the sledge, the physician went down. Jubal felt on the ground for the penknife; found it where it had fallen; and slashed the rope which confined his ankles. Then he leaped away from the firelight toward the direction where the horses were tethered at the edge of the grove.

Most of the horses still stood with saddles and bridles on. Jubal would have liked to take Easy Moses, his little roan, but there was no time to find the pony. In the gloom, the cowboy felt his way to the nearest animal, unfastened the reins from a tree. A revolver roared from the fire and the bullet sang overhead. Then Jubal was in the saddle, driving his spurs into the flanks of his mount, headed at a thundering run out into the pitchy blackness.

He counted, correctly, on the confusion of the posse to give him a lead. Minutes were wasted while the men shouted to each other before they fully understood just what had happened. Then they rushed to their horses, but in the confusion nobody had listened for the hoofbeats of Jubal’s pony, so nobody knew in what direction he had gone. By the time they were in their saddles and Pretty Sam Gooney had cursed some kind of order into them, their recent prisoner had disappeared as completely as if he had dropped into a bottomless hole in the ground. A few scurrying runs, this way and that; a few belated attempts to listen for sounds which might furnish a hint as to the direction taken by the fleeing horseman; a long and somewhat acrid conference at the fire; and the entire posse, led by Pretty Sam and Mae Horgan, began a disgruntled ride back to Teton. None of them had wished to

undertake the thirty-five-mile jaunt that night, but Gooney pointed out that they must reach the nearest telegraph station at the earliest possible moment, and send a description of Jubal Troop over every railroad system in the West. The railroads stretched their lines like a series of barriers across the plains. The fugitive must cross one after another of them.

Meantime Jubal rode at an easier pace in the inky night. Not until he was some distance from the fire did he realize how dark it was. Opaque masses of cloud seemed to press down on the earth. He could barely descry the ground under his horse's feet. He felt, rather than saw, his mount take a sharp rise and knew he was on the level of the high plains once more.

Jubal's first dash had been blind and the yellow and red glow of the fire among the cottonwoods had long since disappeared, shut off by some hillock. Now he began to realize that he had no idea in what direction he was going, or where he was. The horse beneath him was a superior animal, he knew by the long, frictionless lope. His hand felt the leather which covered the saddle bow and the clean, serrated edges of hand-tooling told him that this was an expensive saddle. A moment later his fingers encountered a wide concho, with soft straps of whang looped through it. A concho at a place like that would be silver. From the size of it . . . Pretty Sam Gooney. Nobody else in the posse owned a saddle like that. Nobody else had the love of ostentation, or the money, to spend five hundred dollars for a saddle. With this conclusion came another thought: riding Pretty Sam Gooney's horse, and with Pretty Sam Gooney's saddle which could be identified anywhere, he stood convicted of horse theft—and horse theft at that time was in many places regarded with greater animosity than even murder.

A cutting wind was beginning to blow and Jubal believed it must be from the north or northwest. He turned his back to it and rode at a trot through the darkness. Not a sound came to him except the crisp chop of his horse's hoofs and the rising sigh of the wind. That he had thrown the posse off his track was evident. But there was still plenty to worry about.

After long hours in which he rather permitted his horse to set its own pace, the sky insensibly began to lighten. Jubal found, lashed behind the saddle, a sheepskin jacket—a thick canvas garment, lined with a woolly pelt, and with a heavy rolled collar which he could turn up around his ears. Thankfully he put it on.

There was no dawn; only a gradual graying of the low cloud ceiling, until at last the landscape stood gloomily revealed and the blanket overhead was leaden instead of black. He was in gently rolling sagebrush plains now; a buffalo grass country.

A light, cold drizzle began. Jubal urged his horse a little faster. At this time of the year a rain might turn into a sleet storm. Worse, a blizzard. He remembered this was the first day of the year. January 1, 1886. And he wondered if it would carry as much misfortune in its twelve months as had 1885.

Five minutes later flecks of white were whirling down in the drizzle, and at the end of half an hour the rain had turned into snow; big, soft flakes at first, then, as the temperature rapidly plummeted downward, a dry, sifting fog of white, obscuring the horizon, carrying away his smoking breath with a snatch every time he expelled it.

It was growing very cold. His fingers were becoming stiff and so were his legs. Fortunately he discovered a pair of gauntlets in Gooney's blanket roll behind the saddle, but it was imperative that he reach shelter. Through the storm he felt his way for an hour and at the end of that time he was almost numb. Then a dark blur showed ahead through the smother, which a few minutes later proved to be two heavy covered wagons, the rearmost of which was hitched by its tongue to the foremost one. Freight wagons. He was fortunate.

Jubal rode around to the lee of the wagons and found huddled there the driver and his six mules. A tarpaulin, stretched between the wheels, constituted a windbreak, and behind this a fire snapped and crackled, with a heap of sagebrush conveniently near.

“'Light, stranger!”

Jubal stiffly dismounted and his horse made haste to join the warm huddle of the mules. No fear of the animal's wandering away as long as the blizzard continued. The freighter, a fur cap drawn over his ears and icicles beading his mustache, was a little, wizened man in his fifties. His name was Ephraim Stone, he said, and he was on his way north toward the reservation. He offered Jubal some coffee laced with whiskey.

“That's cawffee roy'l,” he said. “Drink it an' it'll loosen yer muscles.”

Jubal gulped the stuff. Unpalatable, but warming. The storm had grown so thick that it seemed to be sifting down a cloud of white flour, intensely cold. It looked as if it would last a long time. That night Jubal bunked with

the freighter in one of the wagons, and their double blankets were none too warm.

“Still snowin’,” was old Ephraim’s grunt early next morning as he peered out from under the wagon sheet. A fine, impalpable frost mist had settled in upon their bed, covering it with a white rime. Jubal lay for a time in the sour-smelling warmth of the dirty blankets, then regretfully drew his legs into the cold. God, what sharpness! The boots . . . fortunately he had placed them under the edge of the covers and they were not as cold as he feared. He pulled on his heavy sheepskin jacket, which he had used as a pillow, and scrambled outside with Stone to inspect the animals.

All night the wind had rocked their wagon, the furious gusts threatening to tear off the stout canvas covers. And now, with the early light, the blasts seemed to rise higher.

“Must be zero or colder,” shouted Ephraim above the roar of the storm. Protected by the windbreak of the wagons and the tarpaulin, the mules and Jubal’s pony did not seem to be in danger, although they were suffering, their backs covered with ice. The old freighter pulled from the wagon his *morrels*, or nose-bags, and fed his mules. Then he permitted Jubal to use one of the *morrels* to give the horse a bellyful of corn.

“Bad storm,” old Ephraim shouted. “Wussest one in two year. Can’t last much longer now, I reckon.”

But the storm did not abate that day. All through the hours of light the white smother continued. Occasionally dark blobs would drift by . . . cattle, moving with the blizzard. Some of these tried to join the mules and horse behind the wagon windbreak, but Ephraim drove them away.

“A sockdolager of a blizzard,” said the old freighter at noon. “Be colder’n Christian love tonight.”

They did everything possible for the comfort of their beasts and crept under the blankets early. The knife-like wind found its way under the wagon covers and powdery snow continuously sifted in. Bodies pressed together for warmth in the stinking covers, the two men endured the night.

It seemed a little warmer next morning, but when Jubal spat in the lee of the wagons, his spittle crackled when it hit the snow.

“Gee whickety!” exclaimed the freighter at that, his eyes round. “Know how cold it has to get afore spit cracks? *Thirty below*. Yes, sir. She is a bitch-kitty, an’ no mistake!”

The terrifying wind had not abated and the atmosphere retained the peculiar darkness characteristic of a blizzard, while the fine, driven snow made breathing difficult. They fed the animals and watered them with melted snow. Jubal rejoiced to observe that his pony was surviving well. The cowboy had spread an old piece of canvas over the horse the previous evening, and the animal seemed grateful for the comfort of it.

12

As they sat beside their fire that third morning of the blizzard, eating a half-frozen breakfast, they heard a shout through the wind, and two horsemen circled out of the driving white mist into their shelter.

“Gawd, this feels good,” croaked one of them. He wore a wide hat, about the crown of which he had wrapped a muffler, tied under his chin. This folded down the sides of the brim, giving the headgear the ridiculous appearance of a poke bonnet. The other wore some kind of a knitted article over his head and ears, his shapeless felt hat jammed down over this and tied with a string under his chin. Boys. One with a frosty fuzz on his cheeks; the other hairless as a girl. Boys as wild as the Hunnish hunters of Attila, riding through the killing storm on some errand of their own.

“We’re follerin’ the cows,” explained one. “Belong to the Broad-Arrer. The cows is driftin’ plumb bad with this wind, an’ the outfit tuk out after ’em. Only thing ye kin do. But gol-lee, it’s shore cold.”

They gazed hungrily at the frying pan beside the fire.

“Go ahead. Help yoreselves,” invited Ephraim. Eagerly they leaped to take advantage of the offer.

“Bacon’s shore fine on a mawnin’ like this,” grinned the one with the travesty of a poke bonnet. He displayed unclean, yellow teeth. Both ate wolfishly, then turned to their horses. Jubal was thinking. He must increase his distance from Teton. Here was a chance. These boys were with an outfit, there would be a cook wagon. He called out to them.

“Mind takin’ a stranger along?”

“Naw. Come ahead. What outfit you ridin’ with?”

“None. Just ridin’ south to get out of this country, an’ got caught by the blizzard. But since you’re workin’ my way, I’ll keep you company.”

He saddled Gooney’s pony, shook hands with Ephraim Stone, and began to drift with the storm. Within five minutes the freighter’s wagons were

invisible. Jubal could scarcely see the shadowy blots of his companions, one on each side.

They were part of a great wave, a thousand miles wide, which was rolling toward the south that day, hurled along by the furious white blast. From big and little ranches throughout the Northwest, cowboys sallied forth, dressed as warmly as they could that third morning of the great blizzard. They were to keep up with their cattle. Plunging through the drifts, swearing, laughing and whooping, they rode like ice-covered centaurs in the rear of the bellowing, huddling herds, which moved inexorably southward.

There was no way to stop those herds. Day and night they pushed along. The weak fell out and froze to death there on the plains. The rest moved on, southward, ever southward.

They had left the Heart River and the Cannonball behind them already, and now a sudden declivity intervened. The valley of the Grand River. Deep soft snow choked the bottoms, and the stupid cattle blundered in to find themselves engulfed. Cowboys rode down. Here was the place for good men with ropes and stout hearts. After hours, the cattle were out of their self-entombment, drifting, still drifting.

A mass, stationary ahead, and more swearing from the cowboys. A nester's fence—in this country where for decades it had been unwritten law that there should be no fences. Something must be done. The cattle, if allowed to remain stationary, huddled against this fence, would slowly freeze and be lost. In the icy smother a figure or two dismounted stiffly. Wirecutters began to click. Presently the herd drifted through the severed strands of barbed wire, to flow on across the prairie. An angry nester would view the ruin of his fences after the storm, with no sympathy from the cattlemen.

Behind the thousand-mile line of drifting cattle and drifting cowboys, rolled the chuck wagons of every brand in the Northwest. Anybody was welcome to ride up to any one of them and ask for food. Gaunt men, wrapped to their eyes, held the reins and stopped now and then to build fires in the lee of the wagons, to make coffee and cook something hot for the haggard, frostbitten cowboys who came wolfishly out of the storm.

On, on with the blizzard. They crossed the frozen Moreau, and the Cheyenne; the White River and the Niobrara. There were fewer in the ranks now. Here and there riders disappeared. The cook wagons in the rear of the thin line occasionally picked up somebody who had fallen from his frozen horse. Aid was given and an attempt made to revive these men, but rarely

with any success. By the time a cowboy fell from his saddle, he was past human help. There was no question of what outfit the men or the chuck wagons belonged to now. A giant partnership had been formed. The West against the storm.

Still the terrifying migration continued. Day after day. Night after night. Jubal, riding with the plunging cowboys, became an integral part of the migration. He lost his identity completely and to him it seemed he had been riding forever in the white welter. One of his cheeks froze and he had a raw sore on it. Nobody paid attention any more to the brand on his horse's flank or bothered to ask his outfit. It was simply drive on ahead as long as human strength and horseflesh could endure. Once in a while there was a brief period of warm food and warm fire when Jubal stumbled on a heroic chuck wagon driver, following his sundered outfit, surmounting indescribable difficulties, but clinging faithfully to his task.

They crossed the Loup River and the North and South Plattes, and now they approached the Republican. Snowy lumps in increasing numbers indicated that the great herd was thinning out fast. Scores of cowpunchers, too, were back somewhere in that whirling waste of white. Both of Jubal's cheeks were raw now with frost sores. Countless times he was forced to dismount and beat circulation back into his feet and gauntleted hands. He ate wherever he found a chuck wagon, never twice with the same one. Anonymity had come to him. And so, with the herd and the other drivers, he passed the Saline and the Smoky Hill, and finally crossed the Arkansas, and down toward the Cimarron.

Then, about the middle of January, the storm finally broke and a soft southwestern breeze, with a warming sun, meant that the end of the great blizzard of 1886 was at hand. Jubal was hundreds of miles from the Teton country.

There were to be months of confusion while hundreds of outfits straightened out the remainder of their herds. Many ranchers were ruined utterly. Jubal saw a Split-S cow on the Arkansas, and a Pot-Hook steer almost as far south as the Cimarron. In western Kansas some of the ranchers were eventually to bring together what they could find of their stock and form a pool, one big herd of many brands, each owner having shares in proportion to the number of his cattle included. Men earned a few dollars after the thaw, skinning out the frozen cattle. The skinner received a dollar or two, part of which went to the owner of the brand which was on the hide. For years thereafter, racks of white bones, jutting out on the plains, were to tell the story of the fearful January from which many in the West still date

time; the days of the great blizzard which all but wiped out the cattle industry on the high plains.

BOOK 3

The Rawhidlers

1

A group of ranchmen, beside the old stage road in the Texas Panhandle, viewed with distaste the long, shambling procession of ragged wagon tilts which jerked and swayed in the late afternoon sun.

“Rawhidlers,” they remarked to each other, and, as they stared at the strange, wild train, they shook their heads with animosity and suspicion. Thin clouds of dust created a fog about the wagons, through which scrubby horses trudged, carrying gaunt, whiskered men whose flapping felt hats were crammed shapelessly upon their heads. Their clothes were tatters and when they last had known soap and water no man could guess by viewing their condition of filth. With the men rode children and women; and it was noticeable that down to the smallest tot, barely able to manage a straddle wide enough to sit on the back of some ridged and ribbed pony’s back, they rode with an ease which was racial, and which proclaimed that from infancy they had been accustomed to the saddle. At the front and rear of the fifteen or twenty dirty, dun-colored wagons were herded two or three hundred lean cattle. All of the vehicles were driven by women—slatternly, lantern-jawed women, whose hair under their sunbonnets knew not the brush nor the shampoo and whose cheeks were lumped out with tobacco quids, or who, stoop-shoulderedly sitting, dawdled the reins in one skinny hand, while with the other they plied the slimy brown wooden snuff paddle in their mouths. Light-eyed, tow-headed children scrambled inside the wagons which were filled with a misfit collection of household goods.

There was reason why the Texans shook their heads as the Rawhidlers passed through. These people, Ishmaels of the Southern plains, possessed the reputation of being thieves without equals, highway robbers on occasion, murderers often, and cattle and horse rustlers forever and by settled life policy. Well it was for a rancher to count his livestock and watch closely when the Rawhidlers were in the country.

Like nothing else in the West were these people. Whence they came, nobody knew, although their whining, drawling speech smacked of the Southern mountains and their names also were reminiscent of the land of moonshine and feud. Rawhidlers they were called from their habit of using

rawhide for every imaginable purpose. They had developed a high technique in adapting rawhide to most of life's necessities. Soaked and cut into strips while soft, rawhide was a peerless article with which to fabricate or mend. A wagon wheel could be quickly repaired with whangs of wet rawhide, which shrank as they dried into such firmness that the broken felloe or spoke was stronger in that place than it had been before. Gun-stocks were strengthened, saddles built, harness, hats and articles were created from the same material.

Ishmaels the Rawhidiers were, their hand against everyone, and the hand of everyone against them. Chattering, their axles squealing, the hoofs of their beasts thudding and leaving a mounting cloud of dust behind them, they passed over the horizon and out of sight.

One spectator there was who watched the Rawhidiers with amusement rather than suspicion. Jubal Troop had followed the aberrant caravan for an hour, its dust pall ever hanging just ahead of him, its multitudinous noises in his ears. Two months had passed since the blizzard and it was March. No longer was he riding Pretty Sam Gooney's horse. Gooney's expensive saddle with its telltale hand carving and its silver conchos he had abandoned in a clump of bushes by a roadside in Kansas. The pony he sold to a horse trader in Oklahoma. From the funds thus obtained he purchased a much more modest mount and gear. A plain bay gelding and a worn McClellan saddle, with saddlebags behind. For the rest, he was eight hundred miles away from the place where his buffalo gun had blasted out the life of Shep Horgan; and he was almost as moneyless as the day when he first rode into Teton.

Following the Rawhidiers, and seeing their unkempt, almost unearthly wildness, the manner in which they shunned the people of the country and were in turn shunned by them, suggested an idea to Jubal. He quickened his walking pony to a trot and soon found himself coasting along the side of the crazy procession.

As he expected, a horseman detached himself presently and came galloping over toward him. The rider's ungainly figure was awkward in all save one respect; he seemed welded to the very emaciated pony he rode. This would be a beggar, Jubal knew, and the Rawhider's first words proved the truth of the surmise.

"Howdy," said the newcomer as he drew up. He was a lean, dark-skinned boy, with wide cheekbones sloping down to a very pointed chin, and flat, pin-pupiled eyes under almost hairless eyebrows . . . a head like a rattlesnake, Jubal thought.

"Howdy," answered Jubal.

“Yawl ain’t got no pigtail?” He of the hairless eyebrows asked the question in a drawling whine. “We-uns is cl’ar out.”

Pigtail was a dry, twisted roll of natural leaf tobacco, used for chewing by the poor whites of the South. Jubal had none.

“Yawl any snuff, then?”

Jubal shook his head. The youth, with his jagged yellow teeth, his greasy clothes and his filthy hands, made a poor impression on the cowboy. From the wagon train a prodigiously tall and bony man, with a patriarchal beard, waved at them. The bearded man’s sleeve came halfway between his elbow and wrist, Jubal noticed, and the hand was of ungainly size. Yet the shirt fitted the man in the neck and shoulders.

“Uncle Shem sez bring yawl oveh,” explained the youth. “Ah’m Jake Slaven,” he added.

The patriarch with the prodigious arms rode forward to meet them. His big, bony features bore a trace of anxiety.

“How long yawl been tailin’ us?” he asked.

“About an hour.”

“See anythin’ of a pahty of hossmen?”

“No, I haven’t.”

The old Rawhider appeared relieved. “Ah was feared theh mought be some trouble ahind. ’Pears somebuddy was complainin’ of losin’ a cow or so. Mebbe it was all talk.”

Jubal grunted noncommittally. A thought seemed to occur to the old man. “Stranger, yawl have a sop’th us?”

It was the invitation Jubal had intended at first to angle for. Eight hundred miles lay between him and Teton, but he still had the feeling of a fugitive. He was surprised that nobody had thus far accosted him. No doubt existed in his mind that a description of him had been telegraphed in every direction by the Teton vigilance committee. To join the Rawhidiers, who wandered aimlessly and unpredictably in the Southwest, had appealed to him as a way to lose himself still further. But Jubal, after a close look at these people, lost all desire to remain with them. There was a shiftless shiftiness about them which made him doubt the wisdom of staying in their vicinity. It was too late now, however, to refuse the invitation without giving

offense, and in a country where every man carries a pistol at his belt, the lesson of courtesy is well learned.

“That’s han’some,” said Jubal after momentary consideration. “I’d be mighty pleased.”

2

The Rawhiders pulled into the valley, a wide, grassy bottom with a trickle running through its middle. With the appearance of being ready to fall to pieces at any moment, the wagons, one by one, turned off the road and took stations near the creek. Shrill-voiced boys drove the cattle downstream and left them to graze. Out of the wagons clambered women, sharp hip-bones jutting under their ragged calico dresses, their movements stamped with the awkwardness of their breed. Once down, they began lifting, in almost interminable succession, each her series of small, dirty-faced children to the ground. Watching them gave Jubal the sensation of observing an aggregation of female artists of legerdemain, producing, not pink bunnies from top hats, but babies from wagons.

Already the younger women and girls were building fires, and it was evident that camping was the daily life of these people. Wood was scarce; dirty calico dresses darted here and there with baskets, to pick up “cow chips,” the flat, dried droppings of cattle. Using cow chips for fuel was nothing new to Jubal. He knew that a properly dried piece of dung burns like peat with very little smoke and a hot blaze. Within a few minutes each wagon had its fire going, and over it a Rawhider woman preparing the evening meal.

Uncle Shem led the way to one of the dingy wagons, where he dismounted and turned his horse over to Jake Slaven, the gawky youngster who had first accosted Jubal. Before relinquishing his own animal to the youth, Jubal unsaddled it and carried his gear to the fire. His interest in the people around him was quickening. Stark looking men, with long, unkempt beards, lolled under the wagons. Children screamed and tumbled in play as if rejoicing at their release from the long hours of being cooped up. Down in the “branch,” as these people called the creek, boys of nondescript age splashed and shouted. Youths who apparently lived on horseback passed and repassed, their bodies seeming to be part of the beasts on which they rode. Most of the women around the fires looked old, but Jubal, familiar with the appearance of pioneer women, suspected that age overtook them early and that at thirty a woman living this kind of life looked like a grandmother. A

few girls, here and there, were not unattractive in an uncombed, slab-sided way.

Meantime Uncle Shem, his beard wagging, led the way to his own fire. Under the wagon was the indistinct figure of a man, lying in the favorite attitude of male Rawhiders, while he waited for the meal to be made ready. A pot hung from a tripod over the blaze and in this container bubbled a dark, greasy mess. Wild greens and boiled beef, Jubal guessed from the cooking smell. Ready to prod into the kettle with a stick, an old woman with sunken chest and skin as brown as if it had been stained with walnut, squatted near the fire.

“Charity, we got comp’ny,” announced Uncle Shem. The woman turned a gargoyle face to Jubal, her eyes screwed up in the smoke which seemed to blend with the wispy gray hair which frowned out beneath her old sunbonnet. She sluiced a stream of slimy snuff-and-saliva into the fire, then wiped her mouth with the back of her skinny brown hand before she spoke.

“They call me Jubal Troop,” the cowboy volunteered, after waiting for her to open the conversation.

“Yawl welcome to what’s hyeh. ’Tain’t much, but sech as ’tis, it’s yourn.” Her voice was squeaky like a pencil drawn across a slate.

The indistinct figure under the wagon stirred and Jubal could see the man’s neck crane. Then the figure rolled out, rose, and came to the fire, as the old woman called that supper was ready.

The newcomer was tall, lank and gray. His hair was gray and so were his eyes, the corners of which squinted from a nest of quizzical wrinkles. His wide felt hat was gray and so was the flannel shirt he wore. His skin was grayish and the long mustaches, which drooped like twin sickles toward his lantern jaw, were gray also. Yet in spite of his grayness, the man did not give the impression of age. Jubal could see that he was a cowman and not a Rawhider, and the knowledge that the stranger was of his own calling engendered a feeling, momentarily, almost of friendliness. He observed that the gray man was smiling. It was a grin rather than a smile, marred by the fact that a couple of teeth were missing from the front of the wide mouth, but hearty for all that it was silent and somewhat tobacco-stained. The man looked like a lean, sinful gray wolf, but he did not appear unfriendly. The more Jubal studied him, the more he liked him.

“I heard ye name yoreself Jubal Troop,” the stranger volunteered. “I’m called in some localities Reb Haizlipp. Reb’s short for Rebel. Ye see, I fit

with Pap Price ag'in the Yanks in Missouri an' down in Arkansaw. Do ye ever take a drink, pardner?" He drew a pint flask from his hip.

"Don't mind if I do," responded Jubal with pleasure. The liquor burned pleasantly down his gullet. Then Reb offered it to the others, and Uncle Shem took a long pull, while even the old lady accepted a swallow or two. The drink relaxed Jubal's remaining constraint toward the stranger.

"My pap fought for the South, too," he ventured presently, merely for conversation.

"That so? Reckon mebbe yore pap an' me might have seen each other indoorin' the war," replied Reb. "That is, pervidin' he was nimble an' quick, that-a-way, at retreatin'. I allus was the best retreator in our outfit. Used to even lead ol' Pap Price hisself out of a battle when the Yanks got too hot for us—an' that's goin' some."

Jubal laughed and his heart warmed toward the stranger. He would have continued the talk, but the Rawhidors pounced upon them, and Jubal underwent a cross-examination which amazed him. Jake Slaven joined the fireside group and the loquacity of the youth and the old couple was immense, their curiosity endless. Some of their queries aroused brief resentment in Jubal, who had lived under the code that no stranger should ever be probed concerning personal matters.

To the Rawhidors, however, nothing was sacred. With amused exasperation, Jubal parried questions all evening. He knew these people would be utterly unable to comprehend his reasons if he refused to answer, or to understand indignation on his part if he showed it.

"Wheh yawl from?" It was Jake Slaven, who seemed attached to Uncle Shem's family circle in some manner.

"Just come down from Kansas."

"That hoss yo' got a Kansas hoss?"

"No. I got him in Oklahoma."

"Huccum yawl ridin' a McClellan saddle? Ah thought all cowboys up No'th allus rode Cheyenne saddles." This from Uncle Shem.

"I run out of cash an' picked it up cheap," explained Jubal with a sigh of resignation. It was a little remarkable that he should be riding an old army saddle.

The fireside group was joined silently by a thin, subdued girl. Jubal regarded her with sidelong appraisal. She appeared twenty, but probably she was sixteen or seventeen, a meek, gentle creature, with eyes perpetually cast down, under her bonnet. In spite of her pinched features, he could sense a certain loveliness about her, due chiefly to big violet eyes with their long lashes and to the wealth of soft, light brown hair, wound about her head in thick braids as was revealed when she removed her bonnet.

“Whew yawl been, Naomy?” inquired the old woman sharply.

“Oveh to Uncle Obadiah’s.” Nearly everybody in this encampment seemed to have a Biblical name.

“Yawl lissen to me, Naomy!” Uncle Shem’s voice was stern. “Ah’ve told yo’ befo’ neveh to be traipsin’ around afteh dahk. Can’t no gal chile do thet an’ be decent. If’n Ah eveh ketch yawl doin’ that again, Ah’ll whop yo’, sho’ as Ah’m Shem Hocktor.”

“Yes, pappy.” The girl seemed to shrivel up. Jubal felt sorry for her. He was beginning to understand the relationships now. Uncle Shem and the old woman whom Reb called Aunt Charity, were evidently man and wife. The girl called Naoma was their daughter. But who was Jake Slaven?

3

The rule among the Rawhiders was to retire early. Sleeping quarters were in the wagon. From somewhere Aunt Charity and Naoma hauled forth a variety of faded and ill-smelling comforts of the crazy-quilt type, moth-eaten and stained, but smacking of the Tennessee hills from which, probably, they came originally. One after another the family climbed into the abode on wheels, Aunt Charity and Naoma first, then Uncle Shem and Jake Slaven.

Jubal and Reb Haizlipp spread their blankets some distance away and lay looking at the stars. In low tones they chatted, and insensibly Jubal felt himself drawn more and more toward the older man. Reb was a sort of an oracle, a primitive plains philosopher. Moreover, he boasted that he was the “champeen liar of the hull Southwest.” He flourished this title lightly and proudly. Lying to him was no mere mendacious escape from the truth, but a strong mental exercise. In his hands falsehood became a high and glorious art. Upon men of lesser stature in his chosen field he looked with contempt.

“Him lie?” he said scornfully of one whom Jubal described as a proficient prevaricator. “I bet I kin tell a better lie in my sleep than that feller kin awake an’ with three drinks of forty-rod in him.”

He proved to be a story-teller with the true epic style; an unending fountain of anecdote. At last, however, he ceased his foolery.

“Ye might as well out with it,” he said.

“Out with what?”

“Kansas hoss, Oklahomy saddle an’ McClellan saddle at that, sheepskin jacket, meanin’ the Dakotys or Montana. Ye’ve come a long ways in a short time. Jube, I’m yore friend.”

In spite of their extremely short acquaintance, it was sheer relief to be able to unburden his heart to someone. From the beginning to the end Jubal told his story.

When he finished, Reb whistled. “Ye make me feel like a leetle, white baby angel, all with cotton-battin’ wings—an’ me thinkin’ I was *some* when it come to onfettered wickedness!”

“That reminds me.” It was Jubal’s turn. “What are *you* doing here?”

“A little matter of a woman an’ a gent who put on his war clothes so fast it would make yore head swim. Only difference was *I* didn’t have the guts to stick around an’ shoot it out with the husband like ye did. I shoved, an’ that outraged helpmeet of my late eenamoraty a-tearin’ up the sod with .45 slugs all around my moccasins. Son, I shore hit the breeze.” Reb heaved a whimsical sigh. “Run inter this outfit on Red River, an’ j’ined ’em thinkin’ that a Rawhider wagon is the last place anybuddy’d think to look for a pusson, knowin’ this hyar enraged spouse is still liable to be camped on my trail.”

Jubal laughed, a hard, brittle laugh. They were in the same mire, but he was the deeper sunk. “Let every man kill his own snakes,” was a Western adage. Jubal wondered how many other men had snake killing to do in the broad vastness of the plains.

He saw Reb peering through the false light of the moon.

“This little episode of yores has ye shook up wusser’n a sun-fishin’ can’t-be-rode hoss,” the gray cowman ventured, shrewdly.

“Not so much.” It was a short grunt.

“Jube, I don’t never aim to look over another gent’s game,” murmured Reb at length. “Only this: Thar’s a side to everything. Ye hear plenty about the preachers an’ the law-abidin’ citizens. They’re law-abidin’ an’ church-goin’ because it’s to their interest to be. They’ve already got their pile, an’

so they wear the brands which lets 'em run with the herds of the righteous. If they was of what the Good Book calls the hain't gots, it might make some difference. Thar's lots of gents like you an' me, whose promise or backin' I'd rather have than the best psalm-singer in the world. Because I know that righteousness an' salvation is somethin' most church-goers wear like their Sunday-go-to-meetin' clothes. An' that's whatever. I've seen it tried out, an' the minute the garments of righteousness begun to bind a little bit, them church-goin' gents begin to buck like a bronc with a cocklebur onder his saddle."

"A preacher is mostly pretty dumb about things," objected Jubal, "but I've always took it they was sincere an' dealin' from the top of the deck when they play their gospel game."

"They're dumb all right—like a foxy coyote!" snorted Reb. "It's a soft livin' they're after an' they know where to copper an' where to play to win. But Mysterious Dave Mathews tipped the ante one night in Dodge, an' thar wasn't nary soul to cover."

Jubal grinned to himself and settled down to hear the story.

"Thar was a preacher gent decided to make Dodge his stampin' ground," began Reb. "This was when that hamlet was about as lively a enterprise as thar is onder the sky, but the preacher figgered that on account of so much nose paint bein' served over the bars, an' so many games runnin' night an' day at the tables, an' so much other orneriness goin' on full blast, thar ought to be a frootful field thar for his endeavors."

He stopped to rummage for his pipe. "I'm bound to say it was, too, for a while," he went on. "The women folks is allus the first to rally around a preacher, an' inside of two days after he puts up his jim-crow tent an' advertises a revival, he was gettin' big crowds an' takin' in plenty of *dinero* when they passed the plate—Dodge City pridin' itself, that-a-way, on allus makin' good the tariff on any enterprise it backs. Things goes along all right for this preacher sharp for mebbe it's a week. Then he sees with undisguised chagrin that his crowds is fallin' off—Dodge City havin' took the edge off its reeligious appetite, like—an' the collections a-fallin' off too. Somethin' big has to be done to get back his wanderin' flock."

The story-teller struck a match and as the flame flared at his black pipe bowl for a minute, Jubal watched his quizzical, deep-lined face, with the sickle-blade mustaches. Reb puffed a couple of deep draughts of smoke before he blew out the match and threw the tiny stick away.

“At this time,” he continued presently, “Mysterious Dave Mathews was city marshal of Dodge. An’ son,” the narrator grew impressive, “ye kin talk Wild Bill Hickok, an’ John Wesley Hardin, an’ Billy the Kid, if ye want, but I’ll take Mysterious Dave any time in a embroglio. He was split lightnin’ on the draw, an’ sartain death on the pull. He had plenty of notches on them Colts of his, each reecordin’ the ontimely demise of some gent which was weak-minded enough to try an’ shoot it out with Mysterious Dave. On top of this he could down more whiskey an’ stay sober, an’ play the stiffest hand of poker in the camp, besides havin’ other little eccentric’ties which don’t go in church circles. To make it short, this hyar gospel wrangler begins to whirl a blocker loop for Dave. He aims to convert him. Once Mysterious Dave hits the sawdust trail, so the evangelist expects, the mourner’s bench jest won’t have room to hold all them suppliants for grace which will clamor to be a-follerin’ sech a illustrious lead.”

Reb’s eyes twinkled across the moonlit space at Jubal. “This preacher has his own methods. Instead of huntin’ Dave up an’ askin’ him to meetin’, he begins to onload on him from the pulpit. He lets on Dave is a scallywag, an’ a drunkard, an’ a murderer. He says Dave is shore-sartain to fry in hell. Dave begins to hear about them mendacious statements, but what kin he do? Ain’t nobuddy kin lie an’ git away with it like a preacher or a woman—as ye’ve jest found out. Moreover, Dave can’t go an’ smoke up this parson a lot with his gun, even if he wants to, because public sentiment would frown on it, prob’ly with a rope over a cottonwood limb.

“It gits wusser an’ wusser. People begins to believe them libels the gospel wrangler is gettin’ off on Dave, an’ him not able to deny ’em. Finally Dave lets it be known he’s goin’ to attend meetin’ an’ listen to this preacher. By this time the reevival is goin’ so strong it’s been moved into the Lady Gay dance hall. When it gits noised around that Dave’s goin’ to them services, ye couldn’t begin to crowd in all the folks that wants to attend. The preacher is thar, jest a-beamin’ with pride and triumph. He’s fetched the toughest customer in Dodge, ye see, a big feather in his warbonnet. But time for service comes, an’ no Dave. Still, nobuddy’s worried, because they knows that Dave never broke his word. If he says he’s comin’ to services, he’ll come. If he says he’s goin’ to kill ye, yore a gone goose. That’s the way Dave was.

“Shore enough, jest as the first hymn’s bein’ sung, hyar comes Mysterious Dave Mathews, an’ they puts him right up in the front row. This hyar sight is so inspirin’ it teches the preacher off to his greatest efforts. With all the pillars of his congreagation shoutin’ ‘Amens,’ an’ ‘Hallelujahs,’

he gives it out cold that this hyar's the proudest moment of his life. Thar's nothin' left, he tells 'em, to equal this great experience. He's done converted Mysterious Dave, the most onregenerate sinner in Dodge, an' now, he lets on, he's willin' to die, because his cup of happiness is filled to overflowin'. Next he calls on the old he-saints in the congregation. One after another, they gits up an' says they feels jest like the preacher. They've done had a great access of grace in this beyoutiful an' inspirin' experience, they allows. They, too, is ready to die, to the last man, because life in the footure will have nothin' to offer compared with this."

The cowman stopped and pulled at his pipe, chuckling quietly, but Jubal was deeply interested. "An' what was Mysterious Dave doin' all this time?" he demanded.

"All this time Dave has been a-settin' still an' not sayin' a word," replied Reb. "But now all of a sudden, he rises up on his feet, an' throws up his hands for silence. Everybody quiets down to hear him.

"'Gents,' says Mysterious Dave, an' his voice is all broke with his eemotions, 'I'm jest like all the rest of ye. Bein' converted, that-a-way, an' bein' hyar in the blessed fellership of so many godly an' righteous folks has enriched me beyond my pore power to express.'

"He stops hyar, an' thar's a volley of 'Amens' goes rattlin' up to the ceilin' from the preacher an' the old he-saints.

"'But thar's another thing,' Dave goes on. 'I knows that if I dies now, I'll go straight to them golden portals the Reverend hyar has been deescribin', an' I'll hear my spurs a-rattlin' on them pearly streets. I'll be saved forever. But what'll happen if I continyue to live? Mebbe I'll backslide. I'm a terr'ble weak char'cter,' says he, turnin' to the preacher, 'an' I has fears I'll lose grace.'

"At this he begins to snort, an' show the whites of his eyes, plenty wild an' skittish. 'Thar's only one way!' he yells. 'That's for all of us to die together, right now, while the grace is still upon us!'

"With that he yanks out his Colt revolvers. 'Prepare to meet yore maker!' he yowls. 'I aims to start by killin' the Reverend fust, an' then everybody else in the hall, so's we kin all go shoutin' home to glory together!'

"Son, with them words, Mysterious Dave cuts loose with them six-shooters an' brings down a chandelier. But he might have saved hisself the ammunition. Thar wasn't a window sash left in the Lady Gay dance hall.

They'd all been carried out along with the crowd which was surgin' through them. An' the fustest man who crashed through a window, an' lit runnin', an' never stopped for his clothes in his hurry to git out of Dodge for keeps, was the preacher."

Reb chuckled as Jubal's laugh rang out. "No, son, when the garments of righteousness pinches, the folks that wears 'em is mighty fervent in sheddin' 'em off. Tharfore, don't let yore little misfortunes git ye down. Ye might live to be a pillar of the church yoreself some day."

Again the quiet chuckle. From the low hill behind the encampment came the high-pitched wail of a coyote challenging the wagons below. A calf called sleepily for its mother and was answered by her. Subdued voices came in snatches from the shadowy mass of a wagon down the creek where two figures, guessed at rather than seen, still sat by the dull embers of a dying fire. Close by was the little stream with its sweet liquid gurgle. It was good to be here . . . peace all about. . . . For the first time in weeks Jubal was off to sleep in unfretted calm.

4

There were stirrings in the camp early. Short, waking squalls of babies, mothers raising sharp voices to children in the wagons, and the coughing and spitting of men here and there. A few figures clambered down from the wagons and stood in the early morning mist, looked stupidly about, then scuttled off to the willow bushes by the creek side. But there was no definite sign of breaking camp and Jubal, drowsing in his blankets, surmised there would be no move that day. After a time, tired of his bed, he rolled out, pulled on his boots, and went down to the creek to freshen himself by washing. It was a glorious morning, the sun a hand high above the small hills to the east, but already softly warm, a sweet breeze caressing the cheek and driving the light mist away, and the ebullient caroling of the meadowlarks forming an antiphonal chorus.

For a moment, Jubal stood looking across the wild, beautiful landscape. When he turned and stepped toward the wagon, he met Naoma.

The girl was startled when, as she climbed out of the wagon, she found herself face to face with him. Startled, too, was Jubal. He had seen her dimly in the darkness the night before and had dismissed her in his mind. But now that he saw her in the morning light, he was struck by her beauty. Her young body was slack and skimpy in its shapeless calico dress, and her face was thin. But these things were forgotten when he looked at her cheeks, still pink

from her slumbers, her big violet eyes brilliant in their nests of curving black lashes, and the cloud of her blond hair framing her features in its deep, soft masses and bringing out the vivid freshness of her skin.

“Good mornin’, Miss Naomi,” Jubal said, his heart grown big.

Nobody ever had called her “Miss” before in her life and she thrilled at the recognition it implied from this stranger. He was different from the other young men she knew. Straight and muscular, with shoulders broad and square, he walked with a masterful, assured stride instead of the slouch to which she was accustomed. His voice was deep, a pleasant sound after the nasal whine of the Rawhidiers. Moreover there was something compelling about the blaze of his strange, changing eyes, the color of which just now was a soft blue, made even more striking by the virile tan of his broad young face.

“Good mawnin’,” she answered shyly, and instinctively bobbed in a queer, old-fashioned half-curtsey which must have come straight from the Tennessee mountains, and thence from the Kentucky blue grass, and thence from the Old Dominion itself, a grace inherited by Naoma from far ancestresses, for there certainly was nobody in that wagon train to teach her such manners.

“Are you going somewhere?” Jubal was cudgeling his wits for something to say.

“Jus’ down to the branch to wash.”

“Won’t you let me walk with you?”

She scarcely knew whether it was moral to permit a young man to accompany her while she performed her ablutions, but he had taken her consent for granted and already was falling into step with her as she moved toward the creek. The sun fell on her hair, picking out brilliant high-lights of gold among the curls. Where did I get the idea she looked twenty? Jubal thought. She can’t be more than sixteen . . . probably fifteen. . . .

Beside the creek Naoma knelt, carefully tucking her wide skirts about her, and dipped long, slender hands into the water. He stood on the bank charmed and awkward. But the strangeness was leaving her.

“This hyeh’s a big wash bowl,” she laughed, half timidly. “It’s about a million miles long, Ah guess—an’ only ten feet wide heah. An’ it carries yo’ soap-suds clean out to the sea.”

When Naoma at last stood up, fresh and rosy from her cold ablutions, the little ringlets curling tightly at her temples where her blond hair had been dampened, he smiled at her in warm appreciation. Somehow they felt more intimate with each other as they started back toward the wagon, she still scrubbing her face with the old towel she carried.

Aunt Charity's fire was blazing smoothly, the cow chips sending out flames which made a frying pan give forth an appetizing promise.

"Hurry up theh, Naomy," cried the old woman, shrilly. "Ah cain't do all the work around heah." She cast a suspicious, darting glance at Jubal.

"Yawl goin' to New Mexico?" the girl asked him as she hurried to answer her mother's call.

"That'll do as good as any place," he replied, suddenly noncommittal again.

"That's nice," she murmured demurely. "'Cause wawl's goin' theh, too, an' yawl can bide with us'ns."

He watched her running to the campfire. He felt a lazy, indolent delight in things. He glowed with an inburning happiness, a dreamlike anticipatory excitement.

5

There was no method in the progress of the Rawhidlers across the country. They traveled when the spirit prompted them, "by fits and jerks." Sometimes they found a valley which they liked, and then they might outspan for days or even weeks. There was no way of telling when they might move on. Due to their unsteady progress, it took them two months to traverse the couple of hundred miles between Double Mountain River and the upper Pecos.

In the formal sense there was no community organization among the Rawhidlers. Each wagon was a patriarchal family center, ruled in every case by the oldest male. Respect for age was a tradition with these people; and Jubal sometimes marveled at the way some crochety, bilious old gaffer could tyrannize over great, bearded men who happened to be his juniors. Of course every man was the unquestioned lord over any woman or child.

The heads of families made up a sort of informal council which decided from day to day what the entire caravan would do. There were no regular meetings; but on the second evening after Jubal joined the train, he heard the

shuffling thud of feet and the men from the wagons came slouching up to Uncle Shem's fire.

"Wall, what yawl want to do tomorry?" Uncle Shem asked after the lengthy preliminaries of "tradin' snuff" or biting out huge "chaws" from pigtail tobacco rolls. That, Jubal learned, was the ritual for opening the session. Sometimes, when the caravan was lucky, "wettin' the throistle," from a jug of liquor, became an additional ceremony.

But always Uncle Shem's question started the proceedings. And always it was followed by an almost interminable silence, broken only by hawking and spitting, the sound of scratching—in which the Rawhidiers seemed to be engaged constantly—or the liquid spatter of tobacco or snuff juice on the ground. Eventually someone would speak up in a slow drawl.

"Ah reckon wawl oughteh move on a piece," or "Aunt Marthy has a mizry, an' she wants to lay up a bit," or some such suggestion. Jubal learned that the Rawhidiers were always on the lookout for the slightest excuse to refrain from exertion. If Aunt Marthy or anybody else objected to moving for any reason whatever, that promptly settled the question. If, however, the first suggestion met no objections, there followed, invariably, a long period of critical examination of it. Should nobody discover a good reason for delaying the march farther, the men eventually trooped back, somewhat disconsolately, to the wagons, and the next morning saw the whole caravan streaming in picturesque and slovenly disorder toward the west.

The spectacle of the Rawhidiers getting under motion in the mornings was worth seeing. With no logical attempt at system, the whole scarecrow mob would swarm out in unwonted energy. The mean, scrawny horses or mules would be hitched, women and children piled into the crazy wagons, and the Rawhidiers would wind slowly away, their progress audible for a mile because of the squealing of ungreased axles, the bawling of cattle, the constant barking of the multitudes of curs which infested the train, and the yells of the boys and youths who rode like Comanches, ahead, behind and all around, as the wagons lurched forward.

An endless, bizarre interest existed for Jubal in the life going on about him. Sometimes he rode with Reb Haizlipp, and a really vital bond of friendship had grown up between the two. The gray cowman possessed an apparently inexhaustible fund of homely philosophy and personal history which he recounted in a manner so humorous that it was a delight to Jubal.

Reb had another claim to glory. One day Jubal saw him, sitting on a horse, absent-mindedly spit a mouthful of tobacco juice at a beetle crawling on the ground, six or eight feet away. The liquid described a surprising arc and with truly diabolic accuracy engulfed the scurrying insect which promptly curled up.

“There was a good shot,” said Jubal. “Don’t see how you do it.”

“Call that spittin’?” Reb snorted. “Son, ye don’t know what spittin’ is. When I was in practice it was nothin’ for me to buckle the knees of a grasshopper at fifteen paces. Didn’t ketch ’em sittin’, neither. No pot-shootin’ for me. Got ’em on the fly!”

Jubal soon discovered that the ex-Confederate soldier was no ascetic. He had a strong capacity for lustful pleasures. A drink was a drink, not to be rejected if available. But a woman was a challenge, and half the time Reb was riding with his lantern jaw craned over his shoulder watching some bit of calico which might be fluttering in view.

Sometimes Jubal rode with Uncle Shem, as dour and silent as Reb was garrulous, and often the cowboy found it possible to be near the wagon which Aunt Charity drove, her stony countenance set on the road ahead. Jubal frequently rode for long periods beside that wagon on the chance of a glimpse of a bright face with black-lashed violet eyes.

At still other times he rode with Jake Slaven. The youth puzzled Jubal. Family connections were prized by the Rawhidiers and traced out to the most attenuated relationships. Everyone in this train was cousin to everyone else, although in some cases the blood tie thinned down so that the individuals referred to each other as mere “kissin’ kin,” and made no further effort to explain the exact degree of consanguinity. Everyone was cousin to everyone else; that is, except Jake. The strange, silent young man apparently possessed no relationships in the Rawhider camp, not even the Hocktors. More often than not he sat alone in the fireside circle, with his odd face somber, and his small pin-pupiled eyes glittering as if he silently awaited something.

Jubal, pitying him, offered friendly overtures. One afternoon as they rode along together to the windward side of the wagons to avoid the dust, Jubal handed Jake his tobacco pouch for a filling of tobacco in the youth’s pipe.

“Thank ’ee,” said the young Rawhider. For the first time his expression bore a trifle of friendliness in it. “Ah expect yawl gits purty tired dawdlin’

along with us'ns," he ventured.

"Not me. I like it. I've rode hard enough for a while that a little easy jigglin' don't feel bad to me," countered Jubal.

"Yawl's right nice fo' a No'therner," Jake commented.

"I ain't no Northerner. I was born on the Mississippi, a little up from Natchez. All my folks is Southern. I just happened to drift up north with a trail herd. I'm only gettin' back."

This information caused Jake to thaw still more. "Don't tell me!" he remarked, cordially. Jubal felt encouraged to make some inquiries of his own.

"It ain't none of my business," he began politely, "but I'd like to ask you something."

"Go ahead."

"Everybody in this train is a Hocktor, a Tuttle, a Bain, a Shelby or a Cole. That is, everybody except you."

The bleak expression returned to Jake's face, freezing the momentary warmth out of it. Jubal wished with all his heart he had remained silent. But presently Jake answered the implied question.

"Ah is a woods colt," he said, his eyes far away.

"We ought to get along good, then."

"Huccum?" Jake turned sharply toward Jubal.

"I'm a woods colt, too, in a way. Leastwise my pappy an' mammy wasn't never rightly married."

"*Don't tell me!*" Once more the tones were cordial and warm. But Jake relapsed again into his old aloofness in a moment. "Woods colts," he muttered. "Jubal, Ah'm sorry fo' us both. Uncle Shem picked me up an' took care of me after mammy died. But a woods colt's a woods colt. Lots of folks think Ah'm related, but Ah ain't—not to *nobuddy!*"

The Rawhider women clung closely to the old mountaineer customs. Most of them chewed tobacco or snuff, and the smoking of corncob pipes was almost universal among the older ones. It was usual for Rawhider women to marry early and their families were large. In this respect Aunt

Charity was unique. She had borne only three children, of whom two were dead. Naoma alone survived. Aunt Charity, long past any worry of pregnancy now, was regarded with a mixture of envy and pity by other members of her sex.

In their idle time the women sewed patchwork quilts and occasionally held a quilting “bee,” a strictly feminine event in which the men never participated. Otherwise the women spent their lives driving the wagons, giving a meager sort of care to their tumbling broods of children, “doctoring around,” which is to say attending each other at childbirth and in the rare sicknesses, and doing the cookery. The food was monotonous—fried or boiled meat, greens, and thick, black coffee. Whenever anyone obtained a little money it went to the more vital necessities of tobacco or whiskey, so the menu was varied little.

The men adapted themselves to the life in the cattle country far better than the women. In a measure the male Rawhidiers were a part of it. All were expert riders, albeit there was nothing graceful about the Rawhider seat in the saddle. Most were skilled with the lariat. Work was a thing which every Rawhider shunned with instinctive horror, but on occasions when the band needed funds badly, some of the men helped ranchers with cattle for short periods. In this they were really skillful, seeming to possess instinctive “cattle sense.” But they were untrustworthy. Ranchers were hard-pressed before they gave jobs to the shiftless crew.

Jubal discovered that in one respect this band of Rawhidiers differed from others of its kind: Heretofore the wagon people had confined their movements largely to southern Texas. Uncle Shem’s band, however, was heading boldly westward—proposing to cross the mountains, the first caravan of its people to do so.

Occasionally, in the evenings at the campfire, Jubal had opportunities to speak with Naoma, but the girl was usually under the duenna-like eye of her old mother. Nothing, however, could prevent Naoma from smiling at Jubal, and he grew to treasure each of those smiles. In other ways also the girl managed to show him her friendliness. If Jubal wanted another piece of meat at an evening meal, she sometimes stole to the pot and served him, surreptitiously. When they enjoyed the luxury of coffee, his cup was never empty. And often her eyes smiled at him pleasantly from behind the wagon covers when they were traveling.

As the days passed, Naoma steadily occupied more and more of Jubal’s thoughts. His heart grew big with reverence for the beauty of which she

seemed childishly unconscious, with gratitude for the partiality which she undoubtedly showed him, with charm at the grace and gaiety she displayed, and with pity at the gallant way she maintained her spirits against the drabness of her existence.

It was a few days after he joined the Rawhider train that he had one of his few opportunities to be with Naoma. He came upon the girl one morning, standing beside her wagon in a dress which appeared comparatively new.

“You look mighty splendid, Naoma,” he complimented.

She glanced down at herself, her cheeks pinking slightly. “Yawl goin’ with us?”

“Goin’ where?”

“Church services is bein’ held oveh at Brotheh Vain’s wagon.”

“I didn’t know you had church.”

“Oh, yes. Every Sabbath yawl listens to the ex-hor-tations.” The last word came slowly as if she were unaccustomed to its use.

Jubal had never attended church in his life and he felt the greatest reluctance to do so now. But when Naoma asked him, and particularly since it offered an opportunity to be near her, he agreed. Uncle Shem, Aunt Charity and Jake Slaven joined them, and their small group stalked silently across the camp ground to the meeting place. Other family groups converged toward the same spot. Ordinarily the Rawhidiers were free and hearty with each other, but it seemed that the announced religious service had quenched their spirits.

Everybody knew the preacher, Elam Bain. Out of respect for his position he was called Brother Bain, instead of by his first name as were all the lay members of the tribe. It is doubtful that his ordination was valid in any conventionally organized church. Rather, it is probable, he had “set up” preaching—as it was, and still is, the custom in some remote mountain localities in the South, his pretensions being accepted by his neighbors. Whatever his religious orders, he was a dominant figure among the Rawhidiers. Jubal could see him moving about as the people began seating themselves on the ground in a semi-circle around the tail of his wagon. By the time the Hocktors arrived, the congregation had gathered.

Brother Bain, a gaunt old man with a goat beard and an awkward manner, gazed sternly about from his sunken eyes.

“Theh’s some that ain’t hyeh,” he said severely. “Sisteh Sarah Tuttle, wheah’s yo’ husband, Brotheh Uriah Elias Tuttle?”

“He’s done got a mizry this mawnin’, Brotheh Bain,” quavered a small, shriveled woman in a frightened voice.

“A mizry! Humph! An’ Ah knows what kind of a mizry it is! Altogetheh too much goin’ back fo’ jest anotheh gourdful when a licker keg’s broached in this camp. That is fo’ yo’, too, Brotheh Jonas Shelby.” He fixed a harsh glare on a stooped, weak-chinned man, and then swept the entire assemblage with a masterful gaze. Clearly the church believed in discipline among the Rawhiders.

There was a hymn:

“Sound the loud tymbrels
O’er Egypt’s dahk sea,
Jehovah has triumphed,
His people are free . . .”

Then Brother Bain began to pray. Jubal, at first uneasy, became fascinated. The Rawhider preacher folded his hands in front of his chest, face lifted skyward and eyes tightly closed, during his orisons. It was a long prayer, and circuitous. At the start, Brother Bain, with the fingers of both hands clasped together, began slowly to rotate his thumbs about each other. After a considerable time he reversed the rotating motion in the opposite direction. Then, just before the conclusion of his seemingly endless petition, he stopped rotating the thumbs altogether and pressed them instead tightly against each other.

In later days, Jubal was to learn that this thumb twirling was Brother Bain’s invariable custom when he prayed; that without it, he was helpless, “felt the poweh gone from him,” and “couldn’t pray a lick.”

Throughout the ordeal the Rawhiders remained with their heads bowed. Jubal’s attention wandered after a time and dwelt with cordial delight upon the back of Naoma’s neck, small and gracefully bent as the girl inclined her head reverently to the prayer. Little tendrils of golden hair curled from under the rear of her bonnet. Her young back was primly erect, but he took pleasure in the tininess of her waist line, where her dress gathered close above her hips.

There was a stirring and coughing when Brother Bain concluded his prayer, and his audience eased its tension. Now came another hymn, sung in

quavering, discordant chorus, men and women joining loudly but not musically.

Brother Bain cleared his throat, looked sternly about him, announced a text, and launched forthwith into his sermon. At first Jubal listened closely, but he soon lost interest. The exhortation was a stupid ranting, heavily interlarded with sanctimonious catch-phrases, treasured from long years of such discourses, and it bristled with Biblical quotations. Jubal became bored, finally yearned for something to distract him. But the Rawhidiers, down to the smallest child, listened as if they were rapt.

Many times that scene was repeated before the Rawhidiers passed on out of Jubal's world. And to the end of his days there remained with him the picture of the lounging crowd about the wagon tail, and the lean old man, with his goat beard wagging and his awkward arms jerking in stiff gesticulations as he drove home his points.

8

On the way back from the meeting, Jubal fell in beside Naoma. The girl glanced up at him with a slight flush and a smile.

"It's a mighty splendid day," she told him.

"Sure is. But it ain't any prettier than a girl I know."

Timidly she gave him a fleeting look from the corners of her eyes as if to assure herself that the compliment was intended for her. Then her cheeks grew delicately pink again. As for Jubal, he was somewhat confused by his own boldness. His heart began to beat strongly.

"That's mighty nice of you to say," she almost whispered, making no attempt coyly to misunderstand him.

As the girl had said, the day was glorious. The services had lasted all morning and now the sun was near its meridian. A few light clouds floated in a sky of indescribably delicate blue. All about the strollers extended the vast plenitude of the prairie, with tiny, exquisite flowers sprinkling the emerald green of the buffalo grass. Silently, slowly, Jubal and Naoma walked along, drinking in the wine-like air, feeling the soft warmth of the spring sun, inarticulate in a shy happiness and content, inexpressible and incomprehensible to either of them.

Without realizing it, they had fallen back of Uncle Shem and Aunt Charity, who stalked somberly ahead toward their wagon which was situated some distance down the willow-grown creek beside which the Rawhidiers

were encamped. Presently, searching desperately for something with which to break the silence which frightened her, Naoma said:

“Ah wondah what it’s goin’ to be like when we get to the mountains.”

“You’ll like them!” he exclaimed, joining her mood. “There ain’t nothin’ prettier or grander than the Rocky Mountains.”

“Yawl been there?”

“Yes. I been all over the Bitter Roots, an’ them’s about as high mountains as there is.”

“Oh, tell me about it!” she begged.

He described his sheep-herding experiences, and the life in the pine-clad heights. From somewhere he discovered an unexpected facility for expression and, under his telling, the girl could almost see the vast peaks rearing their shoulders against the sky; the brawling mountain streams leaping off into feather-foamy falls; the peace of the night with its brilliant stars shining down from the dark sapphire sky into the narrow canyon.

She drew a deep breath, her eyes shining. “So that’s what it’s like,” she breathed.

When Naoma’s eyes grew bright in that manner, Jubal’s delight in her was boundless. Minute by minute as they strolled along, the wonder of her grew in him. A humble joy was in his heart as he marked her growing cordiality to him, and with it awe at her gentle delicacy and a new-born fierce prayer to serve and protect her from pain or sorrow. In his mind grew, unbidden, the sharp contrast between this simple girl and the other woman of his life, Mae Horgan. Naoma lacked the schooling, the poise and the knowledge of the world possessed by the woman at Teton; but she also lacked the designing nature and the selfishness. These things rushed to his lips, crying to be told to her, but rushing so they choked him and he walked on, inarticulate.

Of a sudden Naoma stopped. “Oh, the lovely little thing!” she cried.

At her feet bloomed one of the delicate prairie anemones, its dainty white petals shading off into a fairy pink; an exquisite and tiny perfection of beauty worthy of her exclamation.

Both of them stooped for it, but the girl was quicker. She plucked the little blossom and as she did so their heads were so close that his heart almost stopped as he felt the soft silken touch of her hair against his cheek

like a momentary breath of fragrant air. Then they both sprang, confused, to their feet.

“Ah must—go!” she said breathlessly.

“Can’t you—when can I talk with you again—” he pleaded.

“Mammy’s waitin’ on me.”

He stood aside, downcast. She turned to him impulsively, something sweet and warm in her eyes. “Take this—fo’ friendship,” she said. She was gone, and he stood looking at the tiny cup-like bloom of the anemone in his palm, his fingers tingling from the pressure they had felt for one instant from her little hand.

For the first time Jubal now perceived that Uncle Shem and Aunt Charity had stopped and were looking back, sharp displeasure in their faces.

9

It was long before Jubal spoke again in intimacy with Naoma. The slow, lazy weeks slid by, each exactly like the one before, and he became accustomed to the manner of living of the Rawhidiers, and to like the wagon people for all their outlandish ways. Occasionally he or Reb contributed a purchase of pigtail tobacco, cornmeal, or coffee to the general supply, and the two friends were welcome guests at any of the camp firesides, although by common consent they were considered of Uncle Shem’s household and usually ate with the Hocktors.

When the Rawhidiers traveled, Jubal and Reb rode in easy conversation with some of the loose-jointed men. When camp was established, the two cowmen learned to loll by the fire or under the wagons, as indolently as any of the Rawhidiers themselves. Their hair grew unkempt, their clothing ragged. Long since Jubal had become accustomed to petty discomforts such as the swarms of flies which seemed perpetually to follow the caravan, and the rank stench of the drying rawhides carried hung below the wagon beds. It was the life of the lotus eaters. No thought of tomorrow. No appearances to keep up. The high, sunny sky, the broad green bowl of earth, the slowly jerking tilts of the moving wagons . . . the leisurely drawling talk . . .

Yet Jubal’s mind was not free and content because of his frustration in being kept away from Naoma. Day after day he saw her at the fireside, or in the wagon. She might as well have been behind high walls. The grim visage of old Aunt Charity or the stony countenance of Uncle Shem always intervened to prevent his speaking to her alone. Sometimes it was even the

triangular face of Jake Slaven, with a smoldering venom in its blank eyes, which prevented converse between Jubal and the girl. Finally, on the rare occasions when he found her alone, Naoma herself seemed to be in the conspiracy against him. She displayed confusion, made excuses, and so left him disappointed and wondering.

For some reason the interdict had been placed upon Jubal. Why, he could not have told. On the surface Aunt Charity and Uncle Shem seemed friendly enough.

The final touch to this disapproval of him came after they had traveled far into New Mexico. Jubal, coming from the frontier where an almost exaggerated respect was paid to women, had been unable to accustom himself to the Rawhider ideas of a woman's sphere. The wagon people were patriarchal. Certain tasks, such as the cooking, gathering of fuel, fetching of water, and much of the other hard work, were beneath the dignity of men. Jubal acceded to the custom, but one day when Naoma, her small shoulders looking inadequate for the demand upon them, was struggling with the weight of a heavy kettle by the fire, a strong arm reached over her shoulder, and Jubal's brown hand lifted the pot and set it where she wished. It was nothing; a simple act of kindness. Instantly, however, he knew he had offended. Naoma looked half alarmed, half embarrassed. Uncle Shem was watching, a curious resentment on his face which was reflected in Aunt Charity's eyes.

Jubal returned with a vague disquiet to the place which he had just vacated, squatting by one of the wagon wheels. It was borne in upon him that he was an outsider here, that these people had their own inflexible ways, and that they did not thank strangers for attempting to set them examples in deportment.

10

One night a thin-bearded young man came to the Hocktors' fire. Uncle Shem introduced him to Jubal and Reb as "Sollerman Bain, the son of Brotheh Bain, the preacher yondeh." Solomon was in his middle twenties, a loosely built, stooped man, with hair, beard and eyes of neutral colors, a set of crooked yellow teeth, and an indolent drawl. Yet he was received with more than common attention by the elder Hocktors. Only Naoma seemed always to hide away in the wagon when the preacher's son sat by the fire, as, in the following evenings, he often did.

There was enlightenment for Jubal in a conversation with Uncle Shem a few days later as they rode along in front of the wagon.

“Wawl aimin’ to have our Naomy spliced with Sollerman Bain, come fall,” the old man said complacently. “Ole Brotheh Bain, he’s willin’, an’ Sollerman Bain, he’s axin’. Only one thing’s lackin’, an’ that won’t take long. Sollerman’s got to git his own wagon an’ team. He already done got two ponies an’ a cow. He’s aimin’ to wuhk fo’ the ranchers in early roundup to fix hisself.”

The news hit Jubal stunningly. “And Naomy . . . what does she say?” he asked, half choked.

“Oh, she’ll be all right. Gal chillen can’t make up theh own minds nohow. Betteh fo’ their old folks to pick a husband fo’ them. Naomy’s a good, stout gal, kin cook an’ raise chillen,” he added smugly. “She’ll make Sollerman a good wife. The Bains an’ the Hocktors allus was mighty kindly to each otheh, anyhow.”

The old man’s complacency gave Jubal an ugly feeling. Naoma . . . *Naoma* to be turned over to that snag-toothed creature, like a cow or a mare, without even being consulted about it? Jubal understood now why she hid in the wagon during Solomon’s visits.

But perhaps he did not understand after all. A whole phantasmagoria of thoughts and impressions swirled through his mind. Somewhere inside him was a savage pain, and a savage anger, too. His thoughts began to cool, to separate themselves, to form lucid islands. As if he had ticketed and recorded every one, Jubal remembered the little attentions she had paid him, her smiles and her friendly ways. Now for the first time he expressed to himself, with amazement, what she had come to mean to him. Naoma had become an essential in his life. He knew suddenly that he loved her, would continue to love her, and that was the reason why he had drifted all these weeks so contentedly along with the Rawhider caravan. Separated as he had been by the ban of her parents from free association with her, he had been happy merely to be near her, to see her on the opposite side of the fire, to know she was within the wagon cover.

Jubal lay long in his blankets that night, staring, with an ache, at the stars. For half an hour Reb was silent, too. Then:

“What’s the matter, Jube? Ye been lurkin’ in a corner all evenin’ like a cow-kicked sheep dog.”

“Nothin’.” The last thing Jubal wished at that moment was to talk. But Reb persisted.

“I got a weakness for lettin’ a man deal his own game,” began the kindly voice. “But when a friend is buckin’ a full house, an’ him cherishin’ nothin’ better than a broken-back straight, open in the middle, I likes to give him the sign.”

Still Jubal was silent, but after a minute the older man went on.

“I been gettin’ the brand an’ ear-mark of these here Rawhidlers ever since I been with ’em,” he drawled. “Little by little, I’ve picked up trail an’ sign, hyar an’ thar. Which they’re plumb fantastic. But if thar’s one thing they’re strong on, it’s kinfolkses. Everybuddy in this camp is related, an’ they go powerful on marryin’ cousins. They been doin’ that for generations, an’ it’s in their bone. Mebbe that’s why they’re so all-fired ratty-lookin’. I’ve heard that intermarryin’, that-a-way, weakens a strain in hooman bein’s, although I’m bound to say hoss an’ cattle breeders don’t seem to find it so. Howsomever that may be, ye got to be a Bain, a Tuttle, a Shelby, a Hocktor, or some of them other families, or ye don’t amount to a plugged white chip around hyar. As for marryin’, gal chillen, as they calls ’em, don’t have nothin’ to say about who they’re goin’ to be teamed up with in the holy bonds of matreemony. No, sir. Their pappies arranges them nuptials for ’em, a considerashun of a demijohn of moonshine, or some other useful an’ valuuable article gener’ly enterin’ into the bargain. So if you’re worryin’ about that Naomy gal, purty as she be, ye’d better be gittin’ her off yore mind. She’s perdistined to put on the halter with that weak-eyed Sollerman, likely, an’ yore frettin’ about it won’t help none.”

“But, Reb.” The words seemed jerked out of Jubal. “What about Naomy? She’ll be unhappy all her life with that—with that weasel. I know she don’t love him.”

“Likely not—now. But lissen to yore friend. I’ve been around quite some, an’ I’ve l’arned consider’ble about the herd book of the women breed. A man, that-a-way, has to make up his own mind—at least think he does—about a woman, afore he kin set deep into the saddle of matreemony with content. But women is different. Women—that is, the ones worth while—is all broke out with sensibil’ties which does ’em credit. Sech things as modesty, an’ reefinement, an’ kindness is only minor examples of them sooperiorities of the fair sex. But in spite of this, thar’s mighty few of ’em likes to make up their own minds. Seems like it’s painful to ’em. If

somebuddy sashays along an' makes up their minds for 'em, they're plumb happy an' content."

Reb rose on his elbow, and looked earnestly across at Jubal as if to emphasize his next words:

"That thar Naomi gal, now, she may think that she'd prefer sidesteppin' the lariat of Sollerman, but once the noose settles on her, it's a blue stack against yore last year's hat that she'll wear the harness as happy as a lark, once she gits used to it. Jest gittin' married at all, it makes no difference much to who or how—that's the main thing with women. They simply has a cravin' to git a man to a sichooation whar they kin begin reformin' an' subdooin' him with their gentle mineestrations, said sichooation bein' holy matreemony. The more abandoned a char'cter he is, the better a woman likes it. Jest give her a husband is all she asks, an' she'll embark on a career of p'intin' him to a higher an' better life with a heap of joy an' enthoosiasm. Male habits like licker, or cyards, or a weakness for takin' it a little easy when the sun's hot, is a challenge to her better principles. She'll hustle in an' begin cuttin' the ground out from onder the feet of that helpmeet she's got, in a way that'll plumb astonish him, an' when the showdown comes, it's likely she's a sight happier with somebuddy she kin really reform, than with someone who's that good that her reformin' instincts has no place to b'ar. All in all, jedgin' by them standards, it looks like a cinch this leetle Naomi person is destined for a life of happy usefulness ennoblin' this Sollerman. Because, jedgin' by what I've seen of him, he's as fertile a ground for improvement as ever sets in a saddle. By the time she gits through puttin' the fire onder his indolent moccasins, an' subdooin' his born instincts to be friv'lous an' no-'count, she'll have lived a life of service which'll be plumb satisfyin' to her."

This was typical Reb philosophy. He had long ago classified women to his own satisfaction, but to Jubal it was unthinkable to place them in such a groove. There was no more similarity between Naoma, now, and Mae Horgan. . . . What did Naoma think of it all? Surely she would be very unhappy as the wife of Solomon Bain. He passionately disagreed with Reb's complacent belief that a woman would be content merely to have her destiny made manifest and her life work cut out. Pretty, dainty, happy little Naoma. How could she endure marriage with the preacher's yellow-fanged son?

All that long night Jubal lay sleepless. His thoughts tore at him ceaselessly as he tossed and listened to the creak of the night insects, the far-off cry of the coyotes, and the nearer subdued sounds of the sleeping camp.

The Rawhidiers were nearing Roswell, New Mexico. At the endless, tobacco-spitting conferences around Uncle Shem's campfire, it had been decided to turn westward at Roswell, and to follow the stage line through Lincoln and thence across the Mescalero reservation, over the mountains to Silver City. A new mining excitement had recently developed in New Mexico and the Rawhidiers had great hopes for easy riches in the silver and gold fields.

"Ah heah a feller got drunk an' went to sleep on a mountain side, an' when he woke up he found out he'd been usin' a solid hunk of gold fo' a pillo' all night. He done staked out a claim, an' sold that pillo' fo' mo' than a thousan' dollahs. An' now he's rich. Ah reckon wawl kin fin' gold if them No'therners kin."

Such was the consensus as expressed by Uncle Shem himself, and the wagons rolled, in their clouds of flies and dust, farther southward each day. Many cattle were in the country through which they passed. Wide, yellowed plains, covered chiefly with short, crisply-cured buffalo grass, stretched about them, with the lofty shoulders of mountains running to the west and the turbid stream of the Pecos River twisting through the sand flats of its broad watercourse beside their trail.

"That peak over yon is El Capitan," Reb Haizlipp said one day, indicating the highest of the mountains to the west. "They claim Billy the Kid used to have a cave on its side whar he hid out."

"Who's Billy the Kid?" asked Jubal, and so heard for the first time the macabre story of the youth who, just three years before, had slain twenty-one men in a cattle war, only finally to be slain himself.

Everywhere cattle dotted the plains, dark pin-points in the distance, ant-like spots in the nearer country, large blobs closer still, and finally long-horned creatures which grazed in the foreground, yet snorted wildly and circled, heads high and eyes starting, when the Rawhider caravan drew nigh. During a long day's travel Jubal noticed one brand only on these cattle—a long slash which went almost from the shoulder of an animal to its hip, and ears slit so that the lower portions hung down to invest the creature with a weird, satanic appearance.

"The long rail and jingle-bob," said Reb. "That's John Chisum's brand. Thar's a hundred thousand cows wearin' that inseegnia all the way from Salt

Crick to the Rio Panasco. It's Chisum who backs Billy the Kid an' his *compañeros* in that embroglio I tells ye about jest back."

Ordinarily Jubal would have been intensely interested. But on this day he scarcely heard his friend. For nearly a week he had been unable to speak with Naoma. Always when he was near the girl, Aunt Charity or Uncle Shem would hang about, or she would be sent on an errand. He could not fail to see the studied plan.

12

That night Solomon Bain once more appeared at the Hocktor campfire. He looked complacent in his sly way, squatting on an empty whiskey keg. At his appearance, Naoma, with a catch of her breath, rose as if prepared to fly, but Solomon saw the movement and raised a hand.

"Don't yawl go, Naomy." He bestowed an ingratiating grin on her. "What Ah got to say is somethin' yo' ought to heah, too."

"But—" The girl stood with her hand at her throat, terror and an appeal in her eyes.

"Naomy, *set down*." It was Uncle Shem's stern voice. "Now, Sollerman, Ah'll be bound Ah knows what yawl heah fo'." The old Rawhider chuckled with arch innuendo.

"Ah reckon yawl does, Uncle Shem," responded the visitor demurely. He was tricked out in his finest—new boots, a shirt without a hole in it, and even a new hat. "Yawl knows, Uncle Shem, how kindly us two families is to each otheh. Next to the Bains, Ah considehs the Hocktors the best family theh is. Yawl knows that."

Uncle Shem nodded, apparently pleased by this condescension from the preacher's clan.

"Wall, what Ah come oveh fo', to make a long road a sho't one, is this: Ah wants to marry wif yo' dawteh, Naomy," Solomon said.

"What, so soon? Ah heahed yawl was aimin' to wuhk fo' the ranches this fall—"

"Yawl heahed right. Ah was aimin' to wuhk a spell fo' money to git a wagon an' outfit. But somethin' come up." He shot a mere flicker of a glance in Jubal's direction, but that flicker was laden with malignity. "Somethin' come up, as Ah said, an' Ah talked with pappy. Pappy, he say what's the use of waitin'. He say he'll take care of everythin'. He say go

ahaid an' git married. An' Ah kin tell yo' right now, that when Naomy is Miz Bain, she's goin' to have the best Studebaker wagon kin be bought, an' she ain't goin' to have to take no back seat to any woman in camp in the matteh of housekeepin' goods, neither." The last was said with sleek pride.

"Now, this heah's good news, Sollerman," cried Uncle Shem warmly. "Naomy, gal—"

But Naoma had vanished into the wagon, her heart throbbing, and her throat aching with the sobs to which she dared not give utterance.

Presently Uncle Shem and Solomon were joined by the gnarled patriarch, Brother Bain. Jubal rose unsteadily and walked blindly away into the darkness, leaving the three Rawhidlers discussing nuptial terms and dates, soberly enough, yet warmed with dippers of Valley Tan whiskey from a keg brought from the preacher's camp.

Cowering in the farthest, darkest corner of the wagon, Naoma heard someone feeling toward her.

"Chile?" It was her mother.

"Oh, mammy!" Aunt Charity's arms went about her daughter in a fierce, tender embrace. The eternal immolation was about to take place again. This virgin lamb, a child up to now, was to have her body despoiled, her back bent with burdens, her soul warped into the mold decreed by the customs of the generations which had no thought for women. Aunt Charity's heart was stabbed with pain, yet not once did she think of rebellion against the established order of her people. As for Naoma, she hid her face in her mother's scanty bosom and wept wildly. With tender wisdom Aunt Charity permitted the tears to have their course, and perhaps mingled one or two of her own with her daughter's, stroking the girl's soft blond hair and muffling her sobs as best she could so that the men outside would not hear them. After a time the sobs ceased. Naoma's Spartan training was asserting itself.

One passionate question she asked, although she already knew its answer. In a way it was the final outburst of her hopeless resentment:

"Oh, mammy, *why* does gals have to marry . . . leastwise why does they have to marry with somebody they don't like?"

"It's jes' the way of life, honey," crooned Aunt Charity to her. "Women allus has the wussest end of things. We bears the chillen, an' does the worryin', an' the drudgin', an' the disappointments is all ourn. Ah guess the good God intended it so. Sorrow's the main thing in life, chile, an' it's put teh to chasten our sperrit. But yawl will get used to it afteh a while.

Bimeby the hurt won't be so bad, an' when yo' gets as ole as yo' mammy, with chillen of yo' own, you'll fo'git all about the pain, an' it'll be as if yo' neveh lived any otheh kind of a life at all, or had any otheh honin's."

There was a haunting sadness in the old woman's philosophy. Far back in her own girlhood, too, there had been tragedy, and she spoke from the wisdom of hard experience, long buried, which had rocked her soul until, with head bowed, she had accepted her woman's destiny for good or evil, with all that it brought, or took away from her.

Presently Aunt Charity gently suggested that Naoma should, for the sake of appearances, return to the fire, since her betrothal was to be made official. With a long sigh of utter resignation, having bathed her eyes at a basin in the wagon, Naoma began combing her hair and otherwise making herself ready for the ordeal.

13

When Jubal walked from the fire circle, he saw the two Bains and Uncle Shem pledging each other with a tin dipper. At the same time Reb Haizlipp strolled up from a visit to another wagon.

"Come all yawl an' have a noggin," Uncle Shem jovially greeted him. "Ah got good news fo' yo'. My gal, Naomy, an' Sollerman, heah, is goin' to be spliced. Drink up."

In the darkness at his elbow, Jubal, gazing back at the circle of fire, heard someone suck in his breath with a hiss like that of a snake. It was Jake Slaven. The dim reflection from the distant blaze made the youth's flat eyes appear colder, and his face with its wide jaws and pointed chin, more sinister. He was staring at Solomon Bain.

Reb accepted Uncle Shem's invitation, and with forthright hand filled his dipper to the brim at the keg. He drank it slowly off, with an "Ah," and a smack, and a wink of his shrewd gray eye.

"Mighty han'some licker," he said. And helped himself again.

Jubal turned on his heel and walked on into the darkness. He had not progressed fifty paces when he heard steps behind him. It was Jake Slaven once more. The young Rawhider was trudging with his head low and his hands thrust deeply into the pockets of his jeans.

"Oh, it's yo', Jube," he said tonelessly when he had almost run into the other. "Ah'm fit fo' nothin'," he continued, as if he were talking to himself. "That Sollerman Bain! Ah'm like to go crazy when Ah think of him gettin'

her. He ain't fitten fo' her nohow. Jes' becuz Parson Bain's made enough off'n his pertracted meetin's to buy him a wagon an' stock. Tell me," he appealed tensely to Jubal, "what is it he kin do Ah cain't do better? Ah kin ride better, an' rope better, an' Ah'm a sight better with a six-shooter. An' yet he's goin' to git her. Ah tell yo', Jube, Ah'm like to go crazy!"

As if he were indeed on the verge of madness, he stumbled wildly off into the darkness, leaving Jubal to stare after him. That Jake was in love with Naoma was a surprise, yet now that Jubal remembered, there were many signs which he could have noticed. Jake's invariable courtesy to the girl, in contrast with his usually surly behavior to the others; his yielding of the best seat at the fire, and the best piece of meat. Now that Jubal considered, he remembered half-noticed looks of hostility which he himself had drawn because of Naoma's little friendly attentions. A sudden thought came to him . . . he was glad it was not himself upon whom Jake Slaven's hatred was turned.

Almost at once, however, his own sense of loss turned his mind to other matters. The imminent fate of Naoma loomed as a hard, jagged rock in the storm of his swirling thoughts. His mind raced perversely back to another woman he had known. Mae Horgan, the shallow and selfish. She had been traitor to her husband, to Jubal, and probably at last to the posse she had sent after her husband's slayer.

But here in the Rawhider camp Jubal had found a girl who had drawn all that bitterness from him with the sweetness of herself. Once more, like a towering tidal wave, the realization of the disaster broke over him.

"Hell!" he groaned aloud. He was beside the little creek which flowed into the Pecos from the west, and near, which they had camped. A clump of cottonwoods and willows loomed above him, and he seated himself in their shadow, his body, like his mind, lost in gloom.

14

Unwillingly Naoma descended from the wagon, her hair arranged and her eyes freshened. A cold qualm was in her heart, and she was listless as, with her mother, she came into the firelight. Her appearance acted as a signal. Half a dozen people had drifted up to the Hocktor camp as the news circulated in some queer, sixth-sense way, that matters of importance were transpiring there.

"Heah's to the bride!"

"Naomy, heah's lookin' at yo' an' yo' also, Sollerman!"

“May all yo’ troubles be little ones!” This last ancient indecency brought howls of glee from the men and self-conscious smirks from the women.

Uncle Shem laid his hand on Naoma’s shoulder and drew her close to the fire.

“Hesh! while Uncle Shem speaks. Lissen!” ran the murmur through the crowd. The ritual of these people in such matters was well grounded.

“My friends,” began the old Rawhider, in the words prescribed by ancient custom, “Ah want yawl to know that this heah, my dawteh Naomy, is today promised to Sollerman Bain, to be his lawful wedded wife. Bless yo’, my chillen!”

He lifted Solomon’s dangling hand and laid in it Naoma’s. The girl dropped her head, her cheeks crimson. There was a roar of applause. Then the Rawhidiers gathered around the whiskey keg, and Solomon led his betrothed away from the fire. There was still a certain mountain decorum which did not permit a man to kiss his woman in public. Solomon drew Naoma into the shadows for his first embrace. The girl followed submissively, although her whole being shrank. What must be, must be. There was no use to rebel against a thing so strong as the Rawhider custom.

Near a clump of trees by the creek they stopped. And thus it was that Jubal, seated in the shadows of those same trees, was forced to look upon a sight which seared his heart and yet with which he was powerless to interfere.

Jubal saw the stooping outline of Solomon and the slight figure of Naoma and knew by their walk who they were. Within thirty feet of his sitting place they halted, the man facing the girl. Suddenly he clawed hungrily at her, jerking her toward him. She averted her face.

“Oh, Sollerman . . . do we have to . . . now?” Jubal heard her wail.

“Yaas, honey. Yawl don’t need to be shy with me no mo’. Ah’m goin’ to be yo’ wedded husband tomorry!”

The man in the shadows almost gasped. So soon as that . . . ?

A moment later Jubal hid his face in his hands as Solomon, his silhouette hunched toward the shrinking girl, clutched her body close to him and fastened his mouth on hers. She submitted to him slackly, returning nothing, and he presently desisted.

“Yo’ ain’t very wahm,” he complained, looking at her doubtfully.

She did not reply and the two presently walked back to the camp. This time, as they stepped into the circle of firelight, Naoma was pale, where before she had been red.

15

Jubal was sick at what he had seen. Naoma would *not* be happy. Of this he was certain. Her whole listless attitude, her little wail of protest, proved it. In the realization there was a tiny spark of joy for Jubal, but the thrill was swallowed by the knowledge that happy or unhappy she would belong to Solomon Bain, with his crooked yellow teeth and scanty beard—tomorrow. He must find out more about the wedding plans. Into the camp he strode, joining the ranks of celebrating Rawhidors.

“A barbecue tomorry,” one of the men was saying.

“An’ a gander pullin’ befo’ the weddin’,” his neighbor replied.

“Ah heah Uncle Shem’s done sendin’ fo’ a hull bar’l of whiskey,” remarked the first.

“Jes’ the same, an’ not castin’ no refleckshuns, Ah feels sorry fo’ that gal. Sollerman Bain’s too much like his old man. Brotheh Bain’s wore out four wives, ain’t he? Or is it five?”

The men moved on, leaving Jubal standing alone. Where was Naoma? He could not see her by the fire. There was Aunt Charity, in a knot of chattering women. The men were still at the whiskey keg which should be nearly dry by this time. But Naoma was not in sight. It dawned on him that she must have retired to her wagon.

Making a wide circle, Jubal crossed out of the reach of firelight, until he was on the other side of the wagon, which he approached by keeping its shadow between him and the blaze. Its black outlines bulked inky against the reddish glare. He scratched on the wagon cover, his fingernails making light tearing sounds on the taut canvas.

“Naomy,” he whispered, and again, “Naomy.” A silence of a few seconds, then:

“Is—is—it ain’t *Jubal*?” There was a catch in her voice.

“Yes, it’s Jubal! An’ I want to talk to you.”

She was fumbling with something inside, a tie on the wagon cover, and in a moment she turned up a flap. Indistinctly he saw the pale oval of her face in the dim darkness. Her eyes were wide, intent.

“Naomy,” he began desperately, “you mustn’t marry Sollerman. He—he ain’t any husband for you.”

“An’ why does yo’ come to me with sech talk?” she asked, strangely prim.

“Because it’s true. Naomy, you *won’t* be happy. I know it. He’ll be mean to you. The men say so. His father wore out four or five wives. You mustn’t—you *can’t* marry him. Besides—oh, Naomy, I love you!”

“Jubal!” Her voice came with a sudden, thrilling softness. “Will yo’ say that again?”

“I love you, Naomy.”

“Oh, Jubal, that’s the sweetes’ thing Ah eveh heahed. Ah’s jest been achin’ to heah yo’ say it. It’s too late now, but fo’ what it may mean to yo’—Ah love yo’, too, an’ mos’ dearly, Jubal.”

The sighing words almost stunned him. “You love me too? Then in God’s name, why can’t you marry me? Sweetheart, listen! Tell your father and Sollerman that you love me instead. Tell them you won’t marry him! We’ll go to a preacher at Roswell if Brother Bain won’t marry us!” He was ecstatic. But her next words chilled him.

“My darlin’, it cain’t neveh be.”

“Why, Naomy? I haven’t got nothin’, but I’ll get a job. I can handle cows, an’ I can work in a saloon, if I have to. I’m not scared of work. I’ll make you happy, Naomy. Please, dear, say yes!”

“Jubal, honey, yo’ don’ know about Rawhidehs. Ah’s got to mind my pappy. That’s what Ah learned when Ah was jest a baby, an’ it’s right. Pappy picked out Sollerman fo’ me, an’ Sollerman Ah must wed. Ah’m pledged now, an’ if Ah broke it, the Bains would foreveh have it in fo’ the Hocktors. Wawl come from the mountains, Jubal, honey, an’ it’s easy to start feuds. If Ah went back on this weddin’, theh might very likely be shootin’. But Ah really, truly, love yo’ only. An’ Ah’ll always love yo’. Reach up to me, darlin’, an’ give me jest one kiss, to live with me all my life . . . all the years without end Ah will have to go on livin’ without yo’. An’ then go.”

It was impossible to change her steady conviction. Jubal climbed on the hub of the wagon wheel and put his face yearningly up to her. Surprisingly, her lips touched his, soft, warm, vibrant, sweet. He was shaken as if by a pent-up whirlwind within him. He longed to reach up, lift her out of that wagon, throw her on his horse and ride away. But he knew how impossible

that would be. Aside from the girl's own unwillingness in the face of what she believed to be her duty, the whole Rawhider mob, with Winchesters and six-shooters, would be after them. It would mean not only death for him but probably for her as well. Twice, thrice, their lips met again and their tender words sighed out in the night breezes. Then she pushed him away.

“Yawl must go, sweetheart. If they should ketch yo' heah—”

He climbed down and walked away into the blackness, his world flat about him.

16

Morning dawned clear and golden . . . the morning of Naoma's wedding day. The Rawhidiers arose far earlier than their wont, frowsy women and unkempt men busy about their breakfast campfires. Much was to be done.

One of the smaller wagons was unloaded and sent trundling off with three young fellows to a Mexican hamlet down the road, to fetch a barrel of the Mormon-made Valley Tan whiskey for the festivities. Another group began to work on a pit for the barbecuing, digging it deep and bringing dry cottonwood logs and branches for fuel to create the thick bed of coals which was needed for that type of cookery. Some of the women, with red peppers obtained from the Mexicans, and other condiments, compounded a curious reddish mixture, hot as fire to the tongue, which they called “barbecue sass.” At this juncture a group of riders came over the nearest rise driving before them a big steer.

“Long rail an' jingle-bob,” said one of the Rawhidiers at the camp, keenly desecrating the animal's brand even at the distance. “Thet's sho' good. Ah allus did heah that long rail beef tasted sweeter than any otheh.”

No Rawhider would have dreamed of sacrificing one of his own cattle for a barbecue when there were great scattered herds like John Chisum's available. Nor did the wagon people consider the appropriation of beef a theft. In a manner their attitude toward range cattle was the same as that of the Indians toward the wild buffalo a few decades before. They did, however, take the precaution of carefully disposing of the hide after the slaughter so that nobody could identify it.

“Set up a gallows oveh theh, boys,” ordered Uncle Shem. Three or four of the Rawhidiers stepped down to the cottonwood grove from which Jubal had been forced, the night before, to witness Naoma's unwilling sealing of her troth with Solomon. A few minutes of brisk, sharp strokes and these expert axmen were back, carrying several spars made of green cottonwood

logs, with which they put up two tripods, supporting a heavy cross beam. From one of the wagons came a pulley which was lashed with rawhide to the cross beam before it was raised, a strong rawhide rope being strung through the rim of the wheel.

Now the steer, his eyes starting and his nostrils flaring with horror of some fate which he did not understand but felt by instinct only, was driven near the gallows, which had been placed close to the creek. Uncle Shem stepped to one side with his rifle as the animal lumbered past. At his shot the big, thousand-pound steer toppled, kicking and struggling on the ground. A youth stooped and probed expertly in the beast's neck with the long, keen blade of a butcher knife. With the coughing gush of blood which followed, the steer lay still.

Instantly the skimmers were busy, ripping off the hide with sure strokes of their thin fletching knives. Almost sooner than belief the carcass was ready to be hung. Hooks at the divided end of the rawhide rope were inserted under the tendons at the crook of each hind leg, and a single-tree, three feet long, was pried in to keep the legs spread apart. Then, with half the camp hauling on the rope, the red and white thing was hauled ponderously up until it hung clear of the ground.

"Tubs fo' the guts," was the cry, and the butchers went to work. In half an hour the steer was ready for the fire.

Meantime the blaze in the barbecue pit had burned to a deep, winey red, the heat waves rising in palpable swirls toward the sky. On a strong hurdle made of heavy wooden splints and laid across the opening, pieces of beef, still quivering, were laid above the heat. Now the women took charge and the whiskey barrel having arrived, the men retired to it.

Solomon Bain and his father made their appearance and were met with uncouth howls of congratulation. Uncle Shem, too, in smiling oblivion of the fact that his daughter's heart was breaking, stepped out and greeted the heads of the family to which his was to be united.

"Fine day," he said, urbanely, screwing an eye up at the sky.

"An omen, Ah calls it," responded Brother Bain. "'Bright mawnin' on yo' weddin' day, an' yo' married life will aye be gay,'" he quoted.

Activity had begun on the flats by the river and the men wandered in that direction. Some of the boys were racing ponies amid big clouds of dust and a deal of noise, although few races actually were run because of the riders' constant disputes over starting advantages, and their disagreements with the

judges. Jubal and Reb, on the outskirts of the crowd, took little interest in these events. Jubal had spoken to Reb.

“I can’t bear to see Naomi married to that skunk,” he had said.

“O.K. We’ll ride south when you say,” replied Reb.

But in hope of catching one more glimpse of the girl before he bade farewell to her forever, Jubal delayed their departure until after noon.

“Meat’s done!” was the shrill cry from the women at the barbecue pits, and the Rawhidlers gathered at the fire. Each secured his share of the greasy tidbits and went off with his tin dish and his cup of whiskey or coffee, to devour it by himself like a dog with a bone. Under the influence of the Valley Tan most of the men were beginning to be boisterous. Solomon Bain was particularly prominent and noisy.

Women cackled, too, and the younger girls, not yet married, gathered in small, speculative knots, discussing Naoma’s climactic event, or returning over their shoulders, with giggles, the sallies of the youths who hung about at a short distance from them. Obscene jokes and constant innuendoes were cast at the bridegroom, who never thought of resenting any of them, but grinned foolishly and jag-toothedly in appreciation of an occasion which, for once in his life, set him so very prominently before his fellows.

An hour was allotted for the meal, and, after that, preparations were begun for the main sporting event of the day, the gander pulling. From somewhere Uncle Shem had secured a tough, gray old gander, which now gabbled discontentedly, secured by a cord to the rear wheel of the Hocktor wagon. Two poles from the dismantled butcher’s gallows were planted in the earth at a place where there was a stretch of level ground, and a strong cross bar was lashed securely to them at a height of ten feet.

Now Uncle Shem removed from his gray head the battered old felt hat, and tossed it, bottom upward, at the foot of the scaffold, at the same time holding up his hands for an announcement.

“Everybody’s el’gible,” he shouted. “This heah’s a sweepstakes. Each pahty enterin’ will put a quarteh in the hat. As a starteh, Ah puts in a five dollah bill, an’ Ah don’t compete any. The man that gits the gander’s haid gits the pot.”

There were murmurs of approbation from the Rawhidlers at this munificence. Five dollars was a considerable sum in this encampment. One by one the young men rode their ponies past the hat and each tossed into it a

coin. At the end the total amount of the prize was announced as eleven dollars, a respectable reward in any Rawhider contest.

Never having seen a gander pulling, Jubal was mystified at all these preparations until Uncle Shem brought forth the gander. Now he began to understand. First the Rawhider carefully greased the neck of the tough and ancient fowl. Then with the aid of a human platform, an active youth was lifted up, to lash the gander securely by its body and feet on the cross bar of the scaffold, its head and neck hanging down. Uncle Shem passed around straws and there was a great comparing of the lengths which each drew to determine their positions in line.

“My straw’s the longest.”

“Nope, it ain’t—aw, hell! Uncle Shem, yawl sho’ly wouldn’t cheat me out by the thickness of a hawg bristle like that?”

“Gangway fo’ a man with a *real* straw. Ah’m goin’ to be leadeh!”

“Wait a minute, theh, frien’. Le’s measure up—see, yawl hain’t got no straw at all. ’Tain’t hardly mo’ than a wheat beard.”

So the bickering and noisy good humor arose as the youths, twenty-four of them, formed a long queue. Uncle Shem’s six-shooter barked, and the game was on. The crowd roared, the voices of the women rising high above the deeper masculine rumble. Girls jumped up and down excitedly, their cheeks pink and their eyes sparkling, investing them with a flash of tender young beauty in spite of their drab and ill-fitting clothing.

The object of the game was for the rider to gallop his horse between the uprights of the scaffold, at the same time reaching up and attempting to pull off the gander’s head. He who secured the head received the money, but there was no slowing down permitted, Uncle Shem standing with a blacksnake whip to give a cut to each horse as it approached the scaffold, thus insuring a burst of speed. When it is considered that at the height where the fowl was hung its head could just be reached by a man standing in his stirrups, and that the head and neck, moreover, were greased, and that many of the contestants were so tipsy they could barely sit in their saddles, the gander pulling became an event with many sporting aspects.

One after another the youths charged, whooping, at their mark. The first two or three, shaken by the sudden leap of their mounts under the crackle of Uncle Shem’s blacksnake, missed it entirely. The old gander twisted his neck this way and that with wily caution, eluding their grasp. Each youth,

after failing, rode around and took a place at the tail of the line so that an endless circle of riders passed beneath the scaffold.

Loud rose the shouts of encouragement from the onlookers, massed to one side.

“Come on, Rube, boy!”

“Some dirt on the palm, Simon—some dirt on the palm! It’ll cut the grease!”

“Grup with yo’ knees, Andy. An’ twist when yo’ grab that gander’s haid.”

At last a youth, more fortunate or more skillful than the others, seized the elusive gander by the head. Immediately the diabolical ingenuity of the game was apparent. The gander’s neck was about as tough as one of the rawhide strips which these people used in so many ingenious ways. Caught off balance, the rider found his horse leaving him as he was jerked backward by his grasp on the fowl. He released his hold on the gander, but his seat in the saddle was lost, and he went spinning to the ground in a smother of dust, amid the yells of the spectators and the excited screams of the onlooking girls, to whom this charging swirl was filling an emotional hiatus in their drab lives.

One thing had been achieved by the last incident. The gander’s neck was broken and the head now hung limp, an easy target. One after another the riders continued to charge in quick succession. It was not difficult to clutch the head now, but nobody seemed able to pull it off. A storm of derisive hoots greeted a youth who flourished the bird’s lower bill which he had torn loose.

“The neb! The neb!”

“Joe’s got his under jaw!”

“Nebs don’t count, Joie!”

“Have to reach higher than that, boy!”

“Haw, haw! Retched fo’ the head, an’ got the jole!”

Several more found themselves thrown, before a gangling, pale-eyed youth named Eli Shelby, reaching up but keeping his knees clamped hard on his saddle flaps, felt the tough neck part and realized from the cheers that he had won the jackpot. Then there was a rush for the whiskey barrel to quench thirst which had been built up to an intolerable state by the dusty game.

Jubal noticed that the sun was beginning to slant low toward the western horizon and that preparations were under way for the wedding ceremony. Brother Bain was seen advancing from his wagon wearing the seedy black frock coat and the rusty stovepipe hat, and with the Bible under his arm completing the costume which he always affected when religious services were to be held. At the sight the Rawhidiers grew subdued.

And in this final minute, Jubal had his glimpse of Naoma. She opened the rear flap of the wagon cover, quite suddenly, and her eyes were upon him. Nobody else saw her. A slow shake of her head, a sad half-smile, and a whispered word of some kind formed by her delicately sweet lips, and the canvas flaps closed.

Jubal's throat choked with a lump. She had thought of him at the last, and given him a message. He had no trouble in translating it: The shake of the head meant she could not escape the wedding; the smile told him that she loved him and him alone; that word which she had formed with her lips—he had it, “Honey.” Her endearment for him. Jubal turned and sought Reb.

“Come on. Let's go,” he said briefly. Their horses were already saddled with the bedrolls lashed behind. Walking toward the tethered animals the two cowmen passed a solitary Rawhider, lying all by himself on his back, at a distance from the camp. His face was toward the sky and it was twisted in pain or passion.

It was Jake Slaven.

17

Twenty miles south Reb and Jubal rode down the broad Pecos Valley before they camped that evening. Behind them the stained brown tilts of the Rawhidiers grew small, finally faded into a fold of the ground, and disappeared. The ride was in silence, save for the creaking of saddle leather, the occasional clink of a mouthed bit, and the soft *clip clop* of the horses' hoofs.

A tiny fire with two blanketed forms beside it; horses hobbled near and the Pecos murmuring—and the first night was done. Again with the dawn, the riders took their way southward, keeping the trail along the muddy river. That night they camped in Texas.

All this time Jubal made no inquiry as to where they were going. Not half a dozen sentences, in fact, passed between them. He was content, for the time being, blindly to follow Reb, accepting his guidance with a dazed, unthinking trust. He was shaken as if by some great illness. A red whirlpool

twisted his head the first day, its torque depriving him of reason. All those hours he rode with a strange, blank stare fixed on the horizon, yet seeing nothing. The second day, however, he began to recover mastery of himself. It astonished him that a thing like love could shake him so severely. At first such rationalization as this could not find its way through its pain. Half a dozen times he almost turned back with some wild scheme of stealing Naoma away from the Rawhidlers; in his illogic thinking she might fly with him if he reappeared. Each time, however, his strong sanity reasserted itself and he rode onward, never even mentioning his impulses to his companion. At last his firm grip on his mind returned. A man must not permit himself to be overwhelmed by an emotional blow any more than he would let himself be cowed by a physical one.

The second night as Reb and Jubal squatted beside their tiny cooking fire, with the lofty stars above them, and the wide, shadowy country stretched all about, Jubal for the first time asked his friend concerning their plans.

“The Big Bend country was whar I was aimin’,” was the brief reply.

“What doin’?”

“Oh, the country’s jest openin’ up again. Apaches cleaned it out in ’80 an’ ’82. Ranchers jest beginnin’ to run cows once more an’ I thought thar might be a chance to git squatter rights to a little ranch of our own. Besides, it bein’ boomin’ cow country, thar might be a chance to catch on somewheres as riders.”

There the conversation ended. Jubal was so little interested in the future that he inquired no further. They turned southwest, into the Big Bend country, which is that portion of extreme western Texas, where the Rio Grande River, making a great turn from the northwest, encloses a narrow strip of the state as in a gigantic elbow. Ranges of mountains, low for the most part, but rugged, form a long rampart which cuts the Big Bend off from the rest of Texas, while its southern border is the Rio Grande, also the international boundary line of Mexico. Thus it is virtually isolated from the world, a narrow corridor of grazing land, watered in much of its length by rivers and creeks which feed into the Rio Grande. At the time Reb and Jubal entered it, the Big Bend was just beginning to recover from the ghastly scourge of Victorio’s and Nana’s broncho Apache warriors, a scourge which had all but depopulated the country.

BOOK 4

Arroyo Grande

1

In the night the coyotes were vociferous, but with the horses securely picketed the two men slept soundly. As soon as he felt the air grow chilly in token of the change which comes just before dawn, Reb Haizlipp was up, a tiny blaze licking its orange lancets toward the bottom of his skillet, a sputtering sending forth rich, greasy smells from the utensil.

Jubal raised himself on an elbow and looked drowsily around. The east was pink and to the north the first light seemed to be investing the head of the Sierra Blanca with a bright halo, although the lofty shoulders of Devil's Ridge and the looming mass of Eagle Mountain stood inky as if cut with sharp scissors from black cardboard and placed against the dawn. In spite of the fact that it was late in summer, the early morning was chilly and Jubal pulled his blankets about him. He was comfortable here, listening to the low rustle of the daybreak breeze in the small trees behind him, and the first sleepy inquiries of the waking birds.

Those small trees behind the camp guarded a spring on the hillside, and beside the spring stood the ruins of an adobe house. A tiny stream escaped from the spring and twisted down the steep side of the vast canyon which lay below Jubal and upon whose brink he had slept. This was the Arroyo Grande, and here Reb and he had decided to stay their wanderings for a while.

The adobe house showed signs of long desertion and the rains of many years had pocked and melted its walls. Yet marks of fire still showed where a heap of furniture and household articles had been gathered, evidently, in the center of the main room, and burned.

"Apaches," pronounced Reb. "Prob'ly six years back—in '80. If ye look around, ye may find what's left of the folks that lived hyar."

But although both he and Jubal poked everywhere among the bushes, half dreading what they might find, they discovered no human skeletons and Jubal always hoped that the former owners of the adobe escaped before the coming of the grim savages, with their steel trap mouths.

“If you’re goin’ to eat, ye’ll have to come an’ git it,” called Reb. “Ain’t got no tray, or doilies, an’ so I cain’t bring ye breakfast in bed.”

Ashamed, Jubal scrambled to draw on his boots, dashed water in his face from the spring and used his bandanna handkerchief for a towel. Then he and Reb squatted with the skillet between them, forking pieces of bacon out of it and dipping hoe cake into the grease.

They were that day to commence the repairing of the ruined adobe. Reb had climbed over it, knocking down a scuttling centipede from what remained of the thatched roof, and finally voicing his opinion, with all the airs of an architect planning a palace, that the edifice could be “fixed up without much work.” The labor was welcomed by Jubal. In those days he did not live; he existed withdrawn into himself, wrapped about with the soundless walls of his reserve, and barely nursing the spark of sentience within. Something which would occupy his muscles and mind would be a relief.

Their tools were few and simple—a broken-handled pick, a shovel, a crude hammer and an ax, secured from a Mexican village up the trail. Now together they began the task before them. Stripped naked from the waist down, Jubal learned the ache of the legs from all-day treading in the clay pit, as with his bare feet, Mexican fashion, he kneaded, with hay straws chopped into short lengths, the doughy mass until it was of a proper consistency to be poured into molds of rough board and dried in the sun. Later, when the walls were finished to a sufficient height, they reroofed the house with poles and withes and stamped clay.

Repeatedly they had observed cattle in the great canyon among the chaparral and mesquite. Once, soon after they arrived at the spring on the hill, a young bull led three cows almost up to the water. Suddenly he noticed the men, snorted, and with the other cattle whirled and went crashing off through the bushes.

“Did ye see them cows?” Reb asked Jubal.

“Some.”

“Notice anythin’?”

“They wasn’t branded.”

“Correct. Them’s bresh cows—mavericks. This canyon hain’t had nobody in it for years. Since the Apache wars, likely. An’ thar’s hundreds of critters runnin’ around hyar with nary soul to own ’em. Up to now that is. We starts right in ownin’ them animals.”

So, no sooner was the adobe house completed to such a state that it would provide shelter against the rain than Reb inexorably led to the building of a corral and chute. The construction of the corral was a hard task, requiring the planting of heavy cottonwood posts at ten-foot intervals around a square space which Reb selected on a flat in the bottom of the canyon. Those were days of back-breaking labor for both of them, digging holes and setting posts. Afterward Reb shot and skinned a young bull down the canyon. The rawhide, cut into whangs, was used to bind strong poles to the posts. Those poles, parallel to the ground and only a few inches apart, were placed on the inside of the corral, so that any beast throwing himself against them would encounter the double strength of the poles' bracing and the rawhide tyings. At first Reb planned an ambitious corral, but the dimensions of it shrank as the difficulties of building it grew, until the final result was a small pen, large enough for not more than thirty cattle at a time. There was a wide, swinging gate, braced and lashed with the ever-useful rawhide.

If the construction of the corral was difficult, the building of the branding chute was more so. And on its necessity Reb insisted.

"Throwin' an' brandin' big stuff is plenty hard to do, even when ye has a full crew of men an' a strong bunch of good ropin' hosses," he explained. "An' thar's only two of us, with jest two ponies. Nope, a chute's the only answer."

Jubal acknowledged the truth of this. The best way to throw an adult steer is to noose him by the horns, let the rope droop along his side, and then cut sharply in the other direction, so that the rope, sweeping against his legs, trips and throws him heavily. Falling thus, an animal is often so stunned that it makes no immediate attempt to rise. The rider must leap from his horse in the short interval afforded and fling himself upon the prostrate creature with a short tying rope. If there is a riding partner, the latter assists the roper; the roping horse, if well trained, will keep the lariat taut by backing up to take in the slack, thus helping to hold the steer prostrate until the hog-tying is finished and the branding can begin.

One man may be able to rope, throw, tie and brand a cow or steer in the open, but a certain amount of luck is entailed. Sometimes the animal is not stunned, or the rope breaks, or the steer is exceptionally nimble-footed. In the case of a big bull, due to his strength, weight and fierceness, one roper can scarcely expect to handle him at all. If luck is with them, two men should be able to rope and brand a few head of stock, but nothing less than a full crew can hope to work over any quantity of cattle.

“Besides,” was Reb’s clinching argument, “throwing heavy cattle like that doesn’t do ’em no good. Big stuff is hurt bad sometimes, even killed by that kind of handlin’.”

So they went at the chute with bitter determination. Those were particularly unpleasant and aching days. Unused to the type of labor, Jubal and Reb suffered, their hands blistered and their muscles cramped. The chute opened into a corner of the corral and had to be built stronger than the pen itself. It consisted of two parallel rows of posts, about a yard apart, extending twenty or thirty feet in a straight line. At the outward end of the chute was a stanchion, built by Reb with an ingenious swinging bar, so that a cow, sticking her head through the V-shaped opening with a mistaken notion of passing through, could be trapped and held helpless for branding. To build the chute, Reb and Jubal sweated by turns at digging two deep ditches. Heavy cottonwood posts were chopped by the creekside and “snaked” with lassos to the corral. These were set into the ditches, touching each other, and earth was shoveled around them and well tamped down. Another maverick was shot and its hide used to weave back and forth among the poles, thus securely binding them together.

2

It was September before the partners completed their work, and as they surveyed the corral they had the feeling that it was a monumental achievement. Two men with proper tools and experience in half the time could have built a chute and corral twice as good, but Jubal and Reb felt pride as they looked upon their crude little creation. During all this period they had subsisted on the meat from the maverick cattle they killed, some of which Jubal took time to “jerk” in the fashion of Indians. To supplement the meat diet, they had only a couple of sacks of *socorro* meal which Reb had purchased in the Mexican village.

“It’s about time we tried our new contraption,” the older man remarked to Jubal one morning. “Suppose me an’ you try to see if we cain’t haze up a few critters an’ put our brand on ’em.”

They had decided on the J R, joined together with the back of the J and back of the R in the same downward stroke:

R

With great optimism they set out. Two or three cattle happened to be near the new corral, but the beasts were wild as deer. Reb and Jubal spurred after them, but the mavericks threw up heads and tails and escaped, it

seemed with scarcely an effort, into the thick underbrush. Again and again the partners tried to herd small bunches of cattle into the corral. It was vain. As the morning wore on, with both men and horses becoming winded, discouragement began to settle down upon them. At last Jubal discovered an ancient cow dozing by herself in the mesquite. Through the united efforts of himself and Reb, she was finally rounded up and safely locked in the enclosure.

“Whew!” remarked Reb as they surveyed their prize. “If that ain’t the funniest lookin’ critter I ever saw!”

The animal’s appearance was, indeed, eccentric. Due to her great age, her hoofs were so long that they turned up slightly at the toes, giving her a ridiculous shuffling walk. In some manner she had lost all but six inches of her tail, and her ribs stuck out like a basket. Moreover, she was lumpy-jawed, which is to say that one side of her face, which was mournful enough at best, was swelled ludicrously, as if she were afflicted with the mumps.

“Ain’t wuth skinnin’ for her hide an’ taller,” grunted Reb dolefully. The cow turned a melancholy eye upon him as if in reproach. “You’re all we got, though, Whopper Jaw,” he went on. “After the trouble we had gittin’ ye in hyar, we’d have to put the J R on ye now if ye was a sawbuck.”

“She’ll be the first of the J R herd,” rejoined Jubal, striving to speak with assurance. “We can always point to her at least an’ say there’s one cow that wears the brand.”

But Reb had a queer, beaten expression on his face. “Jube, I got ye into this,” he said ruefully. “But it looks like a bum steer. I never thought about it before, but I kin see now that with only two men an’ a couple of hosses which ain’t any too good, we’ll never be able to make the grade. I was hopin’ we could git a little start, mebbe even make money in a small way, down hyar. But I’ll have to confess now that I don’t know this game. Thar’s a way to run bresh cows, but I ain’t never seen it. Give me plains country, or even mountains, an’ I’ll handle stuff with anybody. But this hyar chaparral an’ mesquite, with the prickly pears an’ other cactus stuck through every thicket like a bunch of butcher knives, has got me licked.”

It was the first time Reb’s optimism had failed. Jubal felt the danger of the situation. He must prevent his partner from plunging into complete discouragement. It was important for Reb that this be done. All his life the older cowman had lived as a nomad, from hand to mouth, serving this employer and that. The Arroyo Grande venture had been Reb’s one great hope. On the prospects of a little ranch in this mighty canyon was built his

future of dreams . . . the first dreams he had ever permitted himself. If hope failed him now, Jubal feared a final, terrible derelict outcome for Reb. A quick thought came.

“Ain’t we goin’ to brand old Whopper Jaw?” he asked.

“Ain’t much use.”

“You mean you’re goin’ to quit?”

Reb nodded drearily.

“Well, if you aim to quit me, all right,” snapped Jubal. “But you won’t walk out without helpin’ me to brand this one cow, will you?”

He had gauged his friend correctly. The beginnings of the old gleam were in Reb’s eye.

“Ye mean you’re goin’ to hang on?” he demanded.

“You bet!”

Reb began to catch fire. “Ye mean that—ye mean that ye think the ranch kin be made to pay after all?”

“I shorely do.”

Reb’s gray sickle blades of mustaches quivered, and his thin lips made an even, decisive line. “By the Jumpin’ Jehosophat, then,” he cried, “I’ll stay with ye! Anythin’ Jube Troop calls a good hand is extra special to Reb Haizlipp.”

So the lumpy-jawed cow was prodded gingerly into the chute and Jubal closed the bar on her neck, leaving her misshapen head sticking through the stanchion. Reb climbed on the side of the chute with a red-hot iron rod. White, bitter smoke rose from the animal’s flank as he began to trace a shaky **R**, upon it. To Jubal, standing beside the stanchion at her head, the cow seemed to go insane at the touch of the searing bar. Her head was immovable in the stanchion, but her body she twisted into shapes nobody would have deemed possible. Almost as high as the tops of the chute posts flew her rattling heels, while her frantic manure splattered the sides. But Reb and his iron were remorseless and it was moments only before Jubal was able to release the stanchion and permit the old cow, udders swinging awkwardly in the manner of her kind, to gallop with indignation back to her creek bed. Both men were laughing at her departure when a voice behind brought them around.

“*Buenos dias.*”

A small, gray-haired Mexican, with a wise, wrinkled face stood before them, his white teeth showing in a grin under a coarse black mustache.

“Who in the name of hell are you?” exploded Reb.

The stranger smiled sweetly. “I am Francisco Trujillo, who ees call Pancho—*caporal* to Señor Bartee. El Señor, he hear *extranjeros* live up hees arroyo. So me he send to ask of them weel they come down an’ make to heem the *visita* in hees ranch *casa* down the arroyo.”

They stared at the little man in his short brush-jacket, his embroidered boots, and the excessively wide sombrero whose crown, a foot high, sought to compensate for the stature he otherwise lacked. Then the significance of what he said began to penetrate their understanding.

“Living in *his* arroyo? What do you mean?” they demanded in angry chorus.

Again the sweet smile under the fierce black mustachios. “My *patron* have own thees arroyo long time.”

If one thing were needed to add the capsheaf to their discouragement, this was it.

“I ought to have known it,” groaned Reb. “Why didn’t I look on down the canyon before we went to all that work?”

“What had we better do?” asked Jubal.

“Do? Why, we’ve got to go callin’ on this Señor Bartee. No other way out of it.”

3

Late that afternoon, after riding far down the canyon with Pancho Trujillo, they first saw the Bartee ranch. From a spur which jutted out from the wall of the arroyo, they surveyed it. The buildings included one long, low structure, some corrals, and one or two small shacks which appeared to be stables. The three riders circled the spur and two of them approached the ranch with growing misgivings.

The long building was of the type known in the Southwest as a *ramada*, built, however, with greater refinement and permanence than most structures of its kind. Its roof was of branches, thatched over; to the walls of wattle were lashed, by thongs’ of rawhide, horizontal slabs as outside weather boarding, while the interiors were plastered with adobe mud. A Mexican, loitering outside, perceived the approaching horsemen and at his call a white

man and a second Mexican appeared at the door of the *ramada*. The burly figure of the white man advanced to meet them as Reb and Jubal, followed by Pancho, rode up.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen,” was the rancher’s greeting. There was just a shade of an icy question in his voice.

English, flashed through Jubal’s mind at the manner of speaking. He heard Reb making the introductions and nodded in acknowledgment as the stranger in turn named himself “Mortimer Bartee, at your service.” Then they were accepting an invitation to dismount and enter the house.

It was wonderful how Bartee’s manner put his visitors at their ease. Both Reb and Jubal came to the ranch prepared to be hostile. But they came into immediate contact with culture and breeding, and were charmed in spite of themselves by the British gentleman. The interior of the *ramada* was a barbaric hall. Bare earth, pounded hard, formed the floor, but upon it blazed some wonderful Indian rugs of scarlet, gray and white. Down the big room stretched a long, unpainted table of pine, used for eating, drinking or gambling as might suit the temper and desires of the host and his guests. Chairs there were none and rough benches made from half-logs with pegs driven into their round under-surfaces, or even ordinary packing boxes, served as seats. Around this spacious interior lay the blankets of those who happened to be living there at the time, untidy rolls of bedding in the corners, waiting to be brought out and spread upon the floor at evening, for there was only one bed at Bartee’s *ramada*, the master’s own, and everyone else slept, perforce, upon the floor.

Two smaller lean-to rooms gave off from the main hall. At one end was the kitchen, or cook-shack. At the other was the private sleeping apartment of the owner, in which were the ranch’s solitary bed, Bartee’s writing desk, and such other personal belongings as he wished to maintain in privacy, together with a small iron safe which contained his papers and valuables. This room was bare of decorations, but the walls of the main hall were hung with additional rugs, in which the Englishman displayed a collector’s interest as he showed Reb and Jubal around, speaking fondly of the various Navajo, Chimayo, Pueblo and Mexican patterns as if they were rare Persian or Flemish tapestries. Some graceful Indian and Mexican pottery likewise decorated the rude mantel above the huge fireplace at one side.

The owner of this interesting dwelling was in every way as strange as his domain. Whence Mortimer Bartee came, nobody seemed to know for a certainty, but he was reputed to be the younger son of a wealthy British

family, and the story was that his reckless habits had forced his people to demand that he leave England, with the bribe of a regular quarterly allowance to keep him at a distance. He received letters occasionally with a Liverpool stamp on the envelopes, and they always were addressed to “The Honourable Mortimer Bartee,” so behind his back the Englishman was sometimes called the Honorable Mort by his Texas neighbors.

In appearance he was bluff and jovial, with blond hair and a sweeping mustache which became his ruddy countenance. But in spite of his merry temperament he possessed an underlying stubbornness which was well known, and a headlong courage with it; and when the question was asked why a man of such apparent education and breeding should have selected a place so wild and remote as the mouth of the Arroyo Grande to build his home, the reply was that Bartee, in the days of the old Apache wars, had been traveling at that point when he was attacked by the Mescalero warriors of old Chief Nicolas. After beating off the savages he settled at the place in sheer stubbornness, merely to prove to the Indians that he could do it.

For the rest, Bartee spoke several languages—French, Italian, Spanish and German in addition to English, and he read the classics in their original Latin and Greek. When sober he discoursed in the idiom of the West, but when he was drinking heavily, he was prone to hark back to the days of his hidden past, at which time his meticulous English stunned the cowboys, and the saying was that “the Honorable Mort’s gone Oxford again,” when the information to be imparted was that Bartee was drunk.

Nobody could have mistaken his race or his early home, but by the time Reb and Jubal met him, Bartee had lived so long in the Big Bend that he was an integral part of it, and even had his remittances ceased to arrive, it is to be doubted that he could have been induced to return to England. Usually the remittance man employed a Mexican or two at his place, to take care of the stock, attend to the cooking and other tasks. But Jubal noticed on this occasion a dozen dark-faced *vaqueros* dozing in the shade. While the hospitality of the Honorable Mort was celebrated up and down the lower trail which ran along the Rio Grande to the Tierra Vieja Mountains, these men evidently were not guests, and it was easily observable that old Pancho Trujillo, with his cunning, wrinkled face, and his stock of excellent Spanish saws, was planning some kind of a large ranch operation.

A remarkable and astonishing man was Mortimer Bartee. Reb, who came to the ranch prepared to be instantly belligerent, felt his hostility fade

after one look at the open countenance of the Englishman. A second look and Reb and the remittance man were friends. Their natures were both expansive. The honors were done in good Scotch whiskey, and afterward the three white men lolled inside the *ramada* before the big fireplace which, however, was cold, since it was too early in the year to light a blaze in it.

As was his frequent habit, Reb was chewing tobacco. A wooden box, filled partly with sand, did duty as a spittoon, but it was beside the Englishman's seat, and a beautiful white Navajo rug, Bartee's especial pride, lay between the box and Reb. After his long semi-silence in Jubal's taciturn company, it was a relief for Reb to relax into an incessant flow of conversation. Occasionally he paused to expectorate. The first time he did so, there was a look of concern in Bartee's eyes as he noted the perilous position of his beautiful white rug. But Reb's head jutted a little forward, there was a minute opening of his lips, a scarcely perceptible tightening of the jaw muscles, and with the liquid *b-r-r-r-t*, a glistening spurt of brown juice shot from between the gray mustaches, arched high and true, seemed to hesitate for a moment in midair, then landed with a satisfying *plop*, squarely in the center of the sand box. The Englishman relaxed with a smiling sigh. When Reb, absent-mindedly, had duplicated the feat errorlessly two or three times, Bartee remarked upon it.

"Me a spitter?" asked Reb in surprise. "Oh—hittin' that there box. That ain't nothin'. Whar I come from in Platte County, Missouri, ye had to be able to set off six foot from a door an' spit through the keyhole without a splatter, afore they'd let ye wear long pants."

"My word!" exclaimed the delighted Bartee. "Most extr'ordn'ry!"

He insisted on the recital again of the ridiculous anecdote. "Why, that ain't hardly worth repeatin'," drawled Reb casually. "My friend Jack Stilwell, in '68, beat a rattlesnake to the strike with a spatter-squirt in the eye, which mortyfied that serpent so that he up an' choked hisself to death with a loop of his own body."

From that moment there was nothing he might have desired on the Honorable Mortimer's ranch which would have been denied him. And whenever Reb wished especially to please his host, it was necessary only for him to produce another story equally nonsensical.

After supper, in which the main course was ham—the first the partners from "up the arroyo" had tasted in months—Bartee suggested a hand of poker, and when his guests reluctantly admitted their lack of funds, he was quick to propose penny ante at which they whiled away the evening. To Reb,

card playing was a passion, and the small game was sheer delight and relaxation to him. He enjoyed Mexican monte, seven-up, faro, pitch, or any other game, but his particular favorite was poker.

The recollection of their pleasurable evening lingered with him next morning after they had slept at the *ramada*, breakfasted, and prepared to return home.

“Tell me, gentlemen,” said Bartee as he stood beside their horses, “have you enjoyed this little visit as much as I have?”

“Ye said it,” responded Reb heartily.

“You bet,” seconded Jubal.

“Then you must come again soon.”

“An’ ye kin bet we will.”

“One other thing—may I awsk you a rahther personal question?” The Englishman was obviously hesitant.

“Why, shorely. Speak on.”

“What are your plans about your residence in the upper arroyo?”

The hearts of the partners sank. This must be the object of the entire maneuver. Now he would inform them they were interlopers on his range.

“Wall,” stammered Reb, as the spokesman, “we’d sort of figgered on mebbe ketchin’ a few bresh cows an’ brandin’ em.”

“May I awsk how your luck has been?”

“I kin answer ye that easy enough—none at all.”

“I had surmised as much,” remarked Bartee. “I do not see how you could hope for success in brush running. You have neither the outfit nor the men. There is a trick to it such as you gentlemen from the North probably do not understand.”

“I guess that’s so,” agreed Jubal, uneasily.

“Now, my friends, I am going to make you a proposition. Take it or leave it. I need a couple more men for a surround up the arroyo, which I am plahnning with the aid of my excellent Pancho. In addition to that, you have a good little corral and particularly a branding chute which would be most convenient to use in the upper canyon, to say nothing of a house available for temporary headquarters in operations there. Why do you not throw in

with me? If you will do so, and give the combined outfit the use of your equipment, I will be willing to place your brand on one out of every six cattle we catch. What do you say?"

Reb was completely taken back by this generosity. "Mr. Bartee," he stuttered, "I don't know *what* to say. Ye've shore throwed us, Mr. Bartee. Why, we come down hyar expectin' ye to tell us that ye claimed the hull canyon an' to get the hell out."

"Let me—aw—make a confession," answered the Englishman. "When I sent for you that *was* my intention. But, my friends, you soon changed my attitude, and strange as it may seem, it was the bizarre accomplishments of you, Mr. Haizlipp, which brought about the revision of opinion. A man who can spit as you can is a marvel; but a man who can both spit and lie as you can is a miracle. I'd far rawther have you and Mr. Troop for neighbors than some worthless scum who might be rustling on me. In fact there's plenty of room for both ranches—a lot more than I can ever use. We'll call it agreed, then. Gentlemen, I propose to start Monday. This is Thursday. Suppose you return Sunday, ready to begin."

5

On the way home the partners savored with satisfaction the pleasant features of their visit to Bartee's ranch. Reb, in particular, was elated. His natural garrulity had been given a chance for expression, and his hunger for the card game he loved was temporarily appeased.

Reb possessed what the West called "card sense"; that is, an instinct for card combinations and percentages, as well as a flair for studying the habits, peculiarities, and mental traits of his opponents, all of which made him a high-class poker player. Jubal had little of this instinct, and cared nothing about the game. On the way to the upper arroyo, Reb talked about poker and in his philosophizing, his friend found, for the first time, a phase of cards which interested him absorbingly. Haizlipp was full of epigrammatic sayings about poker:

"Poker's a game for gents to play an' thar ain't no room in it for skunks," he remarked. "Ye kin make the world think yore a thoroughbred in every other thing, except when yore drinkin' or gamblin'. Ye cain't fool a quart of liquor or a deck of cyards."

"How long have you been playin' poker, Reb?"

"Oh, 'bout since I could walk. An' I've found out thar's some bedrock principles in playin' the game which I allus observes."

“As what, for instance?” asked Jubal.

“One of them is never open a pot on three aces—the chances is three to one against ye winnin’. Open on a bang-up good hand, or a low-down pore hand—so ye kin stand the raises if it’s good, or quit if it’s pore.”

“Never open on three aces?” exclaimed Jubal. “I thought that was a mighty good hand.”

“It’s only fair, an’ the chances are big against improvin’ it. In general, two pairs is a raisin’ hand, an’ three aces—after somebuddy else has opened—is a raisin’ hand. One pair is a openin’ hand; an’ a extry good hand, like any kind of a pat hand, is a openin’ hand. Of course if everybuddy’d play that-a-way, thar’d never be many pots opened. But ye kin generally figger that somebuddy else will have minimum openers or better. An’ then ye’ll be in a proper position. I’d ruther raise than open any time. A army on the attack is a sight nearer winnin’ than if it’s on the defense. Poker’s an offensive game jest like war, an’ I had that from ol’ Pap Price’s own lips doorin’ the late embroglio with the Yanks.”

“But after you open—what kind of rules do you follow then?” asked Jubal.

“Thar ain’t no rules that ye kin set up as hard an’ fast for playin’ poker,” replied Reb. “It all depends on yore opp’osition. It’s plumb interestin’ to study hooman nature in a poker game. The big end of the players has some habit or trick of actin’ which often tips ’em off. For instance, I onest knew a gent who, every time he bluffed, scratched his haid. Got nervous an’ went to monkeyin’ with his ha’r. *He* didn’t know he done it, an’ ye kin bet yore bottom chip *I* never told him. That habit of his was jest like havin’ a drawin’ account on a Fort Worth bank to me. Then thar’s this: Purty near all novices in poker git white around their lips when they hold hell.”

“Hold hell?” Jubal had never heard the expression.

“Why, that’s holdin’ everythin’—dunno whar it come from onless it’s a shortenin’ of ‘holdin’ everythin’ in hell,’” explained Reb. “Anyway it’s a good sign to watch for—the whitenin’ around the mouth. Ye kin generally figger it means the party is gettin’ ready to bet big, with the cyards in his fist to back up his play, an’ it’s time for ye to git out.”

He made a motion like one throwing a hand into the discard. “Thar’s other gents who use certain figgers of speech when they bluff. Usually it’s jest swearin’, but the words they use is different from when they ain’t bluffin’. It’s jest another case of nervousness, like the shorthorn I told ye

about, who toyed with his skelplock when overplayin' his hand. Others talk when they have 'em an' don't say nothin' when they haven't. Sech players is plenty verbose, all the same as a jay-bird, if thar's good cyards in their fists, while when the prospect's barren, they're silent as a mummy. Onest in a while ye'll run across a man who'll tip off his hand by separatin' off his cyards before he's ready to discyard. Sech a tenderfoot is pie for the observin' player, who has a big advantage by knowin' beforehand if he's goin' to draw two or three, or mebbe only one cyard, an' is tharfore guided in bettin' against him. Many's the time I've stalled with shorthorns like that, waitin' for 'em to expose their game."

"What about stackin' the deck, or readin' your opposition's cards?" inquired Jubal.

"I never played but one crooked hand in my life," said his friend solemnly, "an' I figger it don't pay. As it was I never got a chance to show it. I was drawin' to four hearts an' called for one cyard. The dealer give me two by mistake. Both was hearts. I had a flush, ye see, but it was a foul hand. I thought hard for a minute about gittin' rid of that extry cyard. But another feller had drawn three an' caught two kings. He showed me four kings in his hand, an' I laid down—never had to make up my mind on them six hearts. A squar' cyard player, it's been my observation, is a squar' gent wharever ye put him; an' a feller who'd steal a cyard would do most anythin'."

Their horses began to mount the spur which in a manner separated the upper and lower arroyos and thus formed an unofficial boundary between Bartee's range and that which he had tacitly conceded to the JR ranch. The circumstance seemed to remind Reb of the Englishman.

"Ye take Mort Bartee," he ruminated. "He's half English gentleman, an' half wild Injun. Reminds me of a dog my uncle Jabez Thraikill had. He owned a bird-dog—one of the finest p'inters in the Missouri quail country, an' Uncle Jabez wouldn't let any ord'nary hunter shoot over her. Wall, one of my uncle's neighbors an' friends was a worthless gent by the name of Tod Bowersmith. Tod had a dog, too—a fox hound. Thar's a lot of fox huntin' in the Missouri hills, an' while this dog of Tod's wasn't the best runner or trailer in the country, he had the finest voice in the hull Crackerneck neighborhood in Jackson County. A reglar golden trombone of a bay, an' he'd bay all the time. Ye could hear him for miles on a still night.

"Tod kep' after Uncle Jabez to breed them two dogs, to see what kind of a animal they'd get, an' at last my uncle agreed. They bred the dogs an' the

bitch had five pups. Four was females an' they was drowned, but the one male was kept to see what kind of a dog he'd turn out to be.

“Son,” and the cowman’s voice grew impressive, “he was the queerest critter ye ever seen. He was crazy about huntin’—wanted to hunt every minute. But when he’d find game, he’d stand an’ p’int it—an’ bay all the same time!

“That’s the way with Bartee. He ain’t all Westerner or all Englishman, but a combination of both, which hampers his efficiency with either. But he’s a squar’ gent, an’ ye kin tell it by the way he plays cyards.”

By this time they had reached a point from which they could see their cabin high on the side of the canyon wall. The day was lazy and the horses loafed slowly along, half drowsing as their masters conversed.

“Gettin’ back to poker,” said Reb presently, “the thing that counts most in makin’ a good player, is the ability to quit the best hand. That’s true in life, too. Never git yore neck bowed. Don’t feel bad if somebuddy else makes ye lay down a hand, even if yourn is the best. Another thing ye don’t never want to do is to lay for anybuddy. Mebbe he’s a-sayin’ things that makes ye mad, an’ ye’d rather trim him than anythin’ in the world. Chances are, though, that he’s a-sayin’ them things a-purpose to git ye on the hook. Ye’ve got to keep yore temper an’ stay sweet in a poker game. A pore loser has no business with cyards. Show me a maverick who gits mad an’ tears up a deck because he’s a-losin’, an’ I’ll show ye a feller who’s the orig’nal producer, who keeps on comin’ back an’ feedin’ an’ feedin’ the game.”

He shook his gray head mournfully as if in sorrow at the folly of the luckless individual he just had mentioned. Then he went on:

“A lot of otherwise good poker players has the temper’ment to play the game backwards. When they git off winner, they don’t play onless they has mortal cinches. When they’re loser, they try to bull their luck. Don’t never bull yore luck. If ye’ll wait, ye’ll either git ’em or ye won’t, but thar’s a better chance of gittin’ ’em than not. A feller like I jest mentioned is easy. If he’s ahaid of the game, ye know that every time he bets he’s holdin’ hell, an’ ye kin duck him. If he’s loser, ye kin cash in on him ’most every hand, because he’s a-bettin’ wild an’ without jedgment.”

“Reb, I’m wonderin’ somethin’,” said Jubal. “I know you know poker inside an’ out, an’ other folks is the ones who’ve told me. Why haven’t you ever made a killing in it?”

“That’s a fair question, an’ I’ll answer it,” replied the other. “The main reason I never did make any big money out of poker is that I ain’t reemorseless enough. Poker’s allus been jest a game with me. If ye really want to win at it, it’s got to be a cold prop’sition. Ye must aim yore play as much as ye kin at the big loser. Bluff him. Don’t git sympathetic. B’ar down on him for every chip ye kin squeeze out of him. That’s the way to make a killin’ in poker. But is it fun? Not to me. I’m allus tellin’ sech a onfortunate as that to stay out of a pot when I know I have him topped. Never could take no pleasure out of punishin’ a loser. But that thar’s the chief principle of winnin’ in poker—never let a loser git off easy.”

The corral appeared ahead of them and as their horses approached it, the path to the adobe house on the canyon wall could be seen. Reb knocked out the ashes from the pipe he had been smoking, causing a tiny cascade of sparks and dottle to float to the ground.

“Jest one more thing,” he said, waving the stem of his pipe at Jubal. “I see this hyar deesertation of mine has ye drowsy, but lissen to these hyar golden words of warnin’ to a poker player: *Don’t never play poker onless ye kin afford to lose*. If ye do it’s nearly a cinch that ye’ll never quit winner. Worryin’ is the one thing that rooins yore game the quickest.”

6

The next Sunday they rode down to Bartee’s ranch to find the remittance man waiting for them with a smile under his blond mustache, a bottle of whiskey in one hand, and the other hand extended in warm welcome.

“We’ll start the first thing in the morning,” he roared, “but we’re to enjoy this night. All the Mexicans have been rationed *aguardiente*, but we white men will have Scotch—God bless the race which invented it!”

The evening was a memorable one, but everyone was astir at dawn the next morning. Pancho Trujillo, the *caporal*, marshaled his men as soon as it was light enough to see. Ten Mexican *vaqueros*, with Jubal, Reb, the Englishman, and Pancho, formed the party—fourteen men in all. Driving a small herd of cattle, all branded with the Bar-T, **T**, the brush runners started up the canyon.

At its lower end the Arroyo Grande spread out until its floor, broken by rough ground and small hills, was four miles across. The bottom was covered with heavy growths of chaparral and mesquite. By the time the riders were three hundred yards from the *ramada* it was difficult to see one another twenty feet away. Four miles of this and the cow hunters came upon

an old corral. It was made of deeply planted logs, weather-beaten to a whitish gray and lashed together with ancient rawhide, which, however, was still as strong and hard as flint. From the gate of the corral extended wide-spreading arms, two hundred yards long, also made of posts, to serve as a guide into the corral, for any cattle which might be driven within their embrace.

“*Avanca! Viva!*” called Pancho. The decoy herd was turned off toward the east wall of the canyon, and left to graze in the underbrush which grew thickly beneath the great, towering walls of the gorge. Two *vaqueros* remained to keep the decoys close together; the rest of the party formed a wide-flung line and began slowly to ride through the thickets.

Once Jubal started, bringing a grin to little, wrinkled Pancho, when, with a squeal and a rush, half a dozen small, bristling creatures leaped from under the feet of the horses and tore off through the bushes, scarcely seen.

“*Javalina,*” said the *caporal* reassuringly, from his monkey-like perch on top of his high saddle. Those were the first of the wicked little musk hogs Jubal had seen in the canyon, but he was to learn there were many of them, and also black bears, and even occasional pumas. Of the presence of coyotes, lobo wolves, deer and antelope, he already had ample evidence.

So tense were his nerves that he started again in his saddle when far ahead something jumped up in the brush with a crash and a snort. Instantly there was a drumming of heavy, pounding feet and the noise of big bodies ripping through the thickets. Jubal was bewildered; he could not at first understand what he and the other riders were doing. But he spurred his horse to follow as the Mexicans began to ride hard in the direction of the crashing sounds.

Over prostrate trunks, through what appeared to be impenetrable tangles, leaping or spuming aside prickly pear and cholla cactus, the horsemen thundered. By this time Jubal was certain they were following a herd of cattle, but he was too much occupied in keeping somewhere near the other riders to pay much attention to where he was going or why he was going there. His face was scratched with whipping branches. Had it not been for the tough brush-jacket and chaps he wore, his body would have been lacerated. How those Mexicans rode! An occatillo branch raked his shoulder. By this time he had lost sight of all the members of his party and was guided entirely by the continuous crashing in the chaparral.

Suddenly, however, the chase seemed to be over. The horsemen had ceased to ride forward. To his right and left he descried *vaqueros* and he

knew cattle were ahead. He looked . . . why, they had the Bar-T brands upon them. No, there were also some with no brands at all. He understood now. The wild cattle had mingled with the decoy herd. How the Mexicans ever guided the brush cows to the tame animals through that wilderness passed Jubal's comprehension.

After allowing an hour for the wild beasts to become acquainted with the tame herd, and to quiet down from their run, the *vaqueros* gently commenced to urge the cattle forward once more. This time, however, old Pancho rode far ahead. Jubal could hear from somewhere deep in the jungle the voice of the *caporal* singing some Mexican folk song. The voice seemed to sooth the wild herd. Almost docilely the cattle followed the song, until, within a few minutes, the invisible leader conducted them to where they all poured into the wide funnel of the cattle trap.

7

“So this is the way they do it!” exclaimed Reb as he and Jubal met for the first time since the drive started. “No wonder we fell down so bad with only two riders. It jest shows. Every gent to his own game. I bet I could show some of these bresh poppers a thing or two about trail drivin’ in open county.”

“How many did we get?” asked Jubal.

“About twenty wild one,” replied Pancho who had just ridden up.

The *caporal*, too, had raking scratches across his face. Not a man among them, in fact, but showed marks of the ride, and one *vaquero* was limping, having been whipped out of his saddle and thrown heavily by a low branch. Hunting cattle in the Arroyo Grande required something more than riding. A man had to be a combination of a devil and a hound to be a success at it, Jubal believed.

Nothing was to be done for two days. The cattle must be permitted to grow hungry and thirsty before they could be branded and released. At the end of the period of fasting, their anxiety for food and water would overcome their desire to bolt, and they would remain quiet enough to be held in a herd and taken to the lower part of the canyon where there was open grazing. The cow hunters returned to the *ramada* for the night.

“I weesh we have your branding chute, señor,” remarked Pancho to Jubal when they rode back to the corral on Wednesday. But there was no chute at this place. The cattle had to be thrown and branded and most of the day was consumed in the task.

Then the drive recommenced. It was dangerous, exhausting work, but not unprofitable. Within a week the crew had branded a hundred wild cattle with the Bar-T. That meant sixteen or seventeen animals allotted to the partners' share, it being agreed that the JR should receive its portion when the upper arroyo was reached. More than a month was required to work up the canyon. The men built wings to the gate of the little branding corral Reb and Jubal had constructed, and Pancho liked to work there because of the convenience of the chute. By the end of October, when the season was fairly over, the chaparral in the entire Arroyo Grande had been pretty thoroughly combed.

Mortimer Bartee paid the Mexican *vaqueros* and dismissed them. Old Pancho returned to the *ramada* where Otero, the cook, had remained by himself for weeks, but that evening the Englishman ate supper at the JR ranch. Jovially happy, they toasted their success in Scotch whiskey which a special messenger fetched from the *ramada* for the occasion.

"It was a better venture than I had hoped," smiled Bartee. "Five hundred cattle under my brand, and a hundred for you. I think we may agree that our co-operation has repaid us in more ways than the mere friendship, gratefully received as that is."

As he permitted a mouthful of his mellow whiskey to roll over his tongue, he closed his eyes with a connoisseur's satisfaction.

8

There was nothing of the anchorite about Reb. He had been patient enough during the period of Jubal's apathy, cheerfully shrugging his shoulders when his friend lapsed into frequent periods of lengthy silence. But when the end of winter came, the gray cowman could see no further value in resigning himself indefinitely to a hermit existence. Jubal still had that girl on his mind, Reb surmised. It would do the boy good to loosen up. A bender in town was the solution.

That spring they rode the length of the upper canyon and observed that the JR cows had produced an excellent crop of calves. It was six months since the cattle hunt, but a thorough inspection revealed that nearly all the wild stock of the arroyo had been placed under brand.

"It's the nacheral increase we got to count on from now out," Reb told Jubal. "Thar's around thirty of our calves in the spring crop. We'll git together with Mort Bartee early in the summer an' brand our stuff a lot. Half of it'll be heifers. In a year they'll multiply too—with the willin', not to say

enthoosiasitic, co-operation of the bulls—an', addin' their off-springs to their mothers', we'll have forty-five calves the second spring, with luck. It ought to keep on increasin' like that each year. Slow at fust, but after a few years, we'll have so many cows we won't be able to count 'em, an' our brand'll be known everywhar!"

He was always sanguine . . . too much so. Jubal, more practical, took into account the cattle diseases, wolves, rustlers, and many other factors which could enter into the retarding of a herd's growth. By making all proper discounts, however, even Jubal could see how their brand would increase slowly.

"Looks pretty good," he admitted at last.

"Let's go to El Paso," suggested Reb unexpectedly.

"What for?" asked Jubal, knowing they had no money. Throughout the winter they had lived on venison and an occasional maverick beef, together with the corn grist they obtained from the little Mexican village of Caliente, several hours' ride up the trail above the head of the canyon.

Reb was equal to the implied question. "We'll make up a little drove of steers an' sell 'em. They ain't doin' no good hyar."

To this Jubal entered no objection. It made little difference to him what they did. He helped gather up a few head of cattle. Some of these were ex-mavericks and the rest were steers which they picked up at the head of the canyon near where the El Paso trail passed, and where beef herd stragglers, footsore, sometimes fell out. The brands of these "sleepers" were skillfully altered by Reb, who retraced them into the JR, utterly untrammled by conscience. All told they made up a herd of a dozen animals, some young, the others with wide, crooked horns on which the "moss was grown," as Reb put it.

Early one bright morning in April, the ten days' drive to El Paso began. And speedily Jubal found that because of the strange, old-world sights which characterized it, the journey was interesting. Frequently they passed trains of Mexican *carretas*, primitive affairs usually loaded with corn. The enormous wheels of these vehicles were made from huge logs, sawn across to make flat disks, and clumsily framed together. These awkward wheels loosely revolved on rude axles which, innocent of any grease from the time they were first put into use, screamed as if in torture with each revolution. The body of a typical cart resembled a giant basket consisting of a frame of slats bound to the side-posts with rawhide, and covered over with frayed

canvas or skins. Not one piece of iron was used in the entire vehicle. The *carretas* slowly lumbered over the rough roads, their creaking and squawling unavoidably creating the impression that they were about to fall into fragments, although they were really quite serviceable and lasted for many years even under the atrocious carelessness with which the Mexicans used them. Invariably the carts were drawn by starved-looking oxen, which shouldered along under a straight beam of wood bound to their horns in lieu of a yoke, and with rawhide ropes substituted for chains and bows. Prodding the animals were dirty, bare-headed Mexicans, with blankets, which would have been gaudy had they not been so soiled, wrapped around their shoulders in the manner of Indians. Jubal always could tell from a mile's distance when one of the outlandish caravans was approaching. In such cases he or Reb rode forward to warn the drivers to halt so that the little herd would not be stampeded by the strange apparition.

After a day or two on the highland route, the trail swung down into the warm valley of the Rio Grande, which spread wide and sandy, with a notched line of low mountains to the southwest. Here and there the trail drivers came upon sleepy villages, about which the only signs of life seemed to be the ever-present chickens and the bright-eyed, naked little children who romped and ran, their voices raised in shrill, pinprick whoops. Always the adult Mexicans reclined, the men smoking ceaselessly their corn-husk *cigaritos*, the women, broad-hipped, lounging at their places of vantage from which they could peek through the hanging loops of dried peppers and scream strident gossip to their neighbors in the mud casas next door.

When Reb and Jubal began to near El Paso, the signs of human industry and activity became rapidly more apparent, so that by the time they reached the pleasant, shaded Mexican hamlet of Socorro, with its quaint old church and low adobe houses, and a few miles farther on Ysleta, the Indian pueblo, with its tall white cathedral, the partners could see cornfields stretched out all across the wide valley, with vegetable and melon patches also in profusion. For the slow, ceaseless labor of the Mexicans and Indians had placed all of this portion of the Rio Grande Valley under irrigation and it was pleasantly green here when the entire country surrounding for leagues on leagues was yellow and gray with drouth.

“Thar she is—that’s El Paso del Norte,” suddenly cried Reb with the exuberance of a discoverer as they reached at length the top of a low ridge from which the trail swung sharply downward.

It was a sight to stir the enthusiasm. Far out before them stretched the valley with the river tracing its shining, twisting pathway through it. On

every hand the dark green of orchards, vineyards and cornfields gave a rich, prosperous appearance to the vista. In the center, with the river running between them, stood the twin cities, American and Mexican, their flat-roofed dwellings stretching out in a generous broadcast and the towers of a church or cathedral rising mistily among them. Afar to the south and west the dim mountains faded into the blue of the sky, while nearer the looming mass of a small peak squatted to the north.

Jubal gazed with keenest interest. He knew that he was looking upon the capital of the Southwestern cattle country. In those streets walked saturnine cowmen from as far away as the Pecos canyon, many days' ride beyond Arroyo Grande toward the east, and alkali-bitten punchers from the savage Gila Valley of Arizona, as great a distance to the west. *Vaqueros* from deep down in Chihuahua rubbed shoulders there with Indians from the Sierra Madre, or hang-dog Mexican sheep herders, their *serapes* all covered with grease spots which told of months spent in the Gallina country, might stand watching a faro game in which a couple of stark hard-rock miners from the Silver City district camps bucked the luck or skill of an imperturbable gambler from California or far Montana.

The metropolis of a territory as large as old Spain and as varied, to which men, their souls and bodies starved for relaxation, rode days on end to the promised debauch which awaited them, El Paso was the one place where, sooner or later, almost every denizen of the cattle and mining country would be met. Jubal felt something almost like timidity as he viewed the place . . . his reaction due to the fact he had not been in a city of any size since he had become a young man. Reb, however, almost smacked his lips with anticipation of what was to come.

"Come on, Jube," he called. "Thar's onfettered sin a-waitin' us in them gilded palaces ye see thar, an' I'm jest honin' for some of it! Start them steers for town!"

Down the hill the partners herded their cattle, and within an hour they were passing through the city, their handful of wild-eyed steers staring, starting and slipping in the streets, while the people withdrew into doorways to let the herd pass, or took refuge in their *casas*. By nightfall the herd was penned, and Reb was deep in a lengthy chaffering with a fat Mexican. He sold the cattle, but his face reflected his disgust at the little he received for it—one hundred and sixty dollars. A more cheerful aspect of the situation came to him, however, as he mentally translated his share into pleasure, and he grinned once more as he divided the sum in half, giving eighty dollars to Jubal. The realization came to the latter that this was his entire profit, eighty

dollars, for the labor, pain and risks, as well as the hardships of a year's work. His lips closed thinly as he placed the coins in a money belt which he wore about his body next to his skin.

But Reb, shaking off the disappointment and regret, turned toward the city with a kind of exalted joy. The dispensing of vice was a business in many El Paso establishments. At the time the city was largely Mexican, and even among the American citizens, since the population of women from the "states" was still comparatively small, there was an indulgent attitude toward cowboys who came into town to slake the cravings in their beings.

Gleefully Reb led the way, his share of the sale proceeds stuffed loosely into his pockets. He pushed aside dark-faced men who lounged beneath their wide sombreros in the narrow streets, but halted politely to make way for women who minced along in full gathered skirts, vivid *rebosos* wound about their heads and shoulders to hide almost all the face, except for the large, lustrous eyes.

9

"Hyar we are, an' I give due notice—I'm goin' to commit vice," announced Reb.

It was a mediocre *fonda*, with a *cantina* and gambling room connected with it. Low-ceilinged, dirty and crowded, it was nevertheless the kind of a place for which Reb panted.

"Whiskey!" he shouted. "*Yi-yi-yi-yippee!*"

The old rebel yell with which he greeted particularly tumultuous occasions, rang the rafters and brought a crowd.

"Waltz up to the bar! Drinks is on me, as far as this goes!" The cowman exuberantly spun a twenty-dollar gold piece across the bar. Greasy Mexicans who had been playing listless monte, eagerly deserted their tables. With grinning "*gracias*" and "*salutads*," they crowded up to the bar for their drinks. Two or three tall Texans appeared, their heavy revolvers swinging low at their hips. These Reb pledged with the utmost nicety, turning his back indifferently upon the Mexicans.

Never a great drinker, Jubal stood aside after his first glass and watched the throng detachedly. A heavy odor of perspiration and spilled liquor, mingled with the stale smoke of many *cigaritos*, hung on the air. There was a noticeably social quality among the Mexicans. When one of them observed that a neighbor's glass was empty, he insisted that the other drink

with him. A smoker with a *cigarito* passed it to the man beside him, who in turn passed it on after a puff or two, and so it traveled around the circle, returning at last to its original owner, all but consumed.

After a few minutes Reb left his new Texas friends and led Jubal upstairs. An evil-faced Mexican, his features heavily pitted with smallpox, preceded them and displayed a room which they accepted as lodging. Then Reb leered at Jubal, and to his friend's admiration delivered himself of:

“*Estan muchachas in la casa?*”

“*Ay! Seguro, señor!*” responded the Mexican with an understanding chortle. He was a pander, clearly, and of the most depraved sort, but that suited Reb's wishes perfectly.

“*Esta bien,*” said the cowman. Then, “*Pronto!*” in such tones that the pock-marked pimp fairly scuttled out of the room.

A few minutes later the door to the room opened and two young women sidled in, *rebosos* falling laxly on plump shoulders, hips swinging with insinuation, fixed smiles on painted lips, but eyes unsmilingly intent with speculation. One glance showed that these were not even *rumeras*—locally meaning the higher type of prostitutes—but common, coarse *putas* only. Yet though the faces of the women were heavy and stupid, their carriage had the splendid erectness of the Indian blood in them, and both were slim-waisted and opulent of bosom. Neither was more than twenty, but it was characteristic of the Mexicans in that climate to mature precociously and fade early. The two *putas* probably had been dispensing their peculiar wares since they were ten or eleven years old. In appearance both looked at least thirty now.

Intense distaste for the situation filled Jubal. He had no wish for this sort of dalliance. With disparagement he surveyed the women, then glared past them at the pock-marked procurer who stood grinning and rubbing his hands in the hall. Jubal kicked the door shut. As he turned, one of the women wound her arms about Reb's neck, her loins pressing strongly against the man's. Reb laughed gloatingly. The second *puta* came straight to Jubal, but there was a fulsomeness to her approach which sickened him. The redolence of heavy perfume with the light taint of tobacco-laden breath were inescapably forced to his attention. Her moist, sucking lips sought his, and her face thus brought into proximity with his eyes, was repellent. Sodden meat. Jubal tore out from her embrace and stumbled from the room. Out of the tail of his eye he saw that Reb and the other woman already were wallowing on the bed.

No moral scruples bothered Jubal, but the whole sordid episode left him with the sensation of gasping for clean air in a fetid room. He found his way to the street and began tramping blindly along it.

Once he heard church bells. Walking in the direction of the sound, he came to the ancient, cruciform cathedral, with its shaky towers and crumbling walls, looking as if it had been built before Columbus. The aged edifice stood close to the *plaza grande*, or central market. At the booming of the bells, people stopped their work and their chaffering, and went trooping in to vespers, while a fat priest stood beside the door.

After a time Jubal stood on the bridge across the Rio Grande, and for a time watched the shallow water. Night was falling. He turned at length and walked back toward the *fonda* where he had left Reb, wondering at the diversity of human nature. As he strolled along, Jubal idly noticed that gambling seemed to be the universal occupation in El Paso, indulged in by everyone, from wealthy men who wagered huge piles of silver pesos at monte or poker in the gaming halls, to little urchins who tossed small coins, called *quartillas* at cracks.

Music issued from one building. Jubal paused and glanced into the door which stood open, the yellow light from the interior gushing forth upon the street while dark figures flitted back and forth in its blaze. A *fandango*. At one end of the room Jubal could see a violin, guitar and flute violently being played. Spectators squatted or stood against the walls while the floor was filled with whirling dancers. Some of the girls appeared not unattractive. Men and women alike smoked, and when a girl was summoned to dance, she always handed her inevitable corn-husk *cigarito* to the nearest feminine wall flower to puff while the number was being finished. Jubal experienced a sudden wish to participate in the free enjoyment which was evident. But he met only strange, half-resentful stares, and presently turned sullenly away.

When Jubal returned to the *fonda* he found his partner with half a dozen other men at a poker table. Reb, as soon as he saw Jubal, excused himself.

“I’d take it might han’some if ye’d let me have a few dollars,” he said thickly, approaching Jubal. His gray eyes were dancing queerly and his eyelids were narrowed. Jubal could see that he was very drunk, but without a word handed over twenty dollars. The cowman returned to his game and

played a few minutes more. Then, after a second look at the five cards he had drawn last, Reb tossed them into the discard pile.

“That last hike raises me out,” he said and arose.

“Pikers has no business in this game,” came a voice. Jubal saw the speaker. One of Reb’s new Texas friends. For a moment the gray cowman hesitated at the remark, his face darkening while he looked at the fellow as if about to retort to the discourtesy. The room grew tense for a moment, but Reb seemed to take control of himself and came to Jubal silently.

“Let’s be goin’,” he said curtly. But Jubal was staring across the smoke-filled room.

“What’s the matter?” asked Reb, still intent on his poker losses. “Ye look like you’re seein’ sperrits.” His eye followed the other’s and it was his turn to stare.

Lounging against the bar, his thumbs hooked into his sagging cartridge belt, was a slim, slouching youth. He wore the garb of a cowboy, but there was no mistaking that face with its wide jaws and pointed chin, much less the pin-pupiled viper’s eyes. Jake Slaven, Jubal was thinking. Jake Slaven. What’s he doing here? And why did he leave the Rawhiders?

12

Of a sudden there came to Jubal a great desire to speak to the Rawhider. He could obtain news . . . perhaps word of Naoma. It amazed Jubal to find how strong was the girl’s hold upon him still. He had believed the episode which concerned her was ended and the thought of her came more rarely each day. Yet the appearance of Jake brought back all the remembrances of her blond hair and that tingling kiss she had placed upon his lips. He wished to take Jake somewhere to talk. There were many things to be asked. Was Naoma well? Happy? Did she ever show by any sign that she thought of somebody no longer with the train . . . ?

Then Jubal realized that he did not wish to talk with Jake after all. Jubal would not be able to bring himself to ask those questions. He had to say something, however, for Jake, seeing their eyes upon him, straightened up at the bar and approached the partners.

Casual and brief were the greetings. “Ah was watchin’,” the Rawhider said to Reb. “Yawl had mighty hahd luck.”

“I reckon,” agreed Reb sourly.

“Wheah-at yawl stayin’?”

“I got a room upstairs hyar.”

There was some small talk.

“How long you been here?” asked Jubal.

“Two-three days. Been workin’ on the Mescalero reservation.”

This was news. After an awkward silence, Reb spoke:

“Ye left yore folks well?”

“Wall, theh right smaht. Headin’ fo’ Silver City.”

“How’s Naomi?” It took resolution for Jubal to ask the question. Jake’s eyes flickered and he hesitated momentarily. Then:

“She’s all right, too.”

The constraint again fell upon them. Jake was first to speak.

“Ah heah yawl has a ranch,” he began.

“Wall, yes. If ye want to call it that. Jest a brand an’ a few haid cows. Nothin’ wuth the name, hardly.” Reb feared the direction which the conversation was taking, but his alarm was appeased when Jake presently excused himself and departed from the saloon.

The partners returned to Reb’s room, finding the covers still rumpled on the bed from his recent bout. Reb was depressed.

“Soon as I seen that Jake Slaven with his snake haid, the wish to do anythin’ divertin’ done left me,” he grumbled. He never had liked Jake. Some kind of a portent seemed to be involved in the Rawhider’s sudden appearance at this time.

“I allus git to feelin’ this way after a spree,” Reb continued, half to himself, “but it’s general’ two-three days afore it hits me.” Then, “It’s no use lookin’ for strays after the stampede, but I’m sorry about losin’ our grub-stake. How much *dinero* ye got left?”

“About sixty dollars.”

“An’ we ought to have a hundred an’ sixty. I lost the hundred. It jest shows ye what I told ye before. In poker, like in life, them that has, gits. I couldn’t play, ’cause I couldn’t afford to lose.”

Jubal did not sleep for hours. He was oppressed by a sense of discouragement and worry.

Besides, the bedbugs were numerous and voracious.

Before daylight, having settled their score at the *fonda* they sought the livery stable. A shadowy rider joined them soon after they secured their horses and left the place.

“Hell!” swore Reb under his breath. It was Jake Slaven. In the dim first light, the Rawhider looked drawn and bitter. His little, glassy eyes were as expressionless as ever and the pinched lines of his face accentuated the wide jaw and pointed chin.

“Yawl mind if Ah ride along?” Slaven asked, knowing they could not refuse. The three trotted easily up to the top of the hill and down on the other side, their last glimpse of El Paso revealing the towers of the cathedral spot-lighted with the first dawn rays.

There was little conversation, neither of the partners warming up to any of the attempts to talk made by Slaven, who presently fell silent also. An hour after sunrise, their horses suddenly reared and surged sidewise at the report of a revolver.

“What in hell did ye do that for?” asked Reb’s impatient voice.

Jake’s eyes, for once, had expression. A gleam was in them as he pointed with the still-smoking muzzle of his six-shooter at the twisting coils of a rattlesnake twenty yards away, its body squirming mindlessly about its shattered head.

“Ah hate them things,” he said. With one motion, as lightning fast as the snake’s own strike, he had drawn and fired, smashing the small target of the reptile’s flat skull at sixty feet. That was the reason for the gleam in his eyes.

Jake threw a leg over his saddle horn, and with a cloth from his saddle bags carefully wiped out the barrel of his weapon and placed a cartridge in the empty chamber.

“That there’s purty good shootin’,” Reb commented grudgingly after a time.

“Ah try to keep fitten,” replied the Rawhider. His eyes lazily swept the side of the road. The brown and fawn stripes of a ground squirrel scurried along the ground, then popped suddenly up as the tiny creature sat erect. “See heah,” said Jake. Again he jerked his revolver from its holster, a

smooth motion so fast the eye could not follow it, and the gun crashed. The ground squirrel was hurled a yard away, a bloody rag of fur.

Both Reb and Jubal were forced to voice their admiration. "Let's see you hit that prickly pear," suggested the latter.

"Naw!" The Rawhider's voice was contemptuous. "Ah neveh shoots at nothin' lessen it's alive. What's the use?"

When they camped that evening, Jake broached the subject the partners had feared all along.

"Jube, yawl mind if Ah pays yo' a leetle visit?" he asked. "Ah'd shore like to see wheah yawl's livin'."

The West's code of hospitality would forbid a refusal, since it could only be construed as deadliest insult. Next evening the three riders reached the Arroyo Grande, completing in three days a journey which had required twelve days to make in the opposite direction with the herd of steers.

Loud in his praises of their ranch was Jake. "House, c'ral, grazin' ground, all complete," he lauded. And again, "This heah's some canyon. A hull army could hide heah an' neveh be found."

So well did he like it, apparently, that his stay, which was to have been a "leetle visit," lasted long. In various ways, however, during the next weeks, the Rawhider made shift to earn his keep. He carried a Winchester rifle in the scabbard which hung beside his saddle, and he spent the days rambling up and down the arroyo, often bringing in a deer, turkey, or antelope. Reb had decided to make his roundup without the help of Bartee, and although they offered him no wages, Jake volunteered to go along and help with the work. The partners were forced into the admission that their unwelcome guest was an expert in handling cattle. He found little side canyons in their part of the arroyo which they had not known existed, and from them he routed handfuls of animals. Down the steep sides of a gorge he would ride at full gallop, his body slack and his back stooped, yet seeming to be a part, almost, of his horse. With the lariat he was sure and deft, and he could do things in the way of driving stock and working them into places where he wished them to go, that neither of the others could think of accomplishing. With his assistance they gathered, corralled and branded the thirty or more unbranded calves in time so short that it surprised them.

"He's a shore 'nough cowpuncher. Never seen any better rider or roper than him," grunted Reb one night. "An' he's a shore 'nough virchuso with

that hardware of his. I'd hate to go up ag'in him an' have to draw for my life."

Jubal tolerated Jake's presence more willingly than did Reb for one reason. He still hoped he might learn more about Naoma. But in this he was disappointed. Little information was he able to pry out of the Rawhider.

"Oh, theh all right," Jake would say in answer to a question about his people. "Ah reckon they ain't no diff'unt from when yo' left 'em."

Concerning specific questions about Naoma Hocktor, Jubal was hesitant and Jake maddeningly refrained from any direct mention of her.

Then, one day in midsummer, the Rawhider disappeared. Merely saying good-by, he rode away and did not return. Reb was greatly relieved.

"I don't like that hombre," he told Jubal with great frankness. "Thar's something suspicious about the way he swings his noose. He's hyster'cal an' nervous. I dropped my saddle one time when his back was turned toward me an' he whirls on me with his gun. That's whatever! He was that excited an' quiverin' I didn't know for a minute if he was goin' to let me have it or not. I tried to look him over ca'm an' never turnin' a ha'r, but I kin tell ye, ontill the wild look went out of them snake eyes an' he put the gun away, I was all over goose bumps."

He shook his head and thoughtfully expectorated tobacco juice.

"'Which Ah was jes' keepin' my hand in,' he grins at me," Reb continued, "but he looks plenty ja'ndiced yet. Thar's shorely somethin' on his mind, Jube. I'll bet a blue stack he's been in some kind of trouble. Mebbe stood up a stage or somethin'. Anyway, ye kin bet I don't want him bringin' no Rangers into *this* arroyo. . . . If he ever comes back, I'm goin' to up an' tell him to pull his stakes an' move on a hull lot."

Jubal agreed with Reb. He, too, had noticed the queerness of Slaven. It was no one specific thing, so much as the sum of many little things which, added together, created the impression of nervousness . . . and something uncomfortably sinister, too.

After a time Reb and Jubal forgot about Jake. They labored mightily on their ranch and in the succeeding months Mortimer Bartee rode up the arroyo once or twice and paid a bluff, hearty visit. He was a welcome guest . . . partly because he brought his own liquor.

Between the Britisher and Reb there was a growing, cordial warmth. It delighted the remittance man to listen to the cowman's endless drolleries, and Bartee constantly encouraged these flights of imagination.

"A most extr'ordn'ry chap," he would exclaim in glee. "Most extr'ordn'ry. Do you know what he told me? He has a friend who can expectorate tobacco juice with such exceptional skill an' velocity that the boulder will drop a flyin' hummin' bird at fifteen paces, and buckle the knees of a bullfrog at twenty. Fawncy that now!"

As fall approached, Reb proposed to Jubal that they return Bartee's visits. The ostensible reason for the trip was to arrange for another co-operative roundup drive, using the riders of both outfits to see if they could find any more wild mavericks in the chaparral. But the actual occasion, as Jubal well knew, was to enjoy a final frolic before winter set in.

On a bright morning in late September they rode down toward Bartee's ranch. The Englishman was boomingly delighted to see them.

"Ah, my friends from up the canyon. Pancho! See to the gentlemen's horses. Welcome to the Rancho Bartee. Come in! Come in!" And he led the way into the *ramada*.

It was a time of mutual fulfillment. The little herd up the canyon was growing, slowly but surely. Jake Slaven had taken his menacing presence away. They made ready for a great debauch to signalize their contentment with the present and their joy in the future. When Bartee brought out the strangely shaped and labeled bottles, some of them wrapped in wire to prove their great preciousness, Reb and Jubal relaxed their belts and prepared to do justice to the hospitality offered.

In the kitchen old Otero, the cook, had labored mightily, and after the drinking was continued an hour only, sufficient to give the sharpest drawn edge to appetite, yet not enough to fuddle the brain or numb the senses of smell and taste—in a word when the three of them were in the most perfect condition for appreciation—a feast was borne in triumphantly and placed before them. In this matter as in all others, Bartee betrayed his delicate instinct for hospitality. True to his British blood, he himself esteemed roast beef beyond all other dishes, but he knew that his friends from up the arroyo must be well tired of beef. And so he served to them a juicy antelope saddle, flanked with rashers of steaming pink ham, and garnished with greenery from the small garden which Otero weeded and irrigated back of the *ramada*.

On this banquet Reb, Jubal and the Honorable Mortimer gorged themselves until, in helpless repletion, they could swallow no more. Then they sat in the warm sun outside and smoked the sweet post-prandial pipe, with drowsy gratitude for such a repast, and belched and spat and told sleepy stories, until, after an hour or so, their bellies began in a small measure to relax and the drinking could be resumed.

And then Bartee, with the inward joy of the perfect host, pressed them to try this and that bottle, all strange and fascinating. In the end, however, after satisfying the remittance man by sampling his liqueurs, his brandies and his wines, and having their protests at such munificence brushed aside with the assurance that only the day before Bartee had received "from home" his quarterly allowance, they settled down happily to the homely, natural drink to which they were accustomed—whiskey.

Jubal, as yet unused to prolonged bouts of the kind, went early to sleep, but as their bodies warmed, Reb and Bartee pledged each other hour by hour, and told notable stories. By the very nature of their lives they were continent men, women being far from them for months out of each year. Reb, in particular, a hedonist if one ever lived, dwelt in imagination for months before and after his rare matings, and now with his brain fired, he painted titillating pictures of his journey to El Paso, for the Englishman's ear. And under his telling, the sordid bout with the coarse Mexican *puta* became an affair with a houri; to have heard him would have been to think that a choir of odalisques furnished dulcet music for their couch, whereas there had been only the clinking of whiskey glasses and the hoarse growl of gamblers just below; and he gave the unavoidable impression that he had enjoyed a perfumed cloud for a bed instead of the foul mattress of the *fonda*.

For his part, Bartee became, as the night waxed old, more and more stiffly Oxonian in his speech and deportment, harking back to his youth and relating strange, incomprehensible tales of clipped hedges with daisy-dappled lawns, and great stone houses of eld, the shining mirror of the Mersey River before the door . . . the mellow golden notes of distant church bells in the air . . .

After a long time Pancho Trujillo came stealing with a compassionate smile on his wrinkled old visage, straightened out their limbs where they lay, and brought blanket rolls as head rests; then went away silently and left the three of them sleeping on the floor where they had fallen; blissfully unconscious of the world, the flesh or the devil.

In the noontide glare, Jubal sat alone in the deep shadow of the cabin. It was three days since he and Reb had returned with heads throbbing prodigiously from the debauch at Bartee's, and black reaction still hung over him. At such times the morbidity of Jubal's nature, induced by the successive rebuffs which his life had known, lay upon him like a curse. His inarticulateness forbade his expressing what was gnawing at him. Like an animal, almost, he lay on his bunk, his eyes fixed on space.

From outside came Reb's voice:

"Howd'ye, gents."

Then a deep rumble:

"Yo' heah alone?"

Jubal rolled off the bunk, landing cat-like on his feet, and stepped to the door. In front of the cabin four men sat their horses, bulking unexpectedly large, so close were they to the door. All of them held Winchester rifles across their saddle pommels, in addition to the universal Colt or Smith & Wesson revolver hung heavily in the holster of each. Their boots and their wide sombreros were of the cowboy type, but a star was embroidered on their saddle blankets.

Rangers, thought Jubal. Wonder what they can be doing here? Can they have found out about those four or five sleepers we picked up at the head of the canyon last spring?

A lanky, lantern-jawed man, with a quid of tobacco swelling his cheek, seemed to be the leader. He lolled languidly in his saddle and spoke with the resonant bass Jubal had first heard.

"How long yo' all been heah?"

"Goin' on our second year," replied Reb.

"Know the folks down the arroyo?"

"Yep." There was surprise in the cowman's tone. "Mort Bartee, an Englishman, owns the ranch."

The lantern-jawed man shifted his quid to the other side of his face.

"How long sence yo' been down theah?"

"Three days ago."

"What were yo' doin'?"

Jubal could feel the concentrated look of four pairs of eyes, studying him, studying Reb, studying every detail of their place and surroundings. The man at Lantern-jaw's left was small and dark. He had the appearance of an Indian breed. The two on the right were young, lean, sun-bitten. All had the spareness of hip and thigh of men who spend their lives in the saddle.

Reb, with the same thought in the back of his head which had flashed into Jubal's mind, was weighing his answers and it took longer to answer each successive question.

"Why, we jest rode down for a friendly visit," he finally said. "Big drunk down thar. Made arrangements to work together in next roundup."

"How many cattle have yo' got?" Jubal winced as the question was asked. It was becoming increasingly clear where this was leading.

"About a hundred head," Reb answered honestly, but his gray eyes, meeting his partner's, were forlorn.

"Why would yo' need help to round up a hundred haid?"

How could Reb explain the purely social object of the arrangement? He remained moodily silent.

"Reckon Ah'll look around," said Lantern-jaw. "Yo' come 'long with me, Lupin. Yo' otheh boys stay with these gentlemen."

He and the dark-faced Ranger swung down from their saddles, handing their reins to one of the two men who remained mounted. Then they clumped, rowels whizzing and their sharp boot heels thudding on the ground, into the cabin.

"Take chahge of these," the hoarse fog-horn voice came from within. After a minute or two the men emerged, Lupin carrying the revolvers and cartridge belts of both partners, together with Reb's Winchester.

"Ah'm Cap'n Gatling, Texas Rangehs," rumbled the leader. "Yo' gentlemen have ansehred some questions, Ah'd like to ask yo' some mo'."

Both Reb and Jubal nodded mute agreement.

"How long yo' knowed Bartee?" Where *was* this questioning leading?

"Why, almost since we fust come hyar," replied Reb. "He's a good friend an' a good neighbor."

"Yo' mean *was*."

"Was?" came Jubal's quick exclamation.

“Yep. Bartee an’ his two greasers was murdered some time in the last two days.”

The heated impact of the sun beat down, and all the world lay in dead silence, save for the solemn, discordant hum of one large blue-bottle fly about Jubal’s head. Reb’s face had the look of a man bitten by a snake. Jubal heard him clear his throat.

“Ye mean . . . Bartee . . . *dead*?”

“That’s what Ah mean. Cowboys, stoppin’ fo’ chuck las’ night, found ’em an’ repawted to Fo’t Quitman. All three men at Bartee’s ranch was shot an’ then stomped or beat to death.”

Gatling’s keen eyes had never left their stricken, incredulous faces. Now he spat a cascade of brown liquid in the dust. The spittle lay glistening for a moment, then ran into the fine powdered earth and formed slimy mud.

“Did Bartee eveh tell yo’ about his money?” he continued.

“Yes, he did.” Reb spoke without hesitation. “He told me when we was drinkin’ with him that he’d jest got his remittance from his folks back in England.”

“Tell yo’ wheah-at he kep’ it?”

“No, he never mentioned that.”

“Well, Ah’ll tell yo’ wheah he kep’ it. In a old iron safe in his sleepin’ room. The pahaties that murdered him made him open it befo’ they killed him.”

A combination of pain and fury in his face, Reb looked directly into Jubal’s eyes. “Jube Troop, I *told* ye it would happen. This is the work of that snake, Jake Slaven!”

But Jubal protested in horror. “No, Reb! Jake wouldn’t do a thing like that!”

With appalling fierceness the cowman turned on him and said, “Mort Bartee was *my* friend. Jake Slaven is *yourn*. Well, keep him! *I know it was him done in Mort*. As white a gent as ever crossed leather—an’ by a skunk like that!”

He moved away, cold after his flash of heat. Jubal was stricken dumb by the sudden turn. It was as if Reb had said, “Choose between Jake Slaven and me,” and had then assumed that Jubal would prefer to be loyal to Jake. This was unsupportable. There could be no question which of these two men

Jubal loved. While he stupidly pondered the sudden dilemma, Gatling eagerly took up the idea voiced by Reb and began questioning him about Slaven. As from a remote distance, Jubal heard his partner give the Ranger a description of the Rawhider and relate how Jake had come, an unwelcome guest, to the canyon that spring. After the recital, Gatling said:

“Ah’ll have to ask yo’ to ride back to Bartee’s with me. Nevah mind yo’ guns. One of the boys’ll fetch ’em.”

Silently Reb and Jubal saddled and mounted. The older man rode ahead with Gatling and one of the younger Rangers, while Jubal followed with Lupin and the other member of the squad. It was twenty miles to Bartee’s. About halfway down the canyon, when they came to that spur which in a manner separated the arroyo into two parts, Gatling and Reb veered to one side.

“Heah’s wheah we found the trail from Bartee’s turned off,” explained the Ranger. He pointed to hoof marks which led to a trail hitherto all unknown to Reb and Jubal, but by which riders could reach the top of the canyon wall after a steep and dangerous climb.

“So that’s what he spent his time scoutin’ around the canyon for,” exclaimed Reb savagely. Jubal, too, remembered how often the Rawhider’s hunting expeditions had taken him on protracted absences from the cabin, sometimes for hours at a time.

Gatling led the way back to the main trail and the little clump of horsemen followed. But as Jubal swung his pony around, something caught his eye. Riding a few yards to one side of the track, he dismounted and picked up from the ground a bloody fluff of feathers. It had been a small bird, but its tiny body had been shredded to rags, probably by a heavy bullet. To Jubal’s mind came back the words: *Ah neveh shoots at nothin lessen it’s alive.*

“Reb! Wait a minute!” he called, and, galloping after his friend, thrust the tragic little handful at him.

“You know how Jake was always snap-shootin’ at little critters by the trail,” Jubal said.

The old friendly light came into Reb’s face at the words and gesture, although he received the dab of feathers with only a grunt. Jubal now was as sure in his mind as was Reb that Jake had been in the valley.

The spectacle at Bailee's ranch was even more shocking than Jubal had feared. Inside, the place was bloody as an abattoir. Three blanket-covered figures lay in the shade outside the *ramada*—the dead Englishman and his two Mexican retainers. Two or three Rangers and several cowboys, who had gathered from the ranches up and down the river, were sitting here and there in the building. The interior was as it had been found, save that the bodies had been removed. On the floor of the kitchen spread a dark pool of blood: there Otero had lain. In the main hall, rugs were torn from the walls and benches were overthrown as if a struggle had taken place. Heavy blackish stains in one corner showed where old Pancho had been discovered, his body huddled where it had been thrown, with a bullet hole through its stomach and its head beaten in. Scattered at one end of the table lay a pack of cards, some of them fallen to the earthen floor. Broken and empty bottles littered the place. The beautiful white Navajo floor rug of which Mortimer Bartee once was so proud and which he had feared Reb might stain with tobacco juice, still lay on the floor. It was stained with something darker than tobacco juice.

Worst disorder of all was that in Bartee's sleeping chamber. Bedclothes had been pulled off the bed and thrown on the floor; the mattress was split and ripped. Everywhere, blood was spattered. Its door swung wide, a small iron safe stood with a litter of papers pouring from its open mouth as from some sort of odd cornucopia. One of those papers was smeared with the print of a red palm. Bartee's hand. There the Englishman had been found, shot like Pancho through the body, and also brutally beaten.

One of the Rangers brought in something he had just discovered. It was the heavy iron poker from the fireplace; both blond and grizzled black hairs were matted in blood on its end—Bartee's and Pancho's hair. Jubal, sick at his stomach, heard Gatling's rumble:

“Set down, gentlemen. Please anseh my questions.”

In the midst of that gory ruin, the Ranger captain put Jubal and Reb through a cross-examination such as neither of them had ever before undergone, while one of the younger officers took down every word in shorthand. Into every detail of their lives, Gatling probed. Their former places of residence were inquired into, and it was with a sinking heart that Jubal gave a truthful account of his own wanderings, because he knew that if inquiry concerning him were ever made at Teton, the story of the shooting of Shep Horgan would at once be revealed. But now the dark-faced Lupin entered to report upon his examination of the partners' guns. The rifle and both revolvers were clean, he said. Moreover, the tiny traces of dust and lint

which always gather in gun oil after a few days, proved to his expert analysis that none of the weapons had been fired for more than a week. This information apparently was what Gatling had been awaiting.

“Ah want to thank yo’, gentlemen,” he said in his resounding bass. “Yo’ all understand this heah’s been done in line of duty. Yo’ can return to yo’ ranch whenever yo’ wish.”

On the hillside back of the *ramada*, men were digging three raw parallel holes, each with its stiff heap of yellow dirt beside it.

“Yo’ want to stay for the buryin’?”

“Yes.” Reb’s voice was dry. The way his voice always was when his emotions were stirred. The stiff, awkward shapes in their wrapped blankets were carried to the graves and laid in them. A man stood ready with a shovel to fill in, but Jubal asked for a moment’s delay.

“He was an Englishman. Church of England. Likely he had a prayer book. Fact is, I remember seein’ one. He showed it to me, an’ told me what it was for. There’s a buryin’ service in it. Wait.”

Back to the *ramada* he hurried, and sure enough, there was the little limp-backed volume among the papers which had fallen from the safe.

“Give it heah.” Jubal handed the red leather bound book to Gatling. A fumbling, then the Ranger cleared his throat, and his voice fell to a reverent rumble even lower than its ordinary deep pitch, as every hat came off.

“Man that is bawn of woman, has but a sho’t time to live an is full of mis’ry . . . in the midst of life we are in death . . . unto Almighty God we commend the soul of ouah brotheh depahted . . . certain hope of res’rection unto etehnal life . . . Amen.”

The droning voice ceased and the shovel began its work. In muffled splashes the dirt fell upon the blanketed lumps below.

Like a dream the winter passed. Living their hermit existence, with not even the former contact with Mortimer Bartee to relieve their isolation, news reached the two ranchers of the Arroyo Grande very slowly. Almost wholly now they spent their time in the canyon, riding only occasionally to Caliente for supplies. Reb mourned the Englishman deeply and pathetically. The nearest thing to satisfaction for either of the partners was the watching of the slow increase of their herd.

A lawyer, small, fat and bald, by the name of J. Henry Hardesty, arrived at the lower end of the arroyo in November to make an inventory of Bartee's property. Because he represented their dead friend's family, and in spite of the fact that neither Reb nor Jubal believed that very much of what the lawyer could squeeze out of the ranch would ever find its way across the sea, the partners rode down and helped with the roundup.

It was amazing how little Bartee really possessed. Jubal had considered the Englishman well-to-do, but Hardesty revealed that the few hundred cattle which wore the Bar-T brand were heavily mortgaged to an El Paso bank, and that the dead ranchman owned no title to the land upon which the herds had grazed. It was plain that Bartee had depended chiefly upon his remittances for a livelihood. Reb and Jubal longingly considered the possibility of purchasing part of the cattle, and Reb even suggested borrowing on the small JR herd to do so, but Jubal objected strongly to going into debt. In the end, the ID outfit, a ranching enterprise, the headquarters of which were a few miles down the Rio Grande Valley, and which was spreading out rapidly with the reputed backing of large capital, bought the entire Bartee herd at only a little more than the amount of the encumbrance on the stock. Having thus completed the sale, the lawyer bundled up every bit of personal property which had any value, including the blood-stained rugs, such pottery as was not smashed, and even the little iron safe, and sent them by wagon to El Paso. The *ramada* stood empty at last, abandoned to rot apart. On the hillside above it the three unmarked graves overgrew slowly with weeds.

In early March a rider came up the trail to the cabin of Reb and Jubal. Lean, long-faced, his voice a resonant growl, it was Captain Gatling of the Rangers.

"Thought yo' all might like to know—we've got Jake Slaven," he rumbled.

"Jake? Where did you get him?" asked Jubal in excitement.

"Him an' a partner named Buckshot Rogers stood up a stage near Pecos. They downed the shotgun messengeh, but Lupin—yo' remembeh him—happened to be a passengeh on the stage. Lupin ain't aimin' to be stood up, so he cuts down on this Rogers a whole lot with his Colt, an' drills him. Slaven gets away, but next day we runs him into a canyon in the Barrilla Mountains, an' he quits cold when he sees we has him."

"What's goin' to happen to him?"

“He’ll hang shore. Lupin shoots Buckshot Rogers both low an’ hahd, an’ that miscreant cashes in his chips two days afteh. But befo’ he dies, he confesses that it’s him an’ Slaven which kills Bartee an’ his greasers. We got that confession signed by him.”

“Ye goin’ to try him for the Bartee murder?” inquired Reb.

“Naw. Only direct ev’dence ag’in him fo’ that is Buckshot’s confession. Might be hahd to convict on jes’ that an’ nothin’ mo’. Yo’ know how the co’ts is. But Lupin, the stage driveh an’ a passengeh all saw Slaven at that stage robbery wheah the shotgun messengeh was dropped. Slaven killed the messengeh—Ah’m dead certain of that. But even if he didn’t actually shoot the fatal shot, he’s guilty of robbery undeh arms, an’ that’s hangin’ if he’s convicted, which is dead sure.”

With widely varied feelings the partners heard the news. Jubal felt relief mixed with pity, for he had always maintained a sneaking sort of friendship for the Rawhider, due to their association together with Naoma in the old wagon days. But Reb received the information with fierce joy.

“I want to be at that trial!” he exclaimed. “It’ll be downright pleasure for me to hear a jedge sentence Jake Slaven to a hemp necktie!”

“Co’t session opens at Pecos on May fust,” grinned Gatling over his shoulder as he rode away to Ysleta where he was to make an inspection of a Ranger company stationed there.

18

The courtroom was so silent that, sitting in the rear, Jubal could hear the buzz of flies drowsily mingled with the low voice of the judge. It was a packed courtroom, but the tense drama before the judge’s bench held every spectator breathless.

“Can you give any reason why the court at this time should not pass sentence upon you?” came the magistrate’s dry voice.

Before him the wide-jawed face of Jake Slaven did not alter. “Not as Ah knows of, yo’ honah. Go right ahaid.”

Never once in the days of the trial had the man’s nerve failed him. Jubal, sitting by Reb in the rear of the courtroom, day after day, had watched the Rawhider as witnesses testified against him, as counsel argued back and forth, as the jury, out for hours, pondered his fate. The cold expression of his face did not change. Now, with his sentence about to be pronounced, he was the coolest man in the courtroom.

“Jake Slaven,” sternly said the judge, “you have been convicted of murder in the first degree by a jury of your peers. It is the judgment of this court that you be taken to the county jail of Reeves County and there confined until . . . shall be hanged by the neck until dead, and may God have mercy on your soul.”

Manacled to a deputy sheriff, and followed by two armed officers, the prisoner was led away. Before the door which would take him to his last earthly dwelling place, he paused for a moment and cast a glance over the courtroom. His eyes fell upon Jubal’s face and the glint of recognition came to them as it had come several other times when Jake had seen Jubal in the audience. Then the condemned man walked with his slow slouch through the door.

Even Reb was silent as he and Jubal left the building. The sight of the condemnation to cold-blooded death of a man you have known is sobering.

“I couldn’t stand a hull lot of that,” the cowman remarked in a subdued voice.

“Me neither,” agreed Jubal.

A tall man standing beside the door from which they made their exit, spoke to them.

“Is either of you gentlemen Jubal Troop?” he inquired.

“You’re lookin’ at him,” answered the cowboy.

“I’m Jim Waters, dep’ty in the sheriffs office. Jake Slaven asked me to inqiah if you’d come to see him in jail.”

Jubal hesitated.

“He says,” added the deputy, “fo’ me to say jus’ one word to you: *Naomy*.” Without another glance at Jubal’s startled face, he turned and walked away.

The partners stared into each other’s eyes for minutes. Finally, Reb asked queerly: “What ye goin’ to do?”

“I—well, I don’t know.” Jubal studied the ground. “Reb, I know you don’t like Jake, but—I feel like I ought to go,” he ended.

“Funny how some things kin git hold on a strong man,” Reb generalized to the empty sky above. But he made no objection to his friend’s plan, and returned to their rooming house alone while Jubal made his way to the jail.

To see a man in prison, caged like some wild beast, was a new and shocking experience. When Jubal was led into the cell block, Jake came to the bars and peered through with his yellowed grin.

“How yawl?” he asked as if they were meeting in perfectly normal surroundings. “What did yo’ think of that jedge?”

“Looks like you’re up against it, this time, Jake.”

“Ah reckon,” agreed the Rawhider, becoming somber. “They say Ah stood up a stage an’ kilt a man doin’ it. Ah’m to hang fo’ it. Wall, Ah guess a man gits his bad breaks along with the good.”

He fixed his small, lashless eyes upon Jubal. “Ah could have got off with a prison sence,” he snarled, “if Ah’d tell ’em who else besides that yellor-bellied Buckshot Rogers was with me. As if Ah would! Ah jest laughed at ’em. Nobody’ll eveh say that Jake Slaven spilled the beans on a friend. Even if some othehs . . .” he once more regarded Jubal closely. “. . . even if some othehs does.”

Jubal was startled and showed it. “Yo’ don’t need to worry, Jube.” Jake laughed without mirth. “It ain’t yo’ Ah’m talkin’ about. It’s that long, lean bastard of a partneh yo’ got. Ah like yo’ all right, but Ah cain’t stand the comp’ny yo’ keeps. Oh, Ah was tole all about it. How Reb Haizlipp said to the Rangehs it was me hashed up Mort Bartee an’ them Mexicans. But yo’ didn’t, Jube, an’ a man that’s got mighty few friends in the world wants to be grateful fo’ them he has. Ah heahed how yo’ stood up fo’ me, an’ said, ‘Jake, he nevah done that.’ ”

Evidently one of the Rangers had related to Slaven the conversation between Gatling and the partners on the day when Bartee’s dead body was found. Jubal began guiltily to wonder if the Rawhider had also heard about his own discovery of the dead bird and his conclusions concerning it as voiced afterward. But it seemed Jake had not.

“It’s becuz of that one word from yawl that Ah sent fo’ yo’,” the prisoner went on. “That, togetheh with a thing yo’ said when we was in the wagon train togetheh. Yawl tole me that yo’ was a woods colt, too, jes’ like me, an’ my heart warmed to yo’. Theah’s one mo’ thing to settle. As between friends.” Again that jackdaw grin. “Yo’ come to lissen about Naomi. Ah wa’n’t aimin’ to tell yo’, but things has changed a little. Ah ain’t goin’ to live only a few days longer, the way it looks . . . so Ah’m tole, anyway. Ah know yo’ was crazy fo’ Naomi Hocktor.”

Jake watched the effect of this and smiled vulpinely at Jubal's face. "Yawl couldn't fool nobuddy. Yo' was like a love-sick calf, a-moonin' around. Everybuddy in the train knowed about it. If yo' want to know the facts, that was why old Brotheh Bain 'ranged to fix up Sollerman's wagon fo' him—he could see yo' was gone on the gal, an' he was afeard the gal might take a shine to yo', too. So they fixed up fo' the marryin', quick like."

For the first time Jake looked pensive, and sighed wearily. "Wall, everybuddy an' his dawg knowed *yo'* was in love with Naomi, but did yo' know *Ah* loved her too?"

"You kind of indicated it to me that night the Bains and the Hocktors come to agreement on the wedding," Jubal reminded him.

"Yes, Ah remembek now. But yawl is the *onliest* one who knowed. Nobuddy else . . . not even *her*. But jes' the same Ah did love her. Jube, it's in me to hate powahful hahd, an' Ah hate that pahdner of yourn jes' that way. If Ah eveh had the chance to git even with him fo' what he's done to me . . . but let that pass, now. Ah hates hahd, an' Ah kin love hahd, too. An' that's the way Ah loved Naomi. Jube, Ah wanted that gal to be happy. That's the reason Ah sent fo' yo'."

"But what can I do for her, Jake? Naomi's married now."

For a moment the man within the bars seemed to change into something not human. His face grew cruelly cold, his eyes remote and glittering. So instinct with menace was he that Jubal stepped back from the bars. Then Jake expelled his breath with a slow hissing sound.

"Yo' didn't know . . . she ain't married . . . no mo'?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Jubal, jes' this. Naomi's not married. She's a widdy. Her husband's daid."

"When did he die?" demanded Jubal, a sudden tremendous excitement growing upon him.

"He died the night he was married, on his way to his fust bed with his new wife."

"How?" The cry was one of horror.

"Nobuddy knows. He was shot by somebuddy, layin' in the dahk. *Ah* left the wagon train right afteh, an' Ah don't know whether they eveh found out

or not. Seems to me Ah heahed some mention of *yo* ' name. That was when Ah went to wuhk fo' the Mescalero agency."

Jubal fairly shook with the news. The fact of the death of Solomon Bain, and the unavoidable conclusions he drew from Jake's story, were buried beneath the tumultuous thought that Naoma was free . . . free, that is, unless she had been forced into marriage again.

And she had been free for two years, while he lived like a blind hermit within the walls of his canyon. Perhaps she had tried to learn where he was. He must find her.

With some kind of an incoherent cry of thanks thrown over his shoulder, Jubal rushed from Jake's prison, and hurried to find Reb.

BOOK 5

The Prospector

1

An immense hope and exultation uplifted Jubal. Love is, perhaps, an affair of bodily chemicals, the sublimation of the driving instinct of the race to procreate, the insistent demand of the unborn to be born. It is possible that there is no foundation for the beautiful old belief that two persons may be formed by nature for each other alone—and that instead young men and women fall in love only because of propinquity at a time when physical and psychic conditions are propitious. But Jubal believed that his love was something far beyond body or mind, and as for propinquity, he had never heard of it. He knew only that since his talk with Jake Slaven he felt an imperative yearning to see one wistful face with long-lashed violet eyes and a soft mass of blond curls to frame it. And he conceived suddenly that it was his appointed task in life to find the owner of that face.

Within a breath, almost, Jubal's outlook had changed. The years in the Arroyo Grande were like a dream to him. Some current had pulled him sluggishly along and he had followed, usually without comment, certainly without disagreement, wherever Reb Haizlipp led. He worked mechanically. In a sort of thoughtless state, he rode, slept, ate, like a mindless animal, caring nothing for the future, content to allow the long days to drift aimlessly by with no meaning in their slow passage.

Now, suddenly, there was in him a surging excitement and a keen eagerness to be started upon his search for Naoma. This affected his entire viewpoint. To him the leaves of grass were greener, the sky's blue more sweet. Sharply alive were his senses, and nostril, eye and ear recorded impressions which they had utterly disregarded before.

To Jubal's breathless story Reb listened with resignation.

"I guessed somethin' like that," he said after his partner's plans were outlined. "You're as loco as a pet coon. Whar ye goin' to look for her?"

"I'm startin' where I left her an' following the trail of the Rawhiders."

"Ain't even goin' to wait an' see Jake hung?"

"Good God, no!"

“Supposin’,” Reb asked, “the Rawhider train has busted up, as it prob’ly did when it hit the minin’ country?”

“Then I’ll look until I find a lead of some kind.”

“An’ when ye find her, if ye ever do, what’ll ye do if she has a husband an’ a couple of kids?”

Jubal’s grin was rueful. “When she tells me herself that she won’t have me, I’ll quit. But not till then, Reb.”

The older man tried another line of argument. “What about the ranch? We got the outfit whar it ought to begin payin’ us for keepin’ it. I was countin’ a couple weeks back. Thar’s anyway two hundred head down the arroyo that belongs to us now. We’re jest startin’ to git big. Ye leave now, an’ we might jest as well quit.”

“I can’t help it, I’ve got to settle my mind about this thing.”

“What about *me*?” It was Reb’s trump card.

Jubal looked him squarely in the eye. “You’ll think I’m a skunk. But I’ve got to tell you. I’m goin’. There ain’t nothin’ that can stop me. You can have the ranch, the brand, an’ my share of the cows. But I’ve got to leave you an’ that’s the end.”

Reb turned on his heel and walked to his room, whistling. Jubal knew he had wounded his partner. There was resentment in him that Reb should take it like that. He followed slowly. When he entered their room, Reb faced him and spoke again, his voice surprisingly conciliatory.

“Which you’re as headlong as a blind bull on a ice slide,” he said. “I ain’t goin’ to try an’ stop ye, an’ since ye seem plumb locoed on it, I’ll say I hope ye find her. Goin’ to come back to the ranch an’ fit up?”

“No, I can go right up the Pecos Valley from here.”

The older man reached into his pocket. “How much money ye got?” he asked. Jubal brought out his small wad of bills. “Ye cain’t git very far on that,” said Reb. “Why don’t ye come back to the ranch at least long enough to lay by some cash?”

But the precipitancy of love was driving Jubal. “We ain’t been any too successful in the past putting money by,” he pointed out. “Time means everything to me now—a day’s delay might cause me to lose her. No, I’m goin’ ahead. If I have to, I’ll stop an’ work, but I’m startin’ now.”

Reb sighed. "Have it yore way," he said. "But at least light on the ground long enough to make the most of what ye got to start with. Ye say ye have sixteen dollars. Hyar's nine more—all I got. An' ye better take that sorrel hoss of mine, 'stead of the stoved-up bay ye been ridin'. Well, I hate to ride back all by myself, but ye seem set."

It was a surrender to Jubal's wishes which was typically generous of Reb. In the morning they said farewell as Jubal mounted. The understanding between them was: Jubal's interest in the JR cattle was to be appraised as it now stood; Reb would keep the stock and all the increase; and Jubal should be paid his share of the present worth at some future date when Reb felt justified in making a sale of sufficient magnitude to warrant the payment. No papers were drawn or signed. A nod and a grip were sufficient, for these men were of the old West and still subscribed to its code.

"Be good to yoreself, Jube," was Reb's parting word. "As ornery an' no-good as ye is, it ain't likely anythin' will happen to ye—the devil, that-away, havin' enough trouble as it is, without honin' for any more hell to take care of. But—wear yore gun low, an' don't set with yore back to no doors. An'-an'—be good to yoreself."

The final handshake was strong, but Reb's hand trembled ever so slightly.

2

In Roswell Jubal picked up the trail. This was the first time New Mexico had seen the wild tribe of the Rawhidlers, and the passage of such a tatterdemalion crowd could not fail to create an impression. Within a short time he knew that the wagon train had passed westward toward the Rio Grande Valley.

Late in May he found himself crossing the desert between the San Andreas Mountains and the Rio Grande Canyon—the dread *Jornada del Muerto*. Across this vast, silent ocean of desolation he and his horse crept like torpid insects, stunned by the bombardment of the sun which poured the weight of its rays like molten brass upon them. The flat sand acted as a reflector, hurling back those rays which missed them in the downward passage. Behind, barren mountains sank low in the heat-hazy horizon. A few blistered rock mounds rose here and there, with the looming shadows of still more blasted mountains to the north and west. About man and horse, with malignant persistence, hung a dense cloud of powdery alkali dust, covering both with a thick blanket so that Jubal's face was masked as if by some

curious type of disguise, his mouth a wet spot in the midst of the gray felt covering, his eyes blazing startlingly forth, with tiny runnels of mud downward from the tear ducts. The poor horse wheezed and coughed, but the rider's lips were bleeding from the cruel alkali cracks in them when, at last, the crossing of the *Jornada* was accomplished, and beast and man quenched their thirst in the muddy water at the bottom of the Rio Grande Canyon.

Next day Jubal rode into Hillsboro, at that time the center of mining activity east of the Mimbres Mountains in New Mexico. He indulged in the extravagance of a meal at a "Restauraw," the proprietor of which was plump and greasy, with a red nose and a garrulous tongue.

"Rawhidiers? What do you mean, friend?" asked the "restauraw" man in response to Jubal's question. Further enlightened, he said: "Oh. Where was these Rawhider friends of yourn headed for?"

"They talked some about Silver City."

"Then it's like that they went south by Cook's Peak an' Burr's Pass. This is a little off their trail."

Jubal rode south and at Florida, where the road commenced its climb over Florida Pass, he obtained definite information that the Rawhidiers actually had come that way.

"About two year ago," added an old-timer, who was possessed of a beautiful fluffy beard of snowy white which, however, was marred by a brown stain in its middle from which he spat tobacco juice. Like a dab of manure in a snow-drift, thought Jubal.

"Some of 'em had been sick," continued he of the sullied snow-drift beard. "I unnerstand some of 'em died a-crossin' of the *Jornada*."

"That's plenty easy for me to believe," replied Jubal. Fresh from the *Jornada* himself, and familiar with the improvident habits of the Rawhidiers, he did not doubt that the wagon people had launched into the desert unprepared for, even ignorant of, the brutal ordeal they must face. The wonder was that any of them lived through that dreadful passage. With a catch in his heart he realized that Naoma had been with them. She must have suffered too. . . .

Jubal crossed the pass; after that he skirted the foot of Cook's Range and followed the trail until it reached the Mimbres River, when the cowboy turned west toward the Little Burro Mountains and so at last reached Silver City. In 1888 Silver City was a town of a few frame buildings and many

adobes. Some of the business structures possessed second stories and “porticos”—narrow balconies with flimsy railings supported by rickety posts which frequently broke or rotted through, whereupon the porticos assumed a rakish air of being about to slump into the street. One or two of the saloons were ornate, and although Jubal desired no amusement, he knew where to go for information. Of a bartender he asked his usual question. Yes, was the answer, the Rawhidiers had been there.

“A mangy, spavined outfit they was, too,” added the saloon man, who displayed an enormous belly, a pair of sweeping mustaches, and hair “slicked” down across his forehead in a greasy swirl. “If there was one of ’em which didn’t look mean as a sheep-killin’ dawg, I never happened to see him.” But there the information ended. Had Jubal inquired at Minersville? Some new development up that way, the bartender had heard.

Jubal resolved to investigate that remote mining hamlet, perched high on the side of the range. Minersville was picturesque. Its street was the floor of a ravine and the pine-clad heights rose straight from above its untidy log shacks. In the town’s sole thoroughfare a jumble of wagons and mule *carretas* created an endless traffic tangle, while men on horseback constantly came and went, and bearded prospectors led heavily laden burros with the everlasting pick, shovel, and pan strapped on top of the load. But in Minersville the Rawhidiers’ trail disappeared altogether.

3

The first flush of the mining boom had passed in the Mimbres Mountains, but there was still much activity going on. The Mimbres Range, with the Black Range as an extension, stretched a gaunt backbone almost due north and south across New Mexico, and its rocks were rich with metal. Famous mines still roared at full capacity in the district—true “workings” like the Superior, the Virginia, the Bullion, and the Lady Franklin—where men hacked and blasted their way down great shafts into the heart of the mountains to bring out the quartz with the dull gleaming veins of gold. In addition to these great workings, there were hundreds of smaller ones, and then there were other hundreds of “diggings” or placers—bars of sand and gravel which, when screened, sluiced and washed, produced “free” gold. New placers were being discovered rarely these days, since the earlier rush of prospectors had taken up practically all the gold-producing bars, but what with the placers being actively worked and the hard-rock mines in operation, the creeks and streams in all the canyons were a sickly, soapy yellow instead of the usual sparkling crystal of their natural state.

To Jubal the mining town was amazing. He had seen St. Louis and Memphis with their crowded streets, and he had visited sleepy little river villages and squalid Western cow towns. But a miner's headquarters like this was so different from all those others that he wandered about almost dazed.

Minersville's main street was lit almost as brightly at midnight as at midday, or so it seemed to Jubal. Crowds walked about, the saloons blazed with lights, dance halls gave out the hysterical sounds of laughter, or music and carousing. As he passed one place, the cowboy heard the click of billiard balls; at another the voices of the gamblers calling off their cards at monte, poker, faro or keno; farther down the street, after nightfall, feminine figures in gaudy wrappers lurked before a row of small cabins, whistling sibilantly or calling the age-old "Here, honey," at the passerby. Minersville seemed almost exclusively male in the daytime, but at night there seemed to be women everywhere. Where they all came from Jubal could not decide. Not only down in the "red light" section were they, but in the saloons and dance halls, wearing their tinselly costumes, shrill-voiced and painted, bold and hard; yet ready at any given moment to soften into a ghastly travesty of woman's rich surrender if there was a prospect of obtaining a little of the yellow dust which men brought down from the hills. "Gold diggers" they were in very truth, and it is possible that from the trulls of the mining camps came the expression in modern use.

As for the men, they were as diverse as the far corners of the world from which they seemed to have come. Californians, Texans, Yankees, Michiganders, Tennesseans—from every section of the United States they had gathered. Some of them were old mountaineers with high boots, and long beards covering their dour faces. Others were fresh-faced youths from the "states." Many, Jubal learned, were former railroad construction hands. They had driven the transcontinental steel across the plains, across the mountains, across the deserts to the Pacific. When their task was finished and right-of-ways had been dug around the shoulders of mighty peaks; ties laid across endless miles of sagebrush desolation where every drop of water had to be hauled in engine tenders and Indians had to be fought off with one hand, so to speak, while the work was done with the other—when all this was completed, the old railroad workers, Irishmen usually, received their pay envelopes and stayed in the West. Many of them, while they were digging the railroad through the mountains, had found evidence of wealth there. And so the vanguard of veteran prospectors contained always more than its fair proportion of old construction men, hard-bitten as the mountain grizzlies they resembled.

There were many foreigners, also. Englishmen and Welshmen who had exchanged the collieries of their native land for the gold pits; tall, supple Australians who had caught the fever from their own gold fields; Chinamen with wizened, serious faces, who cooked and laundered and did the menial tasks; richly bearded Germans; dark, wiry and voluble Frenchmen—the whole world seemed to have poured its people into this remote district, where they were attracted by the same inescapable lure—gold.

But Jubal had little time to view the town, no matter how deep his interest in it. The last of his little supply of money was gone, and work he must find. Already, in his few weeks in the mountains, Jubal had grown familiar with the sight of sluice boxes on almost every hillside, some of them with their crews of men like ants, scurrying about them. These, he knew, marked active placer diggings. Other sluice boxes, however, stood deserted like gaunt skeletons of enterprises, disappointed and dead. The cowboy mounted his horse and visited several of the active operations, asking for work. He had determined to remain in this section of the mountains until, once more, he picked up the trail of the Rawhider train.

A fat, high-voiced man named Henry Archelaus greeted Jubal at a diggings far up a side canyon, which the cowboy reached the second evening of his search for a job. Archelaus was an untidy person with a greasy face and sagging cheeks, and from the first Jubal disliked him but the fat man seemed pleasant enough as he invited the visitor to “look around.” Though not experienced, Jubal could tell that little, if any, work had been done at this place. The “long tom” and sluice and flume were of new pine timber, brought from the little saw mill which an enterprising Californian had set up in the pine woods on the mountain.

“I’m jest a-gettin’ started here,” explained Archelaus in his unpleasant, high voice. “I’ve panned a little gold, but I’ve only jest got ready to work the claim in business style. I done enough on her already to know that she’s the finest lookin’ piece of placer in the Mimbres Range.”

Jubal’s interest rose. A cowboy almost all his life, he had nevertheless heard many stories of how men went to the earth to dig out great fortunes, sometimes becoming wealthy almost overnight. With edged excitement the fat miner talked, and Jubal caught himself responding. Archelaus explained his method of mining:

“The gravel an’ sand is throwed into the ‘long tom’—that’s the long box here. You see, the only openin’ is this here lower end which runs into the sluice, an’ it’s covered with wire screen to trap the rough gravel an’ rocks.

My flume taps the crick a half mile above this. The water runs into the ‘long tom’ an’ forces the sand through the screen, leavin’ only the coarse stuff behind. The sand is washed down into the sluice. See here? Them cross-pieces in the bottom of the sluice is called riffles. You see I’ve got some of ’em covered with gunny-sackin’. They’re to ketch the gold dust, which is a heap heavier than sand, an’ therefore sinks to the bottom easy an’ is trapped.”

“How often do you take out the gold?” asked Jubal, enthralled.

“Depends on the run. Some robs the sluices every week, but if this diggin’s as rich as I think she is, I’ll have to do it oftener than that.” Archelaus spoke confidentially, as if he were letting Jubal in upon a priceless secret.

“Is it all ready?” Jubal asked, impressed.

“Yep. She’s all ready to go,” gloated the owner. “I’ve to put my first shovel full of gravel in her.”

Then the miner, as if speculating upon whether or not to utter some thought which was in his mind, gave Jubal a long look.

“You got a job now?” he ventured at last.

Jubal shook his head.

“Look here,” said Archelaus, becoming suddenly briskly businesslike. “I like your looks, an’ I need a partner—need someone to handle the mucking. Would you be interested?”

Jubal’s pulses leaped. Here was opportunity. It never occurred to him that anything less than wealth could come from that intriguing arrangement of equipment and that bank of sand and gravel which, he had been told, was a rich placer. His second thought, however, was disheartening. How could he become a partner in an enterprise like this? Less than two dollars were left to him of the money with which he had started from Pecos.

“How much would it cost to buy in?” he asked.

“I’ll sell you a quarter interest for a hundred dollars—you to do the mucking,” replied Archelaus.

“I don’t have that much.”

“How much you got?”

Jubal blushed. “About two dollars,” he said sheepishly.

Archelaus seemed to think deeply for a minute. Then: “I’ll tell you what I’ll do. You give me the two dollars, as an option, an’ go to work. You can pay me the balance out of your share from the diggings.”

Heart thumping, Jubal agreed. It looked like a good proposition to Jubal.

4

Henry Archelaus was probably the laziest man in the mountains. He wanted someone to do his work for him and Jubal soon learned why he had been able to buy an interest in the claim on such extraordinary terms. What the purchase really had obtained for the cowboy was the privilege of breaking his back at toil about as heavy and unpleasant as any with which he had ever come into contact. With a long-handled shovel he threw off the gravel and other debris which lay two or three feet thick over the sand bar. “Mucking” this was called, and in muck Jubal labored. From plying the shovel, an implement to which he was unaccustomed, his back grew weary and his arms ached incessantly. Archelaus continually hovered over him, like a fat, officious hen, afraid he would dig too deeply and throw away some of the precious pay dirt.

“Careful! Careful now!” he reiterated over and over in his maddening, high voice. “Don’t go in there too deep. Do you hear what I say? Watch out—that’s near pay, right now!”

So weary and exasperated grew Jubal at the constant nagging that he would have given up the job a dozen times had not he realized that far from making any money he had as yet not even begun to pay out the fourth share in the partnership allotted to him. An additional burden upon him was the fact that he had been living on food furnished by Archelaus, which was duly charged and must be worked out. So, although he began to feel that he was in some sort of peonage for which he had not bargained, Jubal drove himself to the labor, his feet soaked from morning to night in the oozy mud, his eyes bloodshot from the flinty dust of the overburden of gravel.

Archelaus did not lift a tool while the cowboy was clearing the detritus from above the placer bar. It seemed to Jubal weeks that he sweated in the bottom of the gorge, and his hands first developed intensely painful water blisters, then horny calluses from the shovel handle. But eventually the day came when a space was cleared sufficiently large to permit washing their first shovelfuls.

With something like enthusiasm, Jubal threw sand and gravel, dark with wetness, into the “long tom.” The flume water was turned in, its sucking

swirl carrying the muck down into the sluice. When the washing was completed, Jubal leaned upon his shovel, and watched with eager eyes while the fat man, with hands that trembled, gathered a few little dull grains from the riffles.

It was a sickening disappointment. Not one dollar's worth of gold dust was in the "take," after all the days of sweat and weariness. Moreover, Jubal had expected to see gleaming gold, but he now learned that the metal in its raw state is seldom very bright. Archelaus noticed the thwarted expression on the cowboy's face and began to reassure him. With bustling enthusiasm, the portly miner explained that the results would infallibly be more satisfactory as they "worked into the bar."

"Look at that bar!" he exclaimed with exultation, and struck an attitude, with his fat chest distended and his pudgy finger pointing. "Why, man, before we get through working her, we'll both be rich!"

But as the weeks passed and results showed no appreciable improvement, Archelaus became spiteful, cruel and unreasonable. He seemed driven by an insensate fury—a fury for gold. Having a poor placer, he attempted to make it pay rapidly by driving Jubal. Already the cowboy was doing all the real labor, and to the accompaniment of Archelaus' snarling, complaining, criticizing voice. Yet there was no question now of quitting. Jubal had an investment in the claim—the investment of weeks of excruciating toil. In the quiet of the mountain nights, when the stars seemed close enough to reach with the extended hand, and no sound arose save the whisper of the wind in the pines, or perhaps the snores of Archelaus, Jubal lay tense upon his back and considered his life deeply.

Thus far his days had been without achievement. From one sort of hard living to another he had gone, complaining not at all, nor attempting to probe much into the future. He had met Naoma, when, for a brief day, existence took on its essential meaning, to be made sterile once more by Naoma's marriage. Jubal thought back upon the revelation Jake Slaven had made in the jail and how it had changed utterly the whole outlook upon the world. Now the future contained a goal and a promise. If he failed to wring the money he needed from the placer bar, he must surrender any further hope of finding Naoma. And the need for finding her never departed from his thoughts.

So each morning Jubal set his teeth and worked and worked. He sought as much as possible to ignore Archelaus. That infuriated the fat man until he

champed his jaws with their heavy jowls, and from this circumstance Jubal derived spiteful satisfaction.

By September, however, for all his doggedness, Jubal was discouraged. They had taken out some gold but the placer daily was demonstrating its poverty more clearly. The accounts, of course, were kept by Archelaus, and when he grudgingly admitted, at length, that Jubal's debt for the fourth interest in the claim was cleared, the latter felt sure that the debt had been paid at least twice over. He said nothing, however, and continued to toil in the muck. Rapidly the nights grew frostier. One morning, after tossing through the dark hours in the tent, under blankets too thin, Jubal flung aside his shovel with cold-stiffened hands.

"I want to check up," he told Archelaus.

"What for?"

"I'm quitting you."

Alarm showed in the man's greasy countenance. That confirmed Jubal's belief that, whatever they were to him, the present arrangements for working the placer were very advantageous to his partner.

"You can't quit now, Jube," Archelaus began in a pleading voice. "We're just beginning to get the good pay. My count shows in the last few days—"

"Archelaus, let me tell you something," interrupted Jubal, with intense meaning. "I don't know nothin' about gold. All I know is what I've learned here, an' if doin' all the work can teach me, I've learned plenty. But I've seen you cleaning up those riffles. An' I know I ain't been getting my share. If I have, this placer's not worth two men's time. It might have enough gold in it to pay one man to work it—providin' he's willin' to slave an' sweat an' break his back like I have, with you a-lookin' on—but there ain't enough to split. I want my share of the dust—now."

Jubal was coldly calm, but he could feel a choking anger rise in him as he spoke. It was the first time he had really summarized his grievances. While the other wheedled and argued with him to remain, the cowboy was silent. In the end, Archelaus turned to anger and accusation.

"Is this the kind of a yeller pup you are, Troop?" he snapped. "I picked you up when your bare hind end was stickin' out of your pants an' made you my partner. My *partner*! I fed you, an' split with you—an' now are you goin' to tell me this is the way you show your gratitude?"

“There ain’t nothin’ you can say to change me,” replied Jubal with curious quiet. He wanted only one thing—to leave the hateful company of Henry Archelaus. But a crafty expression came to the miner’s face.

“Leavin’ me like this,” said the fat man with insinuation. “I suppose you understand I ain’t got money enough to buy out your share.”

“Meanin’ what?”

“Meanin’ that if you don’t stay here and work for your own interest, nobody else will.”

For a moment silence—utter, blank silence—settled over the little gorge. Then terror began to show in Archelaus’ countenance. Fascinated, he stared at Jubal’s face in which had come a fearsome look and a strange, white glare of the eyes. The fat man cowered back. Never in all his life had he seen anger like that.

“Don’t—don’t look at me so, Jube,” he began to whine. “Ain’t we always been friends? Old Henry Archelaus always said you were the finest feller in the Silver City country. That’s on the level. Ask anybody. Ask Warrick, the saloon man. Jest the other day I was sayin’—”

He hesitated and retreated another step. “*Don’t* look at me that way, Jube. You look like a killer—yes, a killer! Please! Please, Jube—Oh, Jube—what are you goin’ to do—”

Jubal’s long, steel fingers, tempered by the summer’s work with the shovel and pick, had gripped Archelaus by the front of the coat.

“I want my money.”

Those four words and no more, spoken in a cold, even tone.

But Henry Archelaus was eager to accede now. “Your money—oh, yes. Sure, Jube. Only let me go. I’ll pay it. *Sure* I’ll pay it. I was goin’ to all the time. Jest my little way of jokin’, Jube. You know *me*. I like to have my little fun. Fooled you for a minute, didn’t I? Ha, ha! That’s a good one. Let me loose, Jube, an’ we’ll settle, just as you say!”

Jubal released him with a push which almost sent him to the ground. Hate was in the man’s piggy eyes, but he kept his fawning smile.

“Here ’tis, your share,” he said. “Earned clean—by good, clean, hard work, Jube. Work I bragged about plenty to my friends. Here—”

Incoherent with fear of that baleful white glare, he dumped the little sacks of gold dust into Jubal’s hands. The feeling of the weight of the

treasure recalled the cowboy to himself. Not in his life before had he known such fury as had shaken him. Now that it was subsiding, he felt weak, but he also felt clean within, as if he had been burned out with fire.

As he rode toward Minersville, he even savored over the great, tumultuous experience of his rage. Wrath was good to feel. It was a climactic emotion, like consummation of sex, and fear of death, and the realization of triumph.

5

Weighed at Minersville the dust totaled two hundred and fifty dollars. Not so bad for a summer's work after all. He could begin once more his search for the Rawhidlers—and Naoma. While he pondered this fact with a pleasant sensation of surprise, he noticed that it was beginning to snow. He decided to start for the lower country in the morning. But morning dawned in gloom, with the storm thicker than ever. Before it ceased the roads down the mountains were blocked. Jubal was snowed in at Minersville.

Prices were high in the town. A quarter—"two bits" in the parlance of the section—was the lowest coin used in exchange. For two months Jubal existed like an animal in a cage. To him the life of Minersville was not pleasurable; whiskey tasted sour on his tongue, he was slow at making men friends, and as for the women with whom he came into contact, they sickened him.

In sheer boredom one evening Jubal stepped into a barroom which was also a café. The only vacant chair was at a table which already had one occupant. Jubal seated himself and studied the dirty, ill-printed menu.

"Take the baked beans," said the man opposite.

Jubal glanced up with the half-irritation which comes to one who is addressed, uninvited, by a stranger. The speaker was an old, sunk-cheeked man, with watery eyes and a chewed white mustache.

"Take the baked beans," he repeated. "The menoo talks about ontrays an' pottages, an' so on. But the one thing ye can really depend on in this country is beans. Take beans, an' avoid the can stuff, an' ye'll have a sight fewer bellyaches."

"Thanks," said Jubal. He gave his order to a waiter with a drooping beer-strainer mustache and a ridiculously frivolous apron several times too small for him, evidently made for the daintier figure of some woman.

"You look like a cattleman," Jubal remarked presently.

“Well, that’s nacheral, bein’ as how I been one all my life.”

“You workin’ cattle now?” Jubal hoped for a job.

The old man shook his head. “No cows in these parts now. Everythin’s minin’.”

Jubal found him pleasant. They drank and the boredom of the past months seemed to fade. They exchanged names, and it was disclosed that he of the white mustache was called Anson Phipps and was part owner of a stamp mill down at Kingston. When Jubal told of his placer mining, the other snorted.

“So Hank Archelaus hooked ye on that too, did he? It’s an old trick. Get some greenhorn to do your work for nothing. Only ye weren’t as green as ye looked. Good job ye made him cough up that hundred dollars he charged ye for your share. Usual, he jest bluffs his ‘pardner’ out, an’ gives him little or nothin’.”

In the company of Anson Phipps, Jubal whiled away the rest of the winter. This was unfortunate in one respect. Phipps was a poker player and he persuaded Jubal to take a hand now and then in small games. The cowboy won at first, then began to lose. By spring he had less than four dollars.

6

That was a beautiful spring in the mountains. When the snow melted and the streams roared in spate; when all the little aspens put forth tender buds of softest green and the magpies flicked their black and white in the thickets; when the warm sun brought the grass out on the benches and the soft, cottony clouds floated sleepily about the peaks—when nature was at her loveliest, Jubal’s spirits reached their lowest ebb. He was sick at his own wantonness; thoughts of Naoma obsessed him. To him it seemed that he was tied by invisible steel bonds which kept him ever from reaching her.

But Anson Phipps gave him a letter to Andy Johnson, foreman of the quartz mill of which Phipps was part owner. April found Jubal ready to go to work at the place.

Wages were low in the quartz mill, no skill being required in its operation, save in the case of the foreman who must have a smattering knowledge of the limited chemistry necessary in the final processes of extracting the precious metals from the ore. Forty dollars a month and board was all Jubal would receive.

“You need nothing but a strong back and a weak mind,” grinned Johnson sourly. He was a bushy-browed Missourian, with shoulders like a wall and a blue chin even after a clean shave. Jubal ignored the banality and accepted the shovel which was the sole equipment tendered for the job.

Under the sheet-iron roof of the mill, ten stamps, each weighing six hundred pounds, danced and pounded like massive hoofs in an iron trough. Behind the building stood the engine house, and on either side were heaped the gray and white ore dumps where the mines sent down their product to be milled. Never, it seemed, could Jubal escape the deafening clatter of the crashing stamps, as he worked at breaking up the chunks of quartz with a sledge, or shoveled the particles into the “battery” to be pulverized by the dancing steel giants. Sometimes in the following days he thought he would lose his reason in the infernal, splintering racket.

The process of milling quartz was simple and Jubal soon was familiar with it. Crushed to rock dust, the quartz was washed by a slow stream of water through a screen into the amalgamating pans, where it formed a mush slowly cooking and stirring. This was subjected to the chemical effects of quicksilver to catch the gold and silver, and of sulphate of copper and common salt, to destroy the base metals. A sluice carried away waste water. This sluice had in it riffles similar to those of Henry Archelaus’ sluice, and they had to be cleaned each night. To be sure that the quicksilver in the bottoms of the amalgamating pans was accumulating its proper weight of silver and gold, Johnson constantly was making tests.

Quartz mill work was bestial and unpleasant. Each night Jubal crawled into his bunk with his whole body aching. Not even on Sundays did he have a rest, for that was the day set aside by the slave-driving Johnson for cleaning up the amalgamating pans and refining the quicksilver. Jubal never fully understood these processes, really quite simple, over which Johnson made a great air of mystery. He only knew that he had never hated a job so much in his life.

Not that he shirked his work. From the constant shoveling and sledge wielding, his hands developed great horny places and his arms began to show knotted lumps of muscle which they never had displayed before. Jubal, in fact, was changing all over. Deep and broad had grown his chest. Already he was losing the slimness of youth and giving a hint of a future burly figure. Lines were beginning to settle about his wide, straight mouth.

All day long at the mill, Jubal’s innate doggedness kept him pitting his strength continuously against the heavy labor which confronted him.

Johnson, the foreman, saw the cowboy's broad back heaving with splendid rhythm to each shovel toss; saw the biceps knot under the sweat-dampened sleeves as Jubal swung the sixteen-pound sledge.

"Best man I got on the job," grunted the foreman to himself. Not that any thought entered Johnson's mind that might have led him to consider increasing the wages for his "best man." The Missourian was working the quartz mill on a percentage basis, so he took care never to let Jubal know that it had been noticed how one man did two men's work.

To tell the truth, Jubal himself thought little of it. He worked hard because only by over-exertion could he keep from thinking. From sheer necessity he was here, spending his days in brutal toil, for a pittance. Because he had no money, he was unable to leave. In those days Jubal might have understood the despair of the peon. Not even when he dreamed of the bright head of Naoma was he happy; there was too much pain in his knowledge that for the present there was no way in which he could find her.

Although Jubal still inquired sedulously of every person whom he met, he had practically surrendered hope of learning anything more about the Rawhidiers in western New Mexico. It had been too long since the wagon people were in this area. Quite evidently none of them had gone into the hard-rock work; the labor entailed in it probably failed to appeal to them. But where had the Rawhidiers gone? Jubal could discover not one clue. Very likely they had gathered and quite suddenly disappeared from the country, speaking of their business to no man and naming no destination. They might, Jubal thought, have returned by the road on which they came, to Texas; they might have continued on toward Arizona and California; they might have gone down into Mexico or north into Colorado. If he could have found the barest hint concerning them, he would have dropped his work at the stamp mill and followed them, "panhandling," as the word was for begging, if it became necessary. As it was, he only could bend his back more savagely to the shoveling, and more furiously whirl the ponderous maul over his head, bringing it down upon the shattering rocks with a power which forced out of him a grunt with each mighty blow.

So the summer passed in discontent and dejection. The stamp mill was operated by seasons only, and as fall approached, Johnson made ready to pay off his crew and return east to Joplin, where he had a wife. An uxorious man, he denied himself the gratification of women all the summer, during which he ran the stamp mill to earn sufficient money to keep himself in idleness throughout the winter. The abstinence, however, affected his temper and as the time approached to close the mill he grew more and more

irritable, like a bull elk when the rutting season nears. In October's first days, Johnson abruptly called in and paid his men, made ready the machinery for a winter's disuse, sent the quicksilver and other chemicals to Hillsboro for deposit, shipped off his last bricks of gold and silver, and departed to Joplin and the wife who, it is to be hoped, awaited him with the eagerness which his summer's abnegation deserved.

7

Jubal went with the shipment of quicksilver and chemicals to Hillsboro, and delivered them to Anson Phipps.

"How's yore conduct?" was Anson's greeting. "Say, ye still on the prowl for them Rawhidlers?"

Jubal, who had told the old man of his quest the previous winter, nodded glumly.

"Wall, now, I b'lieve thar's one of 'em up to Kingston," said Anson. "Old feller with whiskers an' a ja'ndiced eye. I seen him up thar this summer. He's workin' in some mine, I heard."

How Jubal's heart leaped at the news. A Rawhider at Kingston? It was only a few miles' ride up into the mountains. Almost exultantly he thanked Anson and hurried to where he had left his horse.

During the journey up to the mining town that Kingston was, Jubal's thoughts for a time were almost gay. He felt certain that he was approaching the end of his long and discouraging quest. Who could the Rawhider be? Perhaps Naoma's father, Uncle Shem! "Old feller with whiskers an' a ja'ndiced eye," Anson Phipps had said. That might be Uncle Shem, although Jubal had never noticed anything very yellow about the old man's eyes. If it were Uncle Shem, Aunt Charity must be near—and Naoma!

He rode into Kingston with his head erect, his changing eyes, just now dark with concentration, searching every face in the crowded street. Not one of the countenances was familiar. Jubal dismounted before a saloon and tied his pony to a hitch rack. Inside he made inquiries but the results were disappointing. Nobody in the saloon had seen such an individual as Jubal described.

"Mebbe some old pocket hunter out from the big hills was what yore friend seen," the bartender suggested. "No—if he seen him this summer it warn't likely. Them fellers use all the good weather. Still it might be. We get lots of prospectors hyar."

Further inquiry was equally fruitless, until Jubal went to the town boarding house for a meal. Kingston once had owned a population of three thousand persons—in '82 when the silver boom was at its height. Most of these had departed and the empty cabins which they once occupied stretched up and down the canyon. The boarding house to which Jubal was referred occupied what once had been a hotel, and its proprietor, Lazy Jack Reed, a portly man with a fancy waistcoat covered with gravy stains, knew most of those who passed through the town.

“Why, yes. Seems like I remember the pahty,” he said. “Come hyar for a week or two, an’ then left. He’s workin’ in some glory hole up above, if I remember right. His name? Seems to me it was Blane or somethin’ like that.”

Blane?—Bain! The man who had been in Kingston must be Brother Bain. Solomon’s father. He would certainly know where the Hocktors were. Jubal spent days inquiring of every man he met concerning the old Rawhider. Usually he received only stares. A few shook their heads. Occasionally one would take the trouble to deny any knowledge of such a person. Clearly Brother Bain—if it was he—had been a transient of the briefest sort of a stay in Kingston. It was too late in the year to pursue the search any farther. Winter was coming down and Jubal counted his pay: Two hundred dollars for five months’ work, less a small sum deducted for clothing, boots and tobacco, and his expenses thus far at Kingston—a net total of one hundred and seventy-nine dollars. The rueful recollection came to him that more than this sum had been required to carry him through the previous winter. There was still the roan pony which Reb Haizlipp had given him, but otherwise he was without property.

Through that winter Jubal lived in Kingston. He was at a loss as to his future plans. Once he decided to go down into the cow country to seek work as a range rider. The thought of another summer spent in the stamp mill was too much to be supported.

In the earliest days of spring the first prospectors, with their carved faces and streaming beards, started out, each with his burro packed high with blankets, food and necessities, as well as with pan, pick and shovel—headed for the high mountains to continue their never-ending search for the will-o’-the-wisp of fortune. Jubal watched them go, and the sight brought him to a sudden, unexpected decision. Up to the present he had refused to sell his horse because of a vague feeling that the animal represented the last means of escape from the mountain country. But armed with his new idea, Jubal began to seek a purchaser for the pony and at last succeeded in disposing of

it for one hundred dollars cash, the saddle thrown in. Being of a mind to make a final gamble of his entire prospects, he acquired with the money a prospector's outfit, twenty dollars of it going for a shaggy, ugly little burro, the hide of which, scarred and scratched, together with one ear which was badly split, bore testimony to the owner's explanation that the animal had been "clawed up" on one occasion by a grizzly. But for all his scars, the burro's trim, small hoofs were in good condition and his eye was bright, so the bargain was closed.

One soft May morning they started up the mountains. Jubal, afoot, led Felix, the burro, whose pack saddle was piled high with all the equipment, save the light geologist's hammer, which the man carried. Felix, Jubal was to learn, was a stubborn, tough little beast, an arrant camp thief with a goat's propensity for eating anything that came his way, including old papers and even shoes. But he was also a stout packer, an infallible trailer, and a willing worker. Before the two parted, Jubal acquired a very real affection for the shaggy little creature.

Two years in the mountains had gained Jubal little money, but had ripened him considerably in wisdom. It was his plan to prospect through the mountains on a double errand. He would seek for gold, but he would also seek for any word of Brother Bain, the Rawhider preacher. Brother Bain was working in some "glory hole"—a mine shaft. Surely Jubal would find that mine in his journeys back and forth through the mountains.

Much of the miner's lore was now Jubal's. In the cold winter days at Kingston he had conversed lengthily with old-timers, and in early spring he practiced assiduously to develop the peculiar, specialized skill necessary to be a prospector. Panning gold is by no means as simple as it sounds. Except in new country where exceptionally rich placers are to be found, the pan and horn are used more as tests for bars, to learn whether they will warrant working with flume and sluice, than in actually securing the gold. The miner's horn, a spoon made of thinly shaved cow's horn, is generally employed for the first test, because it is light and small enough to be carried in the hand or pocket, whereas the big, black pan is part of the pack load. With the horn the prospector takes a sample of the sand to be examined, and blowing on it, and brushing it with his finger, gradually eliminates the lighter particles, leaving in the bottom of the small utensil any grains of gold present. The pan is a large, heavy, black japanned implement, in which more exhaustive tests may be made because a larger body of sand can be taken up and washed carefully by sluicing it around, permitting the coarser and lighter bodies to slop over the brim. Through the shaking, the heavier

contents sink to the bottom and are held there so that eventually, when all the soil and sand are eliminated, the “colors”—minute grains of gold—if there be any, are seen dully gleaming in the bottom. In emergencies, or where the sand bar is too small to warrant construction of more elaborate equipment, the pan is also used for actually working a placer.

By the spring of 1890, when Jubal started with Felix into the mountains, practically every mining location in the lower reaches of the ranges of New Mexico had been staked out. But Jubal knew a possibility still existed of finding some gold in the upper and wilder regions, so thither he and Felix turned their steps, stopping as they climbed to inquire at every tunnel mouth they saw concerning Brother Bain, and not neglecting to rake every little stretch of gravel, to test it in horn or pan, looking eagerly for the precious colors. Nowhere did they find any news of Brother Bain. So, driving Felix before him, Jubal wandered higher and higher among the upper canyons, muddying the little streams, scratching every bar and shallow, hoping forever for the magic gleam of gold, until he had dipped his pan into nearly every creek bed in that portion of the mountains. Once or twice he found small chunks of “float”—pieces of ore-bearing rock, broken off from a ledge somewhere upstream and washed down the canyon by a freshet, or carried by an avalanche. But although each of these discoveries stimulated in him the brief hope that he might come upon a vein of silver or gold, he was never able to reach the lode which was parent to any of the “floats.”

All that summer Jubal prospected. Bit by bit he worked higher and higher, until he was among the lofty peaks where the world appeared remote in the vastness, and the eternal silence brooded supreme, broken only by the whisper of the pines or the occasional, startling cry of some mountain bird. An often disappointed life, his also was a lonely life. Rarely Jubal met other prospectors, but in that country no man knew whom he could trust. Each rock-scratching wanderer guarded his own little sack of gold dust. No telling what might happen if he met and associated with a stranger. Many a prospector had been left kicking up in those hills for his poke. So when the mountain wanderers viewed each other, they passed afar, like stranger ships at sea, gazing askance over their shoulders until a safe distance separated them, when they hurried on, prodding their burros to speed and seeking to place between themselves and the potential danger as much ground as possible.

Except for these chance and undesired meetings, Jubal was alone utterly. In a manner he grew to like the life. The towering immensity of the mountains was fascinating. Pine and aspen climbed their sides and Jubal

lived in the sweet aroma of these trees; the purr of the pines in the breeze could scarcely be distinguished from the soothing rush of water. Deer he often saw, and wild turkey. Several times he observed bears digging on the hillsides, and occasionally bands of stark mountain sheep crossed single file high above him on a ledge where they looked like tiny moving beads on a string. To Jubal began to come the understanding why some men grow old in this existence, starting off year after year in the illusory hope of making a “strike,” and drawn at last not by the lure of the gold alone, but by the charm of the life itself as much as anything.

Such contentment, however, remained impossible for Jubal. He wanted gold for a purpose, and he sought a man who could give him certain information which he needed vitally to know. With savage persistence he hunted, working every hour of daylight, and, hunched under his blanket at night after a hurried meal, seeking a few hours of sleep so that he could make the most of the succeeding day.

Frost forced him to seek the lowlands again and he came down, this time at Santa Rita, on the other side of the mountains from Kingston, where the ancient copper workings were. There he wintered in discouragement, sick with failure, and with not more than a few ounces of gold dust in his pouch.

8

It was the summer of 1892. Four years had passed since Jubal came to the mountains and he was in his third season as a prospector. He had never found Brother Bain. Once or twice he had come upon a vague word concerning the Rawhider, but no definite information—chiefly, Jubal supposed, because the old man was so uncommunicative that he told nobody much about himself. Jubal had about surrendered any hope of succeeding in his long search for the wagon preacher. The former cowboy had grown into the mood of his new calling as a prospector, and when there were other persons about him he was as silent as one of the boulders on the mountain side. Like most prospectors, Jubal had permitted his beard to grow and its rippling brown mass filled out the lower part of his face, giving his head an added impression of size.

In the long weeks he spent by himself in the mountains, Jubal often thought about the persons with whom his life had been thrown. There was one recollection which came to him with a feeling of sick sorrow. Shep Horgan's death. Shep had not deserved to die, and Jubal could not escape the overwhelming sense of his own guilt when he thought of that shot from the corner of the dance hall, and the figure of the man who had befriended him

sprawled in the dust. Mae Horgan, the faithless, who had betrayed her husband, and then Jubal—he still burned with anger whenever he remembered her.

Often, too, Jubal's conscience assailed him at the thought of old Reb Haizlipp. How was that good and true friend prospering? Jubal's heart was bitter with self-recrimination at times because of the manner of his leaving the Arroyo Grande, yet he knew there was nothing else he could have done.

Most often of all, however, the vision of Naoma came to him. Her face was a steady picture before his eyes; he saw her in still pools, against the blue sky, on the smooth sides of rocks. Because he could not speak to any living person about her, he found himself talking to Felix, the burro, or even discoursing aloud to himself.

This was a dangerous symptom. Jubal knew of prospectors who went "mountain crazy," so that they imagined they were with some companion and babbled incoherencies, their minds twisted by too much loneliness. He must fight against this. There could be, it was certain, no indefinite period of living by himself in the mountains. He must make his strike quickly, or else cease the quest.

Driving Felix ahead of him, Jubal climbed higher and ever higher, until they reached a level above any that they had worked in before. A lofty peak reared its vast bald head just above him and he followed a deep, twisting gorge up its side. Down the bottom of this gorge brawled a small mountain stream, which ran toward the west and eventually found its way into the Gila River and thence into the Gulf of California. Near the head of the little creek there had been, remote decades before, a forest fire, and the mountain side was blasted and bare for miles, except for the berry bushes which grew occasionally and the dead black stumps of charred pines. It was unpromising prospector's country; already Jubal was so near the top of the peak that the stream was a mere trickle.

Jubal paused to consider his next course of action, when of a sudden, his eyes fell upon a piece of quartz which lay in the sand at the bottom of the runnel. Instantly he was alert. A piece of float . . . indubitably. There were flecks of metal in the rock, and one of the flecks, pried out and pressed under the blade of Jubal's knife, proved malleable, while none of the telltale rusty stains of sulphide of copper remained either on the steel or on the white quartz.

The prospector looked up the stream. So narrow at this place was the little gorge that it seemed no freshet of sufficient size to carry the piece of

ore for any distance could have arisen. The parent ledge from which the float had broken must be near at hand. Jubal relieved the burro of the packs and turned him loose to graze. Then he began a very careful search of the small valley. Over every outcropping, every broken shelf, he went carefully. Dusk was settling when he returned to camp, determined to try again in the morning.

That night as Jubal lay beside the fire, his mind for the first time in months was uplifted. It seemed to him certain that he was on the verge of a discovery. That ledge simply could not be far away, and he made up his mind to camp right at the present spot and go over every inch of the ground which might possibly contain the outcropping, until he traced it down.

“We’re going to hit it yet, Felix, old jackass,” he said aloud, and Felix, who loved company and often came close by the fire to stand above his master, pricked up his split ear and seemed to nod assent. But in his heart, the man formed a single word as he closed his eyes to sleep, and that word was *Naoma*.

Jubal was out of his blankets with the first streak of the next morning’s dawn. Far up the mountain side he scrambled, that day, clawing with his pick, examining closely every little rock slide, but finding nothing. Then he climbed out of the small canyon and spent days ranging the upper country, scaling cliff faces in every direction where there was any possibility that the piece of float might have been borne down the creek. Still he had no success. As time lengthened into a week, then ten days, Jubal’s spirits, which had been so buoyant, began to droop. And at last, weary, his clothes torn, and his body and mind both exhausted, he was forced to admit to himself that there was no possibility of finding the ledge he sought.

“It’s just some more of our luck, Felix,” he told the burro at camp that night. “Our outcropping’s been covered over, or somebody carried this piece of float from somewhere else and dropped it into that little creek right here at my feet—”

He ceased speaking and bent suddenly, staring into the water. Felix, at his master’s strange action, cocked both ears that way in astonishment. In Jubal’s face there was a look indescribably intent. Crystal clear and smooth, the little brook flowed over a level stretch of gravelly sand, and at the bottom of it the small stones were as sharply clear to the sight as if they had been above the surface of the water instead of inches below it.

Jubal stretched forth a hand and the fingers seemed to tremble as he thrust them into the water. A queer, dull pebble down there. He groped for it,

stirred a little cloudy swirl, lost it. Waiting until the water cleared he looked again. It was gone . . . no, there it was, buried a little deeper in the sand. This time Jubal was very careful and brought the pebble up between his fingers. For a moment he examined it, tested it, weighed it on his palm. Then his eyes grew black with excitement. It was a big gold nugget, not less than an ounce in weight. There might be more. . . .

The sand bar was covered with water and the use of the horn was impracticable. Jubal stepped to his camp dunnage only a few paces away and took up the pan. With the deepest care he dipped up a load of the sand and gravel. Pouring out the excess water, he shook the utensil gingerly, permitting the residue to spill over the edge, picking out the coarser stones with his fingers, sifting, stirring, washing, gradually eliminating, until only a small deposit lay in the bottom. With a careful forefinger he pushed out the last few pieces of gravel. Then he startled Felix by flinging his hat into the air.

“We’ve struck it, boy!” he yelled. “A placer—a regular sockdolager of a free placer, Felix! What do you think of that, old jackass? It’s been here right under our eyes for days—I’ve been dipping my coffee water right over it. And there it is—enough to make us rich! *Yow-eee!*”

Feverishly the prospector began to use the pan. In the first few hours he netted not less than a hundred dollars’ worth of gold, some of the small nuggets being as large as match heads, although that huge discovery nugget was the only one of its size and quality found. When evening fell, he was almost delirious with happiness. All at once, it seemed, the whole weight of his existence had been lifted. That night his dreams were so roseate that he hardly slept at all, but the morning brought more practical thoughts and the realization that plans must be made.

“It’s getting mighty late in the year,” Jubal said aloud, half to himself, half to Felix. “But that bar, while it’s rich, is small. If I get at it right away, I believe I can pan it out before the weather changes. Let’s see—”

The water of the little creek, running over the sand bar, had been its protection from previous prospectors. It now constituted the worst obstacle toward working the placer.

“It’ll take considerable shovel work to divert the water around one side so that the sand can be reached handy,” Jubal mused. “H’mmm. But it’ll pay for itself in time saved.”

He stood above his discovery and debated the idea of building a small “long tom” and sluice, but since this was the center of the burnt-over area, it was miles to timber, and with only his camp ax to work with—he knew himself to be an inferior axman—it was doubtful if he would gain enough to make the labor, and consequent delay, worth while.

“Guess I’ll stick to the pan,” was the final decision. “I’ll go as far as to do that little job of engineering, but I’ll pan this bar.”

At once Jubal set to. With the shovel he dug a side channel and then made a dam out of stones, sticks, mud, and such sacking and other fabrics as he could spare from his dunnage to break the force of the water and prevent the melting away of the frail barrier.

9

Never in all his life had Jubal worked with such all-consuming energy. Resolutely resisting the temptation immediately to pan out some more gold, he labored long hours to divert the stream. It required days of the hardest kind of ditching, and at the end all but one of the sleeping blankets had to be sacrificed to the dam. That, the prospector did not mind, however. As he huddled close to the fire at night, he could warm himself with the dream of his wealth to be.

Then came days of even more furious labor. Jubal was working against time—already the first frosts had changed the aspen leaves into a glory of gold, while the scrub oaks burned dully red like the fading heat of a cooling blast furnace. Starting at the lower end of the bar and working up, Jubal spent every daylight hour at his panning. Before the sky grayed in the east, his meager breakfast was eaten. His supper was long after twilight had faded. Between breakfast and supper he ate not, nor did he for one instant cease from his dipping, shaking, stirring, testing, washing and final collecting of the gold dust.

Day by day the poke grew heavier. Eventually the leather receptacle was full and Jubal, grudging the time, stopped to make of triple layers of flour sacking and strong needle and thread, a heavy bag to hold the growing hoard. By that time the lower end of the bar was worked out and the prospector was progressing toward the upper end. The gold deposit grew thinner but it was still rich enough to pay the working of it. And Jubal panned and panned. The flour-sack bag held pounds of the precious metal now. Exultantly guessing at its weight, Jubal estimated there must be three thousand dollars or more in it.

Colder and colder grew the nights. Chilling rains came and Jubal squatted by his mud-bank, wet to the skin, his soaked shirt giving him no comfort, shaking the heavy pan, while as the rainstorms shifted back and forth, the squalls hid or revealed the mighty peak above and the great range stretched below. Sometimes after huddling in the one damp blanket at night, blue-lipped from chill, Jubal would bring Felix close to the fire and force him to lie down. Then the man would snuggle close to the beast for the warmth of the latter's ragged hide. In the moist air, the burro seemed to grow in size, his long, coarse body hair fluffing out strangely, each filament with its little bead of water. Whole days passed when it was impossible to build a cooking fire, yet through them all Jubal worked like a fiend at his panning.

Autumn now was far along and Jubal knew it would be necessary very soon to leave these mountain heights. Yet he stayed on for a few days longer. The placer, of the pocket variety, was nearly exhausted and he wanted to finish panning it before leaving. Only about one more day's work remained in it, and that of the leanest part, since he was now averaging less than half an ounce of gold a day, when one morning sinister gray clouds began to pile, one on another, above the peaks and higher mountains. It did not rain but gradually the clouds lowered, while a new sharp edge was felt in the wind shifting around to the north.

Jubal surveyed the signs. A rustling flight of small birds passed close to the mountain side, only a few feet below him, headed in hurried panic for the south. For days flocks of geese and cranes had been passing overhead, and as the moaning of the wind arose to a higher key, the prospector, with sudden decision, began to pack his few camp possessions.

"Time we're heading down, Felix," he announced. The burro seemed fully to realize the danger of remaining any longer in those heights. Stock still he stood and did not even puff out his ribs as was his exasperating custom usually when the pack saddle was cinched on. As soon as Jubal could clean up camp, and after lashing on his own back the heavy, twenty-pound sack of gold, the downward journey commenced.

Jubal hated to lose the rest of the gold which was left in the placer, but it was a comparatively small amount—not enough to return for—and he had on his back between five and six thousand dollars in dust and nuggets. For the first time in days, as he followed Felix down the steep paths, the man was able to think of something beside gold panning. Plans began to float through his head. First of all, Jubal would find Naoma . . . wherever she was, he would search her out. Enough should be left after she was found, to

recompense Reb Haizlipp for his work and worry. Once the girl was discovered, Jubal decided, he would take her to the Arroyo Grande and there make her a home. Not once did it occur to him that there might be a hitch in his plans even if he did find her. Love has a way of making the unreasonable seem certain.

So Jubal traveled, amid his day-dreams, until suddenly he became aware that a drizzle had begun. The clouds hung so low that they seemed almost within reach overhead as he hustled Felix down the narrow trails along the steep side of the range. All that day those clouds brooded above and the light rain continued to fall. That night Jubal camped in a pine thicket and during the dark hours the rain turned to snow. By morning the storm had become a blizzard and it was growing very cold.

10

The pines had protected the man and beast somewhat from the storm, but Jubal knew he could not remain in that place for very long. Felix, however, wanted to stay and the prospector was forced to break a switch and whip the stubborn animal to make him move. Driving the unwilling burro ahead, Jubal continued, as fast as it was safe to do so, the journey down the mountain. More than once the man was glad that Felix was there to pick out the trail, because it was almost impossible to see through the wet, thick flakes which soaked through the clothing to the very skin and piled a sticky whiteness over everything.

Late that evening they stumbled on a ruined prospectors' cabin. A good half of the roof had fallen in, but there still remained some shelter and after an examination and the raking out of a pack rat's nest, Jubal decided that the primitive fireplace in one corner was in working order. Felix was brought into the cabin and unpacked. Jubal chopped a pile of wood from a dead pine log and built a roaring fire. Part of his clothing, in places where it did not have actual contact with the warmth of his body, was frozen stiff, and he spent hours drying out and warming up.

After a time Jubal sallied forth again with his ax and felled a couple of small aspen trees, which he cut into lengths of about four feet, for his burro. Felix was hungry and it was interesting to see how the little beast managed the "long fodder," as aspen chunks of this type were called in the West. Putting one hoof on the stick to hold it down, he would bend his rough, ungainly head and bite and tear at the thick, pulpy bark, sometimes shaking it as a terrier shakes a rat, tearing off the covering in strips, and peeling the stick bare before he finished it and turned to another.

It was a reasonably comfortable night. When morning came, the snow had ceased, temporarily at least, but the mountains were covered a foot deep in dazzling whiteness, and the clouds still lowered. Jubal's food supply was almost exhausted. He could not afford to be snowed in at this place for the winter. Even now the trail might be difficult to break in places where there were drifts and if another snow came on top of the present one, there was no predicting when he would get through. Sometimes, in these mountains, the snows reached a depth of seven feet or more, as he could see by marks on the trees and on the side of the cabin, the roof of which, indeed, had been broken down by the very weight of snow during some previous winter.

Therefore Jubal packed Felix, whose little apples of dung, covering the floor of the open half of the cabin, had mixed with the melted snow into a sloppy, brownish mush, investing the place with a pungent stable odor. On the previous day, the twenty pounds or more of gold had distressed Jubal somewhat, and the idea occurred to him to fasten the heavy sack on top of the burro's pack.

"Felix, you're a whole heap surer-footed than I am," the man told his long-eared friend as the package was made secure in such a position that it would be visible at all times from the rear.

Once again they started down the mountain. Looking back up the steep pine slopes, Jubal, because of the clouds, could see only the base of the peak upon which he had spent those weeks, and which he had left only two days before. He knew that the snow must be piling high there. Not an hour too soon had he departed from it. But there was satisfaction in the knowledge that he had stayed to the last possible minute and squeezed all he could out of his placer bar. Almost Jubal laughed aloud as his eye caressed the fat package on top of Felix's load.

Travel was unpleasant. The snow was melting and had become of a heavy, sticky consistency. Ordinarily sure-footed, the burro became slipshod in his walking, often sliding and almost falling. Jubal stepped up and examined the animal's hoofs. The snow had packed into hard, icy snowballs in the cuppy bottom of each foot, preventing Felix from obtaining a purchase on the ground he trod.

"No wonder you slide around, boy," Jubal comforted the little animal. "I'll fix that for you."

With a sharpened stick the prospector dug out and cleaned all four of Felix's hoofs, but within half an hour after they resumed their journey, the burro was slipping again. It became necessary every mile or so to dig out the

snowballs on the bottoms of the small beast's feet, and after a time Felix would halt of his own accord when the footing became insecure, waiting for Jubal to perform the accustomed service.

The man was amused at first by the burro's actions.

"You needn't stop so often, Felix," he said. "I believe you like having your hoofs worked on."

But Felix halted at ever shorter intervals until he became a nuisance.

"We'll stop that," remarked Jubal. With his knife he cut a stout branch, trimmed off all the twigs, then sharpened the end. Now he had a goad and the first time Felix halted unnecessarily, he was prodded severely. The burro leaped forward in pain and scrambled ahead. Later he stopped again and Jubal prodded him sharply as before. This had a positive effect. From being goaded, Felix grew to fear his master's approach. Every time Jubal drew near, the burro would hurry faster ahead to keep from being prodded. By this time Jubal saw that Felix actually was in need of having his hoofs attended to, but the beast would not permit the man to come up to him. Jubal threw away the stick and began to coax.

Felix hurried obdurately on, his eye cocked back. Presently he came to a narrow place on the trail where it skirted the face of a lofty precipice. A gorge dropped off dizzily below and a steep shoulder stood above. Even in good weather this was a tricky place to traverse and Jubal was more than alarmed, because he knew the burro's footing was dangerous.

"Whoa! Whoa! Felix, you little son-of-a-bitch, whoa!" he called, half angrily, as he hurried forward. He hoped to catch the burro before the most perilous place was reached, but every time the man drew near, the animal hurried the pace, scarcely watching his footing, his split ear cocked and his eye still looking back with apprehension.

Once Felix slipped and Jubal's heart was in his mouth, his eyes fixed with dread upon that bag of his gold bound on top of the load. The beast recovered and stood for a moment, snorting a little.

But Jubal was close behind now, and again the burro hurried on.

Then, suddenly, he was gone.

Jubal could hardly realize it. One moment Felix was on the trail, there, ahead—hunching along crustily under his pack, with the heavy, thick sack of

gold on top of all. The next, the trail was empty and a blur on the smooth edge of the snow at the side showed where the animal had skidded over into the chasm.

Breathlessly Jubal leaned over the edge and saw the burro apparently hanging in midair. So great was the distance that the animal's fall looked leisurely, his four feet with their tiny hoofs clawing absurdly upward, while the topheavy load, which had turned him upside down, acted also as a ballast to hurry the horrific plunge. Two hundred feet down, a jagged crag projected outward from the cliff face. On this poor Felix struck, squarely on top of his load, then seemed to bounce, catapulting in a majestic arch outward and down into the awful chasm.

One thing in that sight held Jubal's eye with sickening fascination. As the burro turned over in midair after bounding from the crag, the bag of gold dust came momentarily into view. It was smashed and split open by the blow; and as the wretched Felix, with an almost human scream, whirled over once more, a glistening shower, like the spittle from a sower's hand, flew far out over the valley. In that moment six thousand dollars' worth of gold, all of Jubal's hoard, was broadcast over whole acres of broken, pine-covered canyon. A little later came the crash, dulled by distance, which told that the burro at last had struck the bottom, a thousand feet below.

For minutes Jubal crouched at the edge of the abyss, craning his neck over the perilous, snow-rounded edge, his eyes trying to reach through the tops of the pines which hid the rough floor of the gorge. During those minutes his mind at first refused to accept the fact which he had witnessed. Catastrophe seemed to have numbed his senses. Over and over the thought persisted that here was no reality but some phantasmagoric nightmare from which he would presently awaken. Yet he found himself shaking all over, partly with cold and partly with the momentarily unrealized horror of the height, for at best he had small head for lofty places and now he was staring down a thousand feet into the abyss, held there by the blunted senses of one part of his mind, while the other part of it shuddered to be back from that edge.

After a time Jubal had the wit to crawl weakly away from the lip of the cliff and gather himself together. By sheer will power he forced his mind to understand and believe.

"I'm wiped out," he heard himself repeating. "Wiped out . . ."

That one fatal instant had ended dreams of ever finding Naoma again. Not even his pick and shovel could be recovered unbroken from such a fall.

Yet a hope persisted. Jubal had seen the jet of his gold dust fly as the centrifugal force of the whirling burro cast it from the bag, but in spite of that he would not admit to complete disaster until with his own eyes he had verified its extent. Perhaps, after all, there was something he might salvage. Once more Jubal forced himself to creep to the brink, to look down into the abyss which seemed more dizzying than before to his now collected senses. He was completely shaken by what had happened to his burro and, had he attempted to resume the path from which Felix had slipped, he too would inevitably have fallen. By retracing his steps for a mile, however, he could see where he might work down to the stream which roared between its snow banks in the bottom of the gorge.

Still with that leaden feeling in him, Jubal began the terrible downward journey. Once he slipped in the snow and barely by catching the trunk of a small pine did he escape pitching lengthwise, feet first, into space. At another place he had to lie on his belly and slide thirty feet in the slush along a sloping ledge barely two feet wide, which gave off to a sheer drop of hundreds of feet at one side. It was night before he finally stood above the pitiful, grizzled carcass of Felix.

Under the huddle of broken bones, blood, rags, and splintered wood, Jubal groped. The gold sack was there . . . empty . . .

One moment. Down in the corner a rough lump. Jubal felt a surge of hope. Clutching the sack, almost crazed, he began slowly to turn it inside out. With care to avoid losing a single precious particle. If this were to be another disappointment, God help him. His fingers touched the coarse lump. That familiar, satisfying, heavy feeling . . . *gold*. Jubal held in his palm a single nugget. The very nugget which first he had found, the one which had called attention to the little placer on the peak and the fortune he had made and lost . . . the ounce nugget, worth not more than thirty dollars, all that was left of his treasure and his hopes.

Most men would have died in those mountains. There was no food, no fire, no shelter. The cold dug into Jubal like a giant chisel and his legs more than once gave way from weariness so desperate that he fell in the snow and lay until the driving lash of will forced him up and on. At last, after eons of time it seemed, he realized dimly that he stood before a log cabin. How he had reached it he could not have told. It was a long, low structure, built at the side of a great snow-covered mound.

“Tailings . . . from a mine,” was his blurred thought. A black hole into the mountain side led unguessed distances down into the earth’s bowels. As he staggered across the clearing and knocked on the door, Jubal realized dimly that his hands and cheeks were frosted and that his face was gaunt like a death’s head. Still in a blur he perceived that the portal was swinging back, while a rush of warmth, the first he had felt in days, touched his features.

“I . . . I . . .” he croaked, nor could his tongue form further words. Deprived of the necessity of constant movement, the lash of his will ceased to drive, and in numb stupor he permitted himself to be led inside; then succumbed to a soft, mindless lassitude as he sank into a bunk.

13

It was days before Jubal was capable of talking. In the comfort of a bed and a fireplace and thick walls to keep out the white cold, he lay contented neither to move nor to think. Food was brought to him and of this he feebly ate. Awkward fingers which were not unkind greased his frostbites. Jubal slept most of the time, day and night. For a while there was a question whether life or death would win the battle over him, but slowly his superb body built back its strength, until one morning for the first time he clearly saw what was about him.

The interior was that of a typical mountain cabin, a single large room with bunks about the walls, a table of rough pine boards, a few stools and benches, and a flat-topped kitchen range which served the double duty of heating and cooking. Here and there on the walls, which were the rough surfaces of pine logs with the plaster chinking showing between, hung askew some wretched chromos.

Only one chair was in the room—an ancient rocker with a high back, of the type formerly in favor with ladies’ sewing circles. Upon one of the high posts of the chair’s back hung a dirty, moth-eaten fur cap which swung in rhythmic motion as the chair rocked back and forth. It was the motion of the cap which first focused Jubal’s wavering attention. The swinging cap called attention to the chair, and that to the occupant who sat, solemnly oscillating. One look at the man and Jubal’s interest was alert. Well did the prospector know that stooped, haggard figure. The goat beard, the narrow eyes, the stiff awkwardness of every attitude and movement could belong to but one person in the world. It was Brother Bain . . . Brother Elam Bain, the Rawhider preacher, father of Solomon Bain who had married Naoma, and, if Jake Slaven’s story was to be trusted, died on their wedding night. Brother Bain—how well Jubal remembered him, his rantings when he preached, and

the way he twirled his thumbs when he prayed. Brother Bain . . . why, this was the man for whom Jubal had been hunting all those weary months . . . Brother Bain had crossed the *Jornada del Muerto* with the Rawhiders . . . he must know where they were . . . where Naoma was . . .

Jubal struggled to speak. Brother Bain sat placidly rocking, his eyes on the single frost-screened window. Partly from his weakness, partly from the tumult of his emotions, Jubal was unable at first to make the words come.

“Oh . . . hah,” he finally croaked.

Slowly Brother Bain swung his head and Jubal could feel the Rawhider’s gaze upon him. A strange, vacant stupid gaze. Jubal was puzzled. Then an explanation came. Jubal thought: He doesn’t know me. I’ve grown this beard since he saw me last.

Jubal summoned a weak smile. “Brother Bain,” he muttered.

“Eh? Whut’s that?” At the sound of his name the gaunt old man levered himself up from the rocking chair, and stood looking about the room with a puzzled, querulous expression, as if he struggled in his mind for concentration.

“Brother Bain,” repeated Jubal huskily, “don’t you know me?”

The old preacher’s eyes swung from the walls to the floor, and at length to Jubal’s bunk, focusing on the foot of the bed and then running up the younger man’s blanketed form until they rested upon his face. Something in that look made Jubal uneasy.

“Heh . . . know yo’? Sho’lly,” said Brother Bain vaguely. “Yawl’s the man whut come down f’um the mountain afteh the big snow.”

“But my name?” insisted the other. “Surely you remember Jubal Troop?”

“Jubal? Jubal Troop?” The Rawhider shook his head. “Name seems mighty familieh, all right. But Ah don’t rec’llect. Whar did Ah make yo’ ’quaintance? Was it in Silveh City, mebbe, or in Kingston?”

“Neither. It was back on the trail when the Rawhider wagons were coming down from Texas.” Jubal felt delicacy about referring to anything which might refresh the old man’s memory concerning events which must be painful, so he did not mention Naoma, much less Solomon Bain. And the Rawhider remained utterly at a loss as to his guest’s identity.

A disquieting conviction presently began to steal over Jubal.

“What are you doing up here?” he asked, changing the subject.

Brother Bain's dull eyes lighted up. "Ah'm winter sup'intendent of the Blue Condor mine," he explained eagerly. "Co'se that don't mean as big as it sounds. Ah guess they give it a big name so whoever has it will be betteh satisfied," he disparaged, but with evident pride in the title. "Ah has to stay heah all winter. This mine shets down afteh snow comes, but somebuddy has to stay fo' feah depredators might git in an' try to wuhk the vein."

Jubal's long failure to find this old man was now explained. In the winters when Jubal had been in the towns, Brother Bain had been high up in the mountains at this inaccessible mine. In the summers when Jubal was prospecting among the peaks, Brother Bain reversed the order and was down in the towns. No wonder the search for him had for so long been unsuccessful.

Again the old man's brow wrinkled and the querulous, puzzled look returned. "Ah'd sh'lly like to place yo'," he said. "Ah neveh fo'get, hahdly, an' yo' face is familieh, some way. Wall, les' let it go fo' a while. Ah'm not as ha'r trigger with my mind as Ah used to be. Oh, nothin' to worry about," he hastened to add. "It's jest that Ah think a leetle sloweh. Ole age, Ah reckon, although Ah ain't so ole—only sixty."

14

The "glory hole" of the Blue Condor was high on a spur of the mountains, so that it looked almost straight down a sheer, swooping wall of granite which was darkly covered with pines. From below the mine was reached by a long and tortuous mountain trail which clung to the face of the immense escarpment like a piece of string plastered against a wall, switching back and forth, coming out now and again on appalling shoulders, and gradually working its way to higher levels until at last it arrived at the shaft. A treacherous, half-built wagon road at best; to travel it in any kind of bad weather was to court death. Snow had followed snow during Jubal's illness and by the time he recovered his strength there was nothing to do but reconcile himself to a routine of winter imprisonment at the Blue Condor mine.

Jubal was eager to learn what Brother Bain knew of Naoma's whereabouts, and more than once he attempted to question the old man. But little satisfaction was he able to obtain. Once or twice at the questioning a momentary gleam of lucidity seemed to come to the gaunt preacher's eyes . . . as if he were on the verge of some queer recollection . . . but it always passed. Jubal did succeed in learning that the Rawhider had worked four winters as caretaker of the Blue Condor shaft. Brother Bain said, dully, that

he did not mind being alone, was used to it now. But he added in afterthought, as if out of consideration for Jubal's feelings:

"Yawl unnerstand, Ah don't object none to *yo* ' comp'ny."

One of the old man's duties was to keep paths open through the drifts to the various company buildings on the tiny foothold before the mouth of the mine shaft. Each time it snowed again, he bent at this task with resignation. His gaunt old back humped, and his poor, scrawny arms struggled with the shovel, until one day Jubal, gaining strength daily, offered to take over the work.

"I'm a sight huskier than you are, Brother Bain," he said kindly. "An' I'm fair crazy for something to do. Let me handle the clearin' of the paths."

"Heh? Yeah, Ah reckon it'd be all right," agreed the Rawhider with his vague look. "Give me mo' time fo' my medditashuns." This last was spoken with a satisfying return of unction as the familiar, mouth-filling phrase came to his tongue.

Thereafter snow-shoveling was Jubal's duty. He went at it with fierce eagerness, as he had gone at smashing rock with a sledge at the stamp mill—because it kept his mind occupied. Sometimes at night when idleness was enforced, he could see in his mind's eye the slow parabola of a burro, falling down a mountain face, and from the pack on the animal's back a glistening shower broadcasting over the entire valley below. . . . It was unhealthy, he knew, to brood over misfortune. Therefore, as long as it was light enough to see he attacked his work with gratitude and vigor.

Behind the cabin stood the wood shack, almost on the trembling brink of the precipice. There, where firewood was housed to keep it dry, Jubal spent hours, chopping and splitting, putting his back into every blow of the ax, so that his muscles ached and he craved sleep at night. After a time the banks of dazzling white rose seven feet high on either side of their runways, because of the frequent snowfalls which he welcomed because of the employment they provided. Occasionally, too, Jubal found it necessary to clamber on top of the various log buildings, to scoop from them the white burden. If it were allowed to accumulate, its weight would, in the end, break down the rafters and cave in the roofs.

With these various tasks, Jubal managed to occupy himself during the days. The nights, however, were a problem. For, after the evening meal was cooked and the dishes washed and put away, Brother Bain, with a mystical look in his eye, would turn solemnly to the prospector and say:

“My brotkeh, shall we have our evenin’ medditashuns?”

Attempts to avoid the ordeal proved useless. A ragged Bible lay always on a shelf above the Rawhider’s bed. This Brother Bain would open and read by the hour, sitting with the book in his lap, a gaunt finger, with its cracked nail, following line by line the print, his lips pursing over the hard words, his high, cracked voice keeping endlessly and monotonously on. At such times Jubal sought to retire within himself in a sort of hypnosis, and so endured silently.

But sometimes the old preacher wished discussion. Then he would sit with his forefinger stabbing at Jubal while he expounded his dogma.

“An’ Ah tell yo’, brotkeh, the world was saved by wateh,” he would intone. “Ol’ Noah, he saved the righteous an’ condemned them that was unholy with wateh. An’ wateh is the savin’ of the righteous an’ the condemnatin’ of them that is unholy right in this heah day of ours.”

At such times Brother Bain often would stand up and speak as if he were delivering a sermon, and the vacant look would leave his narrow eyes, and the loose lines about his mouth would tighten as he pounded on the table and thundered his excoriations of the sinful.

Once and once only, early in the winter, Jubal ventured to ask if the old man played cards. To Brother Bain’s angry snort of dissent, he entered the meek suggestion: “Seven-up’s a mighty fine two-handed game for winter. Mebbe I could teach it to you.”

Then did the Rawhider arise in awful wrath and blast the sin of card playing and gambling, ranting until Jubal gazed at him half awestruck, and saw in him the vision of one of the fanatic prophets of the Old Testament, with beard wagging, bushy eyebrows playing up and down and eyes flickering with the lightnings of righteous indignation. It was such a vivid exhibition of pyrotechnics that Jubal was at first entranced, but by the time the sermon had lasted for two hours, the prospector became excruciatingly bored, and resolved never to mention cards again.

Greatest of all Brother Bain’s delights, however, was prayer. At the slightest excuse he was willing to flop down on his bony knees, his eyes closed, his hands clasped before him. Then as the stream of catch-phrases rolled from his lips, Jubal would watch the old man’s thumbs. The familiar trick was still there. Around each other the thumbs would twirl, first one way, then the other, and finally as the petition came to an end, they would be pressed tightly together. Not until this occurred and the final “Amen” was

uttered sonorously, would Brother Bain open his eyes, and, as he rose and dusted off his knees, gaze about the room as one who would say: "If anyone thinks he can better that effort, let him but try." This was the old Rawhider's chief obsession and his greatest single pride.

So, slowly, the winter passed. Jubal's frostbitten face healed completely. The two men were not uncomfortable, even though their room was both small and ill-ventilated. Not only was the cabin warm, but there was an abundance' of food, including a shelf of canned goods—great luxuries to Jubal, who as a prospector was unused to such delicacies. Only the boredom of seeing nobody but each other from one week's end to the next, offended them.

15

Spring was well advanced and bare patches of ground could be seen on the mountain sides. Rummaging in the store room one morning, Jubal found a razor and a chipped shaving mug with a cracked and wasted sliver of soap at its bottom. Months had passed since he last had shaved his beard and, for lack of anything better to do, he determined to see once more how he looked with a clean chin.

Brother Bain was out inspecting the mine shaft, the yawning tunnel of which led deep into the mountain, with one or two side galleries which had been abandoned because their lower levels were flooded. Sometimes, standing in the mouth of these deserted shafts, Jubal had listened to the distant sucking gurgle of the flood which ran through the darkness far below.

On the cabin stove the teakettle was simmering and with its warm water Jubal worked up a lather in the mug, rubbed it well into his luxuriant brown whiskers, and began to shave. Surprisingly keen was the razor, evidently stropped by its last user before he put it away in a dry place where its shining blade remained fleckless. Even so the removal of Jubal's beard was a tedious task.

The prospector began at each temple and worked downward on first one side, then the other, toward the point of his chin, clearing one foothold, as it were, in the tangled jungle, before he went on to the next, and having frequent recourse to more warm water and lather to soften the stubborn growth. After somewhat more than half an hour he was able to observe his face in the small cracked mirror, his beard a thing of the past.

"Sure makes you feel funny," Jubal grinned self-consciously, gingerly fingering his naked jaw. His face appeared smaller, with the chin shrunken

since its covering was gone. As he peered into the mirror, noticing with surprise how white was the lower portion of his face where it had been protected from sunburn, and feeling one or two tender places where the razor had gone too deep, Brother Bain entered the cabin.

A sharp exclamation brought Jubal around. The old man's eyes were boring into his face like a pair of steel gimlets.

"*Jube Troop!*" he exclaimed.

"Sure," said Jubal. "You remember me at last, do you?"

"Remembh yo'? Yes!" Brother Bain glanced sharply around. In a single moment he had become a different individual. The vacant, foolish look in his eyes had given way to something alert . . . something malignant. On the table lay Jubal's revolver belt; with a movement which was arresting in its swift purpose, the Rawhider leaped to it, threw it, weapon, holster and all, into a corner behind him, then drew his own Colt.

"Brother Bain! What in hell's the matter?" demanded Jubal, his voice expressing his amazement.

"Vengeance is mine, saith the Lawd," quoted the old man. "Ah will repay. The Lawd speaketh the truth. Even to His mountain, to His holy hill has He brought yo', so that He shall be paid, through me, his sehvant, fo' the blood of His innercent lamb!"

The gibberish was incomprehensible to Jubal, but there was no mistaking the look in the Rawhider's slitted eyes. If ever a killer lived, he stood there. Automatically Jubal's hands rose skyward as he looked, stunned, at the black muzzle of the revolver which was swung upon him. For weeks he had known that he was living with a man mentally unbalanced, but the thought of danger never had occurred to him. Brother Bain had seemed so helpless, so gentle. What had happened to change him? In desperation, Jubal strove to reason with the old man.

"Put down that gun, Brother Bain," he said, striving to make his voice authoritative and at the same time persuasive. "You got no call to look at me that way."

"Ah hain't? Wall, Ah reckon Ah has. Yo' is Jube Troop, ain't yo'?"

"That's true enough, but I've been telling you that ever since I came here at the first of the winter."

"Names don't mean nothin' to me, Jube Troop, 'thout faces. Ah thought thar was somethin' familiah about yo'—but it warn't ontill yo' shaved off

them whiskehs that Ah knowed whut it was. Yo' is the man *whut killed my boy Sollerman!*”

In terrible denunciation, his face haggard, the preacher's voice rose in a scream. For the first time the other understood his own fearful predicament. This crazed fanatic believed, for some reason, that it was Jubal who had assassinated Solomon Bain the night the latter married Naoma Hocktor. The mountaineer blood in him demanded blood vengeance and his religious mania supplemented that demand.

A cunning look had come over the Rawhider's face. “Now Ah knows why yawl pestered me all the time about whar-at the Rawhidehs done went.”

Jubal nodded, very seriously. “I've been hunting Naoma for years.” There was no use to beat about the bush. Jubal expected to die within the minute. He uttered the sentence as if it were a credo.

The expression on Brother Bain's face changed to one of speculation.

“Ah cain't kill yo' heah,” he mumbled, as if speaking to himself, “but Ah kin kill yo' somewhar else. An' nobuddy'll eveh know it happened.”

The truth of this was apparent. No one knew Jubal was at the Blue Condor mine. He had wandered into it quite accidentally after the last of the summer crew was gone. If Brother Bain murdered him and dropped his corpse into one of the water-filled side galleries in the Blue Condor's glory hole—with a proper amount of rock ballast to make the body sink—Jubal's disappearance would probably never be discovered. Furiously the prospector's mind raced. A vagrant, casual thought translated itself into words:

“Surely, Brother Bain, you wouldn't kill me without praying for my soul. You wouldn't do that to a nigger about to be hung.”

It struck a responsive chord. Indecision appeared in the preacher's eyes. “No. Thet's so. Ah betteh pray fo' yawl.”

Jubal heard the words with the most profound relief. This old bigot could not forego the temptation to indulge in the luxury of one of his endless prayers, even though he was about to mete out what he believed to be vengeance for the death of his son. It would be a respite at least, and for the first time Jubal was thankful for the old man's long-windedness.

“Yawl kneel down, Jube Troop,” ordered Brother Bain, motioning with the muzzle of the revolver. He set the example. Stillness reigned in the

room, except for the faint rustling of the flames in the kitchen range and the occasional light crackle of burning wood. The preacher began sonorously:

“Oh, Almighty Lawd, this Thy sehvant hath found the pahty which killed Thy otheh sehvant, Sollerman, an’ is about to visit upon him Thy most just wrath. Whehfo’, O Lawd, we asks Thy gracious blessin’ on this heah act, seein’ as how Thou ain’t a-fixin’ to do it Thyself, with the blast of Thy righteous lightnin’ from heaven, but is intrustin’ it to one of Thy humblest people with his six-gun. Now, O Lawd, inasmuch as this heah mis’able skunk which is about to die is a sinful man, a *very* sinful man, O Lawd, an’ in special need of Thy plenteous mercy . . .”

On and on droned the prayer. Brother Bain spoke haltingly at first and appeared ill at ease. Because of the revolver he held, he was unable to fold his hands in the familiar praying pose, and this took away from him some of the satisfaction which he always derived from rolling the well-oiled phrases on his tongue. As the prayer progressed, Jubal, watching with anxious eyes, saw the Rawhider cautiously lay the revolver on the floor, within easy reach, and become more deeply interested in his effort. Now Brother Bain locked his gnarled hands together, the thumbs beginning to revolve. Deeper and deeper grew his fervor, until at last the full fire of his own particular type of virtuosity was upon him. A never-failing elixir it was to Brother Bain to pray, and even though the audience here was about to be immolated on the altar of vengeance, there was a pleasure in having someone to listen to his rhetoric. The old preacher’s voice rose as his fervor increased. Completely forgotten was everything. It was good to be praying for its own sake, and, with eyes tightly closed and thumbs rapidly rotating, the gaunt patriarch continued until the well-known ending, when, with thumbs no longer revolving, but pressed tightly together, he concluded:

“An’ all this we ask in Thy gracious name, Amen.”

Brother Bain opened his eyes to find himself looking into the muzzle of his own revolver. But there was no fear in the Rawhider’s wasted countenance when he slowly came to understand that while he had been lost in prayer this man had obtained possession of the weapon.

“Go ahaid. Shoot me,” he said quietly. “Ain’t nothin’ left fo’ me to live fo’ nohow.”

“I’m not shooting you, Brother Bain, an’ the reason why is that I didn’t kill your son.”

The old man's eyes opened a little wider at that. "Yo' didn't?" he asked childishly. "Then why didn't yo' say so?"

"Because you never gave me a chance. Now I'm going to tell you all I know about how Sollerman was shot."

They made a strange picture as they faced each other there on their knees, the one with a revolver, the other listening, rapt. Jubal recounted his own movements on the day Naoma's husband died, and then told of his conversation with Jake Slaven.

"So you see," he concluded, "I was twenty miles from the wagon train when the shooting happened. An' I can prove that by Reb Haizlipp. An' you can draw your own conclusions about Slaven."

"Whar-at is Jake Slaven?" the Rawhider asked softly.

"Hanged four years ago in Texas. I saw him tried and sentenced."

After a long silence, Brother Bain said: "Yo' know, Ah'm downright glad now Ah didn't kill yo', Jube."

"So am I," nodded Jubal, nervously inclined to laugh. "If you want to help me out, tell me something about what happened to the wagon train."

"Yo' mean the Rawhideh train? It ain't, no mo'. Busted up when it got into the mountains. One or two found a leetle gold. The rest went crazy, a-seekin' afteh mammon. Ole Uncle Shem an' Aunt Char'ty is both daid. Aunt Char'ty, she couldn't stand the heat an' dryness when we crossed that thar Hornady dill Murto. She warn't the only one, neither. Uncle Shem jest seemed to pine, afteh. We berrit him 'bout the time we reached Silver City."

Dispiritedly he shook his head. "But yawl ain't inter'sted in them folks," he added surprisingly. "Yawl wants to know whut happened to Naomy. Ah wouldn't tell yo' this if yo' burnded me with hot irons, only Ah think Ah wronged yo' jest back. . . . Yo' kin put down that gun, Jube . . . but sence things is as they be, an' was, Ah'll tell yo' whut Ah know. Naomy ain't in this kentry at all. She run off from the train at Roswell. Wawl hunted fo' her, two-three days, but she was gone . . . some said she went with some Californy folks back East. Ah thought she'd gone off to yo' some place, an' the fact that yo' asked me about her is one reason why Ah believes yo' didn't have nothin' to do with killin' my boy. But we neveh did find her. Ah think that was one reason fo' Aunt Char'ty failin' so. Uncle Shem, too, fo' that matteh. They sho'llly set a pow'ful sight on that gal chile."

BOOK 6

Poker and the Prodigal

1

If abasement of self be a virtue, then Jubal was a paragon of virtue; but the West did not, nor ever could, regard humility as anything but a confession of weakness. To the forthright masculinity of the cattle country, self-abasement partook of the unprofitable aspects of asceticism, which was held to be the moral refuge of the mediocre. It was looked upon as a part of the routine of living to starve or thirst, or bear cold or heat—not a thing to speak about as being admirable. Your Westerner underwent his privations without even philosophy, for he took them in his stride, so to speak, as a matter of course, when it became necessary. But only when it became necessary. Once the condition which imposed abstinence was removed, the return to the fleshpots was considered not only a matter foreseen, but even to be commended.

For the West considered that no genius is required to deny the bodily cravings; more often the gratifying of them, since it may demand a certain degree of ability, is the real achievement. Asceticism, therefore, was held merely to present an opportunity whereby an inferior person, unable to achieve recognition for accomplishments, may assert a claim to superiority, because he refrains from appeasing the appetites of his body. Wherefore, throughout frontier history, the prejudice against the reformer.

In like manner, it was the unspoken conviction that one was unmanned who humbled himself. The prone position is ever the easiest position, whether it be physical or psychic, and the weakling is the most successful in subservience. Therefore, in eating his pride, Jubal punished himself far more than would a member of some more flaccid type of society.

No essential lack of force brought Jubal to his decision to return to the Arroyo Grande; it was rather because of the very consistency of his will. Bitter cordial as it was, he recognized that his next step must be to return to Reb Haizlipp, confess his failure and his destitution, and ask for the money which was due him as a result of the dissolution of their partnership. Pridelessly, therefore, he “rode the chuck line” southward, which is to say that he cadged meals wherever he could find them, stopping at ranch houses, Mexican adobes, even on one occasion camping in the mesquite with a

sheep herder, pariah of the West, for the comfort of a bellyful of beans. In spite of this he was unable to down the fierce, stiff, quickening of pride when he came to the door of the old cabin by the lip of the Arroyo Grande. He would have swung back even then, but the hoofs of his pony—a spavined brute, whose swollen hock joints confined its pace to an exasperating crawl—had been heard, and from within Reb Haizlipp came lounging to the door.

One flash of amazed recognition came to the cowman's leathery features, then expression vanished as he and Jubal surveyed each other wordlessly. Through the mind of the latter passed a realization of the figure he must present . . . ragged shirt . . . worn overalls still showing stains of rock dust and sweat . . . a broken heel on one warped boot. He was no cowboy. No longer, even, a prospector. His degradation overwhelmed him.

Since his strange conversation with Brother Bain at the Blue Condor mine, no opportunity had come to Jubal for the improvement of his appearance or his condition. The spavined pony represented the last souvenir of his brief gold prosperity—the nugget, salvaged from the ruins which had been his burro and his fortune, and sold to provide him with this sorry mount and a saddle which was both warped and peeled. He had ridden back across the *Jornado del Muerto*, had inquired hopelessly and fruitlessly concerning Naoma at Roswell once more, and so, discouraged and penniless, had begun the long journey south to the Arroyo Grande, driven back to the canyon by instinct . . . the instinct of a dog which returns gropingly to the place in which are the roots of its memories.

In the shimmer of the spring sunshine, Jubal perceived that the old adobe from which Reb had just issued was in disrepair, its walls melted down in places from lack of mud-plastering after heavy rains; its roof inclined to sag. Behind the cabin and nearer to the path which led upward to the spring, was a new structure which Jubal had not before seen.

For the first time Reb opened his mouth: “Wall, if it ain’t Jube.”

“How you, Reb?”

Thus, with elaborate casualness which was a cloak to their feelings, the two friends exchanged greetings. Reb was slightly grayer than when Jubal last had seen him. About his eyes the crow's feet were deeper, but the sickle blades of mustaches, hanging on either side of the wide mouth, were as defiant as ever.

“Ye better 'light,” suggested Reb.

After a momentary hesitation, Jubal dismounted. "Thought I'd stop by an' see if you still had hold of the jerk line," he remarked with forced lightness.

"I'll have Emilio take yore hoss," said Reb. Then he raised his voice: "Emilio! *Emilio!*"

Like a jack-in-the-box a grizzled Mexican appeared from around the corner of the adobe. "Take this hoss down to the c'rall," directed Reb. "*Pronto!*"

The gray cowman conducted Jubal into the shanty, and the newcomer noticed that the interior was much the same as when he had departed four years before. No great signs of prosperity here. As a matter of fact, a general down-at-heels atmosphere was discernible about the whole place.

"How was yore trip?" asked Reb, presently. "I ain't heard from ye since ye lit a shuck that time in Pecos an' high-tailed north like a mule-eared rabbit. Did ye find the gal? But I kin see by yore face ye didn't. What else did ye do?"

The constraint of their meeting was passing and both men began to feel that the danger of some ill-timed display of embarrassing emotion had departed; their tongues were loosened, the words flowed freely, and the old affection began to glow again in each face. In pure happiness, Jubal listened to the garrulity of Reb, smiling at the comical countenance, with its expressive mustaches and its gap-toothed grin, and warming mightily at the nearness of this best of all friends. As for Reb, he seemed to expand as the minutes passed, pressing Jubal joyfully for details of his adventures, so that the wanderer told, as briefly as he could, the full story of his journeys.

"Too bad about losin' that gold," was the older man's comment at the conclusion. "I could tell by yore get-up that ye didn't have no *dinero*. But that ain't nothin'. I'm between a rock an' a hard place myself."

The oblique Western phrase was familiar to Jubal; Reb meant that he, too, was insolvent. Jubal, who had come to the Arroyo Grande to obtain some money, had a presentiment that things were not going aright here.

"Did you ever draw up the account on what was comin' to me when we split up as partners?" he began tentatively.

"Wall—" Reb hesitated. "No, I didn't never do it," he ended lamely.

"What about my—"

“Yore share?” The cowman gazed somberly out of the door of the cabin, across the great abyss of the arroyo, his eyes bleak and his gray mustaches tense with some unguessed emotion. After a time he turned and gazed directly into the other’s eyes. “Jube, I jest cain’t pay you now,” he said simply.

It began to dawn upon Jubal that conditions must be worse with the JR than he had feared. He awaited Reb’s explanation.

“I ain’t never had the herd appraised,” the older man began apologetically. “Figgered at fust ye’d be back in a month or two, an’ didn’t take the trouble—jest my laziness. When ye didn’t come right back, kep’ puttin’ it off. Knew ye’d be along some day, so I jest sat tight an’ kep’ the herd together. Built that doby back thar, an’ hired Emilio as a *vaquero*. He sleeps in the second doby, ’cause I don’t aim to bunk with no greaser. Branded a few calves every year, an’ sold a few steers—enough to keep the ranch—ah—goin’.” He hesitated momentarily for some reason as he made the last statement, then hurried on. “The ranch has growed some, although not as much as ye might think.”

“Where does that leave me, Reb?”

“Jube, it leaves ye still my pardner!”

At the words, Jubal’s heart leaped. To be a partner once more in the Arroyo Grande . . . how he would welcome that. Merely to be within those jagged walls would rest the ache in him, somehow. His mind was half-numbed with failure and he blindly wished to rest it, to let it lie at leisure for a time, untroubled by problems other than the small daily ones which really are no drain upon thought but rather a way of easing thought by means of physical action. His hope had been that Reb might be willing to let him have a little of the money due him, perhaps even a job. But that he would receive a warm welcome he hardly had expected, and he well knew he had no legal claim upon Reb, since there was no written contract to show for the arrangement made four years ago at Pecos. The years in the mountains had destroyed whatever faith in human nature Jubal possessed. This simple, kind man, whose soul possessed no guile, in one act had restored it all.

Jubal gulped out words: “. . . Can’t figure it . . . too square . . . never expected . . . can’t take it from you . . .”

Reb was speaking again: “Don’t think I’m doin’ ye a favor, Jube. I ain’t. Yore broke, but I’m wuss. I owe money—plenty of money. The ranch is loaded down an’ it’ll take both of us to pull it out, feenancial.”

“Let’s hear it.”

Reb, suddenly guilty, looked at the floor, at his gnarled hands, at the table and at the chasm of the arroyo seen through the door—anywhere but into Jubal’s eyes. He tugged at one of his sweeping gray mustaches, stirred uneasily in his chair, rubbing the calf of one bow leg with the toe of the opposite boot, and eventually spoke defiantly:

“I’ve had to borry on the herd.”

Jubal considered this. He had fought to keep the JR cattle free from encumbrance. Reb named the figure—two thousand dollars—and the El Paso bank which held the mortgage. He vouchsafed no explanation. One thing was clear to Jubal, and it restored a portion at least of his self-confidence: Reb needed help and needed it badly. The thought convinced Jubal that he should remain and accept the partnership once more.

2

Gradually Jubal slipped back into the slow routine of the Arroyo Grande. A count of the cattle in the canyon revealed that their numbers were considerably greater than when the partners divided; but that they were fewer than might be supposed. With that guilty sidelong glance, Reb explained that he had been forced to sell part of the herd.

Once or twice racks of white bones were passed in the canyon. “Blackleg,” said Reb in explication of the skeletons. “Two year ago. Almost wiped out my younger cattle. That’s another reason why we’re smaller than I’d like to see.”

There was a vague emphasis on the words *another reason* which puzzled Jubal but he sought no further elucidation.

It was settled that Emilio should remain at the JR as a cook and rider. The *vaquero* was a middle-aged little man, with a kindly, wise face, into which hard existence had hewn deep wrinkles. Like most persons who have spent a life in the saddle, his legs were greatly bowed, but once mounted on a horse, he was grace itself, understanding how to coax the utmost from an animal, at the greatest saving of horseflesh. Full of gentleness and good humor was Emilio, with an unending desire to please; yet his life might have made a book of blood-curdling adventures. Born a peon, he had escaped the slavery of the *estancia* of a Mexican hidalgo, and worked his way north. It was said that he had known and perhaps ridden with a certain ferocious bandit chief on the other side of the border. Somewhere, too, it was reported of him, he had a wife and children. Ten dollars a month, plus food, was the

wage Emilio received, the money paid at very erratic intervals. Yet so much better was his condition than it had been in Mexico that he developed a deep, doglike loyalty to Reb, his employer.

The months slid in their grooves, time passed without being noticed, and life in the Arroyo Grande flowed along. Jubal made friends with the Mexican, and from him began to learn the dialect of Chihuahua. Of the language of Mexico Reb already had a smattering, but with a mind younger and more retentive, Jubal soon far surpassed his partner. Learning a language, and conducting the routine work of the ranch, however, occupied only a part of Jubal's thoughts. The weight of the debt oppressed him. All of the following year and the next also, he labored to lift it. Not a calf was overlooked or neglected; the brush was combed for beeves for sale twice each twelvemonth; every nickel which could be squeezed out of the JR herd was taken and the money applied on the El Paso note. Fortune was favorable. The increase was surprisingly good, the cattle were tamer, and with the aid of Emilio and the corral with its chute and wide arms of fences, the branding was conducted with a minimum of effort. At the end of the second spring, the partners had the satisfaction of tearing up the canceled note from the bank.

Having lifted the debt, there was time now for Jubal to consider other matters, and he found himself drifting into the old moroseness which had its roots in his frustration. Occurrences in the Arroyo Grande began to pass over him with no created impression upon his mind. He did not know how to alleviate his feeling of futility. To go once more traveling in the world, in the evanescent hope of discovering some clue to the whereabouts of Naoma was impractical; to remain where he was and in his present condition, was intolerable. Diagnosing the mood, Reb sought to alleviate Jubal's low spirits, with a dose of his own homely misogyny:

"Look at it this way," he said. "Women is all right, if ye takes each one an' tries to play her for her best game. But when ye takes one an' tries to play her for every kind of a game—which is what matreemony is—ye'll find her a plumb fiasco. Some women is good at cookin', others at dancin'; some at keepin' house, others at dressin' up to look like an angel; some is playful as a kitten, others all business an' no monkeyin'; some is good to look at, others is homely as a mud fence. It's all them varyin' attribootes which makes womenkind, that-a-way, so beguilin'. But when ye marries one woman—an' that's all the law allows—ye don't get all them attribootes ye ignorantly an' injoodiciously ascribes to women in the bulk. Ye finds the

one ye picked out is lackin' plenty of the things ye admired most in the sex as a hull. Forgit about marriage, son, an' be happy."

Jubal heard him out, but made no reply. There was no object to be gained by arguing the woman question with one so confirmed in cynicism as Reb. Jubal thought his own thoughts, growing steadily more taciturn. And then, by fortunate destiny, Paquita came to soothe his spirit and provide him for a time with a new and exciting interest in existence.

3

It was the third spring after Jubal's return, when the JR debt had been paid, that old Emilio came, hat in hand, to ask if it would be permissible to bring his family to the ranch. So accustomed had Reb and Jubal become to the Mexican's celibate presence in the second adobe that it was almost a shock to realize that he possessed a family . . . in spite of the reports they had heard.

"Shore, Emilio," Reb agreed and Jubal nodded his head. The old Mexican flashed a gleaming smile of gratitude and disappeared mysteriously for some days. His return was signaled by a prodigious racket one morning up the canyon trail . . . a noise Jubal heard long before he saw the *carreta's* weather-stained tilt coming down from the rise. Like most Mexican equipages, the wooden wheels squealed on the tortured axles. To this offense to the ears was added the shouting of the *boyero*, goading his oxen along. Over all resounded a high-pitched woman's voice, incessantly chattering, the frequent treble yells of young boys, and the frightened squawking of numerous cooped-up fowls.

Upon a heap of household goods in the front of the *carreta* sat a forbidding figure—a woman past her youth, but still retaining her vigor and determination. Thin-faced and thin-waisted was she, yet the scrawniness of her body could not make her entirely ugly, for her dark eyes were brilliant with high-lights, and she possessed a wealth of wavy, blue-black hair which she wore softly curved from the parting on her brow to the thick and gleaming knot behind, in which she had thrust an enormous ivory hairpin. Her costume was the costume of her people—a flowered *reboso*, a voluminous flowing dress of print, and crude *zapatas* on her feet. From her mouth poured a continuous stream of words, and Jubal saw with amazement that she was furiously scolding Emilio, who walked patiently beside the vehicle. More surprising, the old Mexican was grinning delightedly. Plainly the woman's vituperation warmed the cockles of old Emilio's heart.

To a groaning halt the *carreta* came, and out of the back of the tilt, scrambling over coops of protesting chickens, tumbled two boys, ten and twelve years old. The *boyero*, his goad leaned against the cart wheel, was assisting the woman to the ground, to the accompaniment of strident criticism. In the meantime Emilio himself had gone to the rear of the vehicle and was offering a hand to someone there. But the offer was refused; down over the tail of the cart leaped a figure whose grace caught and held Jubal's eye . . . a girl.

She was young, not more than fifteen or sixteen, and in her was the luxury and richness of her race and sex. Although not tall, she appeared tall, because of her manner of walking and the way she carried her head. Golden was her skin with her Indian blood and the outdoors life she had led; her eyes were soft, lustrous and large, with exquisite curving lashes of jet. A nose, straight and delicate, was in harmony with lips full and softly modeled, red with the color of health instead of the cosmetic box. Like the older woman, who was apparently her mother, the girl's thick hair was black, tinting with faint shades of blue, and it was softly waved, knotted behind and fastened charmingly with a comb.

Already Emilio was leading forward his family—the girl by the hand, the mother behind, and the two boys shyly peeping from behind the wide skirts of the latter.

“*Señores*,” proclaimed the little Mexican proudly, “thees is my daughter, Paquita, who I haff not see since she ees leetle *muchacha* only seex year old.”

As Jubal nodded, he was conscious of a frank, appraising stare from the girl. “Mighty glad to have yore family with us,” Reb was saying. And then Emilio presented the other members of his family, Mamma Maria, and the two boys, Felipe and Enrique.

With shoutings and gesticulation the *carreta* was unloaded and the goods carried by the sweating *boyero*, aided by Emilio and the boys, into the adobe which the Mexican had previously occupied alone, from which now issued an unending clatter as Mamma Maria ordered the men here and there, domineering, indignant, excited by turns, so that the bedlam extended down into the canyon, and the cattle, grazing in the bottoms, raised their heads to listen to the tumult which upset the peace of their quiet haven.

When the last of the Mexicans had disappeared into the adobe, Reb and Jubal looked at each other and grinned uncertainly.

“I don’t know whether it was such a good idea or not,” the older man remarked presently. “That old lady, she’s a bitch-kitty, or I ain’t no judge. An’ likely on the prod all the time. Hain’t been so much confusion around hyar since the Almighty cyarved out that thar arroyo.”

“We told old Emilio he could bring them,” Jubal reminded.

“Oh, we did, did we?” Reb’s glance was sharp and quizzical. “Don’t seem to recall ye was so hog-wild for ’em to come afore. Couldn’t be that little filly, Paquita, now could it?”

Jubal shook his head. “I’m too old for that, Reb. You keep thinkin’ I’m still a kid. I’m headin’ for thirty fast now, an’ if that don’t make me a man, I might as well quit tryin’. Besides . . . I ain’t interested in women. An’ she’s just a child.”

“If they’re big enough, they’re old enough,” Reb quoted, “an’ if they’re old enough, they’re big enough. Ye might be surprised how far past bein’ a kid that little señoreety is. After seein’ the way yore eyes stuck out like a couple of fried aigs when ye first laid ’em on her, I’d say if ye ain’t interested in wimmin, ye give a mighty deceivin’ appearance.”

4

In the days which followed, Paquita occupied an ever growing place in Jubal’s thoughts. He and Reb would see her pass their shanty, and then they would catch a gleam from her eyes and a brightness on her lips. Her walk was provocative, an undulation, with the slender waist a fulcrum from which the hips swayed below and the shoulders swayed above. When some errand brought her to the white men’s house, she would poise on the threshold, her eyes like a deer’s, half-startled, yet half-challenging, a denial in the aloof turn of her head and an invitation in every curve of her young body.

There was music in her, too, and in the evenings they could hear her rich voice as she sang to Emilio’s tinkling guitar. Like a Diana of the south she could ride and often Jubal thrilled to watch her catch, saddle and mount one of the most stubborn bronchos, “take the pitch out of him,” then gallop away to the Mexican hamlet where they obtained their supplies.

5

Early in the morning, Mamma Maria was at work. Before dawn the sharp slapping of her hands could be heard when she molded the *tortillas* for the day’s repasts. Mamma Maria had taken charge of the cookery for the entire establishment of the ranch, and Jubal and Reb resigned themselves to

a diet of Mexican food. Not that there was much of which to complain; Mamma Maria was an accomplished cook after her own style. When the ranchmen became accustomed to the inevitable pepper in everything, they grew more and more to appreciate her talents. In her way she had virtuosity in her art, as do many of the great chefs of famous hotels. For the first time in her life, too, she had an abundance of meat out of which to concoct dishes. *Tortillas*, *chile* and *frijoles* had been the boresome limits of her diet for years and, although she made the utmost of so small an assortment, she felt its limitation as any artist feels the limitation of materials. Now, however, she might have a quarter of beef, or a chicken, or pork whenever she wished them, and white flour as well as corn meal, together with vegetables from the garden which Emilio tended, drawing irrigating water from the spring.

The slapping of the *tortillas* awakened Jubal early one morning. There was a puzzling unrest in him as he lay in his bunk for a minute, listening to Reb's gentle breathing. Perhaps a ride down the canyon through the grass wet with early dew would be quieting. Jubal arose and walked up to the spring for a drink of cold water before he started for the horse corral. The people of Emilio's house were scarcely stirring, although Mamma Maria's bustling was plainly audible. Having satisfied his thirst and wiped his lips on his sleeve, Jubal was turning back toward his cabin, when he heard the sound of light feet coming up the path. Some impulse caused him to move behind the screen of chaparral which grew thickly back of the spring.

A moment later Paquita came into view, a tall jar on her shoulder, her slender body twisted gracefully a little to one side to compensate for the weight of the vessel, a slim, velvety arm upraised to balance it so that one of her breasts thrust forth the loose garment she was wearing, in bold suggestion of the warm cup of flesh beneath.

The spring was concealed from the houses below by the bulge of the ground as well as by the undergrowth which always forms in dry lands about any source of water. From the side of the hill ran a little stream, forming a small pool in which the ranch riders frequently watered their horses, and then trickled on down to join the creek in the canyon.

At the spring Paquita filled her jar, then dabbled a slender hand in the water. The coolness seemed to intrigue her, for she glanced carefully around and seeing nobody, lifted her skirts daintily and stepped into the pool. There were no shoes or stockings or undergarments to hamper her. To Jubal, watching her guiltily and excitedly, the sheen of her exquisitely rounded calves seemed glossier than that of any silk. Higher and higher she held her

dress, until she was mid-thigh in the water. Jubal, in an embarrassing position, scarcely knew what to do. The sight of her young liveness made his throat throb and yet, for some reason, frightened him. He wished mightily he had let his presence be known when she first appeared. Now she was splashing the water against her golden hips, holding her skirts aside with one hand and bending in a delightful pose while she used the other palm as a paddle.

Suddenly something seemed to alarm her. Hastily she left the water, still holding out her skirts widely so that the full length of her limbs, with their slender ankles, their dainty yet softly rounded calves, their dimpled knees, and their thighs, swelling disconcertingly large toward the hips, were fully exposed, streaming with water. Then, like a little cat, she shook first one leg, then the other. This done, she dropped her skirts demurely and picked up the full jar, starting down the path just as her father appeared, toiling up the hill, scolding her for being so long on her errand.

Jubal hastened to the corral down in the canyon, and as soon as he could saddle and mount a horse, rode away. But all day the image of Paquita's round, distracting legs burned in his imagination. He knew how women were formed, but he had never outgrown the curiosity which the oddness of their bodies prompted in him. The fullness and smallness of the feminine figure were almost directly opposite to a man's, he thought to himself. How remarkable it was that a woman was wide-hipped where a man was narrow; narrow-shouldered where he was wide. Her waist was infinitesimal compared to his, yet her breasts gave her a far more rounded appearance of torso. Her thighs also were more plump than a man's lean flanks, yet his calf usually was thicker and more muscular than hers. All these things which he had observed in the past, now reappeared in Jubal's mind, no matter how he tried to banish them, and set him to wondering just how Paquita was molded beneath the loose garments she wore.

A coarseness of thought took possession of him. He delighted that day in the grossest of imaginings. To her legs he could testify—they were deliciously beautiful. But what of her breasts, her belly, her hips? Jubal was certain in his soul they were of a quality to go with the legs. It came over him what ailed him; he was woman hungry. Better get over that, or something might happen for which he would be sorry.

Jubal returned to the ranch house late that evening, somewhat recovered from his disorderly thoughts and emotions but resolved to take precautions.

He remembered the *putas* of El Paso.

“Reb,” he began after supper.

“How?”

“Let’s take a sashay up to El Paso.”

The older man regarded him keenly. “What for?”

“Oh, nothin’. I feel like gettin’ drunk an’ raisin’ a little hell.”

This was so unlike Jubal that Reb became concerned. “Ye feelin’ all right?”

“Yep. Perfect . . . too perfect.”

Reb grunted and lit his pipe. “Might go over the fust of the week. I got my eye on a batch of white face calves. We’ll cut out a bunch of the best beef steers, if ye say the word, sell ’em at El Paso, an’ buy some of the white face young stuff. If we’re goin’ to stay in the cow business, we gotta improve our stock. Fellow has some Herefords up Fort Davis way. I been dickerin’ with him now for two-three months, an’ he’s give me a price which is plumb thievery for us.”

Jubal stepped out into the velvet black night, and walked toward the edge of the bluff, to look down into the opaqueness of the canyon. Only his ear, catching the faint, far burbling of water told him of the creek far below. From somewhere in the immensity beneath his feet came the short, reedy bawl of a young steer.

He almost stumbled over someone crouching, looking out into space. She rose with a soft *h-hah*, a sort of startled catch of her breath, and swayed as if to escape him, but Jubal had her in his arms. Warm on his mouth he felt her open lips pressing. There was surprise in the fire of her return to his kiss, hot, moist, and fiercely passionate.

“*Ai, mi amante!*” she breathed. Then: “Let me go. You must let me go!”

The fresh, robust animalness of her throbbed against his body. His hand, running with a sleeking motion down her back, encountered the stunning soft abundance of her hips.

She was silent except for her panting now. Up from the canyon the opaque blackness seemed to come, to cover them both, plunging them into oblivion . . . children of nature, untrammelled, like the faintly gurgling brook and the cattle far below. She was . . . as he had imagined . . .

As fire is the cleanest element, lust is the cleanest, fiercest form of love.

Jubal, who had suffered a sodden and unexpressed lack, found it suddenly supplied to him. Women were scarce in the Big Bend country; particularly exiguous in the vicinity of the Arroyo Grande, where, up to the time Emilio brought his family, not a petticoat had fluttered in all the years the JR had been operated. Under this deprivation Reb and Jubal became accustomed, as did others of their kind in that day, to long periods of enforced celibacy as a settled part of their lives.

It is true that in the extremely infrequent visits to town made by the partners, they found women—of a sort. And this was a circumstance which sometimes partook of embarrassment to Jubal. He was now twenty-seven years old, tall, bronzed, and powerful. His waist and hips were lithe, his shoulders were broad, and his years spent climbing the mountains had given him a tremendous compensatory depth of chest, so that latent power was apparent in him. There was that in his figure, but more particularly in his strange, changing eyes, which could be now cold gray, now a wolfish green, now merry blue, and again blazing white with anger, which drew women to him, and of this he was conscious to a degree.

Many women tried to please him—but the class with which he was, by virtue of his position, thrown was not to his liking. Waitresses, dance-hall girls, out-and-out prostitutes, were the only women with whom he came into contact. He sometimes saw women of a better class, in carriages driving down the street, but there seemed an impassable gulf between himself and them, a gulf which he had no thought of attempting to pass. Yet he knew an unspoken wish to meet women like that, and associate with them, having the instinctive feeling that there was something very wonderful in life which he was missing and which feminine society alone could supply. For the rest, he viewed with distaste the dregs into whose company, as a cowboy, he was cast, and on the rare occasions when he had dealings with women whose favors were for hire, he always ended with the same feeling of half-nausea as an aftermath. Something about their raddled faces, their forced gaiety and their counterfeit fervor, sickened him.

Not so Reb Haizlipp. He was past fifty but still he sat as erect in the saddle as a youth, a centaur whose tumbling passions drew him irresistibly toward the nearest vice. He sinned with a zest and an unalloyed delight which in some manner removed from it some of the reprehensibility. It was

difficult to condemn a man who went to his drinking, his gaming and his whoring with the innocent and open joy which Reb displayed.

Jubal realized with astonishment that concerning Paquita he experienced none of the shame and revulsion which the *putas* of El Paso had aroused. She was a revelation to him. After that first night when, it seemed, she arose unannounced out of the ground at his feet into his arms, she alternately baffled and delighted him. Sometimes she seemed to be his utterly, at his call. But almost immediately she would become shy, unwilling, even tearful.

For a few days Jubal experienced all the ecstasy of an enamored and successful suitor. The sensation of being loved was new to him, and he had what to him was abundant assurance that Paquita loved him. Perhaps the appeal to his male vanity was the chief ingredient in her attraction for him, but he knew a thrill such as he had never encountered in seeing the light in the dark eyes which she raised toward him, and the delicate fervor of her little arms clinging to him. So for a time he was content with the girl; even ignoring the need of circumspection at first, and running perilous risks to create occasions in which he could slip away with her, so that they could lie within each other's arms, hot faces pressed together, feeling the throb and sweet agony of their flesh, feasting upon one another's lips, denying each other nothing.

After those first few days, however, the elements involved began to distress Jubal. Several possible eventualities became alarming. Emilio trusted and almost worshiped Jubal. How would the old father take it if he found that the Mexican tongue, which he had taught the cowboy in friendship, was now being used by the latter as a language of love for the seduction of Emilio's daughter? Mamma Maria was even more realistic and her illusions concerning Paquita probably less; so that she would easily become suspicious. Once they were convinced that their daughter had been debauched, it would be likely that this pair would insist upon a marriage—and a marriage did not fit into Jubal's plan of life just now.

Then there was Reb. Jubal feared that his partner more than half suspected something already. And here again arose a strange anomaly in ethics and morals. The older cowman, although he drabbed and drank and gambled whenever the opportunity presented itself, had the old-fashioned notions of the West about "good" women. And any woman was good, to him, so long as she did not actually occupy a brothel. Even toward recognized prostitutes he displayed a gentleness and consideration which often astonished some of the hardened sisterhood. Jubal was fairly certain

that if Reb convinced himself concerning what was going on, he would disapprove most strongly.

Finally, there was Paquita. She was a constant puzzle to Jubal. The abandon with which she sometimes threw herself into his arms, and buried her face in his shoulder, and even wept in ecstasy, might have indicated profound love. But at other times her actions were quite contradictory. She sometimes sulked, or was sharp-tongued, even aloof. She was elemental and unpredictable. Moreover, Jubal could not conceal from himself the fact that if he continued to take Paquita for an indefinite period, the girl would become pregnant. About her was no hint of barrenness. Too rich were her thighs and hips, her breasts warmly pointed, her flesh gleaming like satin where the pearly high-lights dwelt lovingly when she lay in his arms under the moon at night.

In that case there could be but one eventuality: marriage. And already it was apparent to him how impossible that would be. Except for her beautiful body, Paquita was like all other Mexican girls. Her mind was childish, and between her and Jubal there could be no possible juncture of the spirit. To him the girl was a beautiful and extravagant emotional adventure. But no more. If it needed another argument to convince him of how great would be the mistake of marriage with Paquita, he had only to consider Mamma Maria and envisage the day when Paquita, also, would grow old and shrewish, with a shrill, scolding voice. Surprising, too, how soon the change would come. Mexican girls matured at twelve. At sixteen they reached the peak of their beauty. By twenty they began to fade.

8

With intense disgust, Reb Haizlipp laid down his cards and rose from the poker table in the *cantina* at El Paso, to which he had been accustomed to go for the past several years. Formerly it had been owned by Tom Blount. Lately a man from the North had purchased it—a big, florid man named Gooney, who affected embroidered waistcoats, was finicky about the shine of his boots, and smoked long, crooked Pittsburgh stogies. Sam, they called him. *Pretty Sam*, sometimes—on account of his fancy clothes.

It was losing to *Pretty Sam* Gooney which blistered Reb's soul. Across the green baize he caught the glitter of triumph in the gambler's heavy face, although nothing was said. Their mutual dislike was of long standing, dating from the time they first met, then, as now, at a poker game, in the days while Jubal was away in the mountains. Poker game? Well, it was a game to Reb, who played poker for sport. But Gooney, with his lizard eyes, played for

profit and profit only. The feud, born of clashing personalities and divergent standards, had continued and grown.

Looking back on the past years, Reb realized that he had lost thousands of dollars to this gambler. He could have played in other games, but whenever he visited El Paso, a stubborn streak sent him back again and again to Gooney's table in the bitter hope of getting even. And Pretty Sam always won.

Today's debacle, however, concluded the feud—in defeat for Reb. He was in a mood of savage self-blame as he thought of Jubal, back at the Arroyo Grande. For some reason, after suggesting the trip several days before, Jubal had changed his mind, and Reb, alone, had taken the steers to market by railroad.

Outside the *cantina* the cowman crossed the street with long strides, his high heels scuffing the deep dust in the peculiar bowlegged walk of the horseman. Just enough money remained in his pockets to pay his hotel bill and purchase a ticket on the “jerky” for Caliente—now a whistle stop on the railroad. Jubal and Emilio had helped bring the cattle up from the arroyo to the loading pens of the little way station, and there Reb, who had accompanied the shipment alone to El Paso, had left his pony with a Mexican *panolero*, or store-keeper, to care for until he returned. Sitting now in the gritty car with its smell of greasy steam and dirty human bodies, the gray ranchman's very mustaches seemed to droop from their accustomed bellicose projection as he thought of the blow he was destined to deal the partner who had trusted him.

It was sunset when Reb swung on the flea-bitten gray pony he rode and felt the smooth single-foot carrying him down the trail from the small station at Caliente toward the Arroyo Grande. The gray's pace never slackened—he could maintain that effortless single-foot for a day at a time—and to the horse the road home was so familiar that the rider permitted the reins to hang slackly, his mind beating hopelessly on a single, sodden thought. Late at night two pin-pricks of light far ahead down the valley revealed the location of the ranch houses. Again Reb's heart sank in despair. In all verity the Arroyo Grande ranch was small enough to begin with—two insignificant adobe cabins, a corral all out of repair, and a scrawny handful of branded cattle. How under the shining heavens it could possibly survive this final disaster which he had brought upon it, the lonely rider under the dim stars, in his agony, could not conceive.

Familiar sounds came to Reb's ears as he turned his pony into the corral. From the dim brush of the arroyo's wide bottom, a steer bawled, and on the opposite canyon wall a coyote yapped thinly. Reb heard neither of the wild notes, nor, as he lifted his saddle and bridle to begin the climb up the hill to the adobe, did he notice, as he often pleurably had noticed in the past, the creek's soft brawl.

For the first time in his life, Reb hesitated a moment outside the cabin door. He usually faced issues squarely, no matter how disastrous, but the money he had lost to Gooney in El Paso, was the whole store of Jubal and himself. Every steer the partners could round up in the canyon had gone to make up the beef herd which Reb had taken to El Paso—a herd which was to be sold for money to begin a new era in the Arroyo Grande. Jubal and Reb had spent long days before the venture was finally decided upon, figuring with pencil and paper the basis upon which they could stock their range with the white faced cattle for which the older man had bargained with the Fort Davis breeder.

Everything would have been well after the cattle were sold at El Paso had not Reb passed Gooney's *cantina*, the door of which yawned invitingly. Instantly the vision of Gooney's hateful face arose and the cowman entered, intending at first to take only a small flutter at the cards. Morning found him empty handed. No money. No white face calves. Worst, no excuse to offer.

With a deep breath Reb opened the cabin door and stepped inside. Jubal lay on a bunk, inhaling a corn-husk cigarette.

"Just in time," he said, tossing away the smoke. "Supper still on the table. Didn't expect you back so soon. Thought you were going over to Fort Davis. Are you hungry? But that's a silly question, isn't it? You're bound to be. Fall to, Reb. We can talk afterward."

For his life, Reb could not have replied. Mechanically he seated himself at the table where the remnants of Jubal's meal remained uneaten. The silence was strange and Jubal surveyed his partner for a moment, then rose with a look of edged comprehension and sat down at the table with him.

"How much did you lose?" he asked, striving to keep his voice casual.

"Three yeller stacks," gulped Reb.

Not a muscle in Jubal's face changed, but his mind was whirling. Three thousand dollars. It was all the money they had. Reb had frittered it away. It was gone. Disaster unexpected, uninvited, was upon them. A flush of anger swept over him. But Reb was speaking again.

“Ain’t no use to say I’m sorry,” broke out the older man, miserably.

At the words another emotion overwhelmed Jubal’s anger. After all, what right had he to complain? He was in the Arroyo Grande on sufferance by all rights. He had given away his rights in the ranch and Reb had welcomed him back to them. Jubal felt violently ashamed of his recent thoughts.

“Hell,” he said, forcing a grin, “ain’t you told me often enough never to go lookin’ for strays until the stampede’s over? If you wanted to play at El Paso, it was your right. An’ the fall of the cards is plumb all right with me.”

This evidence of his partner’s loyalty cut Reb to the heart.

“From hyar on, Jube,” he began in a stricken tone, “I’m jest a hand hyar, ontill we make that money back. All the stock—an’ if God knows it’s damn near none—that we’ve still got onder brand, is yourn. It’s all I kin do to make it up to ye.”

For the first time there was concern in Jubal’s eyes, but it was not concern, now, over the money lost. This was a different Reb, a broken Reb, a suddenly aged Reb who was talking. The metamorphosis from the humorous, confident cowman who had departed from the ranch so shortly before alarmed Jubal, crowded all other consideration out of his thoughts. Had his partner attempted to justify himself for the gambling, Jubal certainly would have felt resentment. But this groping old man—Jubal perceived that there was something dangerous in his abnegation. Words came. He screeched them with a purposed violence:

“Reb Haizlipp, shut your God damned mouth!”

The other, with pained wonder, drew back from him, silent.

Jubal, who had risen, resumed his seat at the table. “Get this,” he said. “Don’t let me hear any more about this ranch changing hands again. Because if I was to take you serious, after all you’ve done for me—takin’ me back that time after I went off an’ left you for years—I’d shorely have to take it that you deemed me a polecat!”

“But, Jube—” began Reb.

“But—hell! If you wanted to lose the whole damned place, herd, buildings, an’ brand—at poker or faro or any other way, it would be plumb your right—an’ I’d be the first to call the hand of any mangy coyote that said different!”

Early in the morning Jubal summoned Emilio and ordered him to saddle two horses.

“Thought I’d take a look down at the lower end of the arroyo,” he explained to Reb. “I hear the ID outfit’s gettin’ ready to put in fence across the water.”

Already the day of the small ranchers had ended over most of the West, but they were still making a stand in the Texas Big Bend. Even here, however, the sun was beginning to sink for the little operators. Most of the land had been acquired by the large ranches and cattle pools, and what remained of the free range had almost disappeared. Wire fences were coming in—the knell of the poorer cattleman who could not command sufficient capital to build the miles of expensive barriers required. For some time Reb and Jubal had been recognizing, albeit unwillingly, the fact that the Arroyo Grande must soon be invaded by interests too powerful to be coped with, of which the ID outfit was the nearest and most threatening.

Down the canyon toward Mort Bartee’s old *ramada*, that morning, rode Jubal and Emilio. The ruins of the ranch buildings still stood, melancholy reminders of the jovial Englishman who had lived there. In gloomy memory, Jubal dismounted from his horse and walked about the weed-choked grounds. He could see the three graves on the hillside, overgrown now with grass. Some kind of a headboard was at the center one. Jubal moved closer. An unpainted pine plank with lettering burned into it with a hot iron:

MoRTiMER BaRTEE

kilt Oct. 11th, 1887

I will rimmember you old Frend

It must be Reb’s work, thought Jubal. Nobody else in the country would take that trouble for Mort. Jubal felt the old burn of resentment again over the tragedy of that causeless murder. Jake Slaven did it. Jake, hanged years ago . . . by the neck, until dead.

A dry *sweesh, sweesh*. Old Emilio, his long sheath knife drawn, was slashing the grass of the graves. Kneeling on one knee, with the other leg braced against the slope of the hill beneath, the little Mexican used the knife like a sickle and the green blades flew in bunches to the earth. Presently, when all three mounds once more were neat, the two men mounted and rode south toward the Rio Grande.

A long, snaky line ahead. It was a corroboration of Jubal's fears . . . a wire fence. He could see where the barrier crossed the creek and took in the right bank of it, leaving only the dry chaparral beyond to any who wished to use it. It would not be long until that fence extended on up the canyon. Cattle at the creek bank . . . ID cattle.

It was too bad. The country was filling up—was already too full. Jubal knew that when Reb heard of the ID's invasion of the arroyo there would be fighting talk. Reb was a fire-eater, but Jubal saw the futility of attempting resistance to what amounted to the encroachment of a new era. What could the partners, weak as they were, do against an organization like the ID, with its fifty punchers, its hundreds of thousands of dollars in capital, and its political "connections" at Austin? Might as well admit that not only the Arroyo Grande ranch, but all like it were at the end of their trail. How much longer he and Reb could hold their precarious place up the canyon, Jubal made no attempt to guess.

The broad Rio Grande Valley, sandy and flat, with its gleaming serpent of water, marked the international boundary line. Across, to the south of that crooked river, lay Mexico, a country as different from the United States as if the two were a hemisphere apart. The City of Chihuahua was a hundred miles or more down across the horizon. To the west lay the wild regions of the Sierra Tarahumare and the Sierra Madre, where dwelt the fierce Yaqui Indians and the unconquered remnants of the Apaches who formerly held the Southwest in a thrall of dread.

A dust cloud in the distance far across the river caught Jubal's attention as he and Emilio sat on their horses by the Rio Grande and permitted the animals to drink. Moving so slowly that its progress was almost indistinguishable, and, from where they were, appearing only a tiny fleck, Jubal yet knew it must be an enormous dun-colored pall, towering hugely on the far plain and indicating a considerable herd of animals or body of vehicles in passage.

"*Quién es?*" he asked Emilio, who sat staring, his dark eyes, like those of a spaniel which scents the hunt, shining in his wrinkled face.

"*Bandidos,*" was the instant reply. "*Los charros de Mesa.*"

So that was what the dust cloud meant. The *charros*—dandy riders—of Mesa, the bandit. Jubal had heard of him more than once, the fierce cut-and-thrust fighter and raider, who swooped down from his retreats up in the Sierra Madre cliffs, to burn and slay among the rich *haciendas*. Half bandit and half patriot, he was reputed to be a Robin Hood of the Mexican

wilderness, who never slaughtered and tortured the ricos without distributing at least a portion of their wealth to the peons.

“What do they there?” Jubal asked in Spanish.

“They drive a *ganado*—a herd. These *vacas* they have taken from some rancho and now they carry them off to the sierra,” Emilio explained.

“And what do they wish with so many *vacas*?”

“These they will butcher for food. Thus do the *charros* keep Mesa’s camp always replenished with meat.”

“They live pretty well, do they?” Jubal asked, still in Spanish, with a sidewise glance at Emilio. He was beginning to remember that it had been told that the old man had once been a bandit himself.

“*Sí—no*,” replied the Mexican. “A sufficiency of *carne* and *tortillas* they have, and at times of *pulque* there is more than enough. But for them it is difficult to obtain *tequila* and always they seek for rifles and *cartouches de cobre*.”

Pulque and *tequila*, reflected Jubal, were popular drinks south of the border, although he himself cared little for them. The first was sour, not much stronger than beer, and produced a severe aftereffect; the second was a fiery, ardent spirit, which burned the throat all the way when it went down, and, after only two or three gulps, caused a man to reach for something solid to hold to. As for the rifles and “cartridges of copper” to which Emilio referred, it was to be supposed that there was a constant demand for them in the kind of work Mesa and his *charros* carried on.

Having watched the distant cloud for many minutes, Jubal led the way back up the canyon and throughout the ride to the ranch houses he sat his horse in taciturn abstraction. *Cartouches de cobre . . . tequila . . .* an idea, bold as Mesa himself, was beginning to germinate in the cowboy’s brain.

Presently his thoughts wandered to the ranch. A pathetic change had come over Reb since the day he lost the money at El Paso. Through all the years of their association, up to this time, the gray cowman had always been the leader. His experience, age and aggressiveness justified this. But since Reb was wiped out by the gamblers his confidence seemed shattered. It was Jubal who suddenly became the leader, and it was Reb who was hesitant, grateful . . . *too* grateful . . . for small, every-day courtesies, pitifully the follower now.

This change in their relations worried Jubal. He knew what was at the bottom of it but lacked any knowledge of complexes, so could not understand why a thing like losing their money, complicated with a tearing conscience, should so have broken Reb. Of course he understood now why the JR had not grown during his absence to the mountains. Reb had gambled away all the increase. Still, the terrible depth of the old man's abasement confused and shamed Jubal. Old man . . . Reb *was* an old man, suddenly old, with the elasticity gone from him.

Complicating even more the worries on Jubal's horizon was Paquita. Beside him rode the girl's father. She herself was waiting at the ranch. What would Emilio do if he knew of how Paquita had been spending some of her night hours? Jubal disliked thinking of it. If Emilio ever learned the truth, the old Mexican would kill or be killed—providing no satisfactory marriage agreement was reached. Only one solution to the problem existed. In some manner Jubal must be enabled to leave the Arroyo Grande and all its associations.

10

"I was down at Mort Bartee's," Jubal said to Reb when he reached the ranch after the ride in the lower arroyo. "Saw where you'd fixed up Mort's grave with a head board."

The other nodded. "Little enough for a man like Mort."

"Did . . . you see them hang Jake Slaven?" It was the first time the Rawhider's name had been mentioned between them since Jubal's return from the mountains.

Reb nodded, his eyes gazing stonily at the distant opposite wall of the arroyo.

"Was it . . . bad to watch?"

Reb swung his gaze full on Jubal and his eyes seemed skimmed over with ice. "Nothin' is bad to watch," he said, "which is needin' doin'."

Not even death had erased the cattleman's hate for Jake. Jubal perceived that this was dangerous ground and sought to change the subject to something less explosive.

"The ID outfit's moved into the lower arroyo," he remarked. Instantly the expression on Reb's face changed and he lifted that troubled look to Jubal, the look with the hurt in it, which said, "More misfortune for you, after I have fixed you so that you can't resist it."

The look embarrassed Jubal, made him half resentful. “They’ve fenced in the creek for eight miles up from the mouth of the arroyo,” he went on. If only Reb would forget his damned remorse and become his old aggressive self. This was wearing on a man’s nerves.

“I—I reckon they’ll be tryin’ to buy us or squeeze us pretty quick,” the older man was saying desperately.

“Matter of fact, they’re already tryin’,” said Jubal brusquely. Seeing the anguish in Reb’s eyes he failed to add that he himself had invited the ID to make an offer on the JR property.

“Wha-what was that ye said?”

“I said they’re already offering to buy us. Ike Dennis himself made me a bid. Come over here the day you was in El Paso. I didn’t tell you before, because you were already pretty bad upset. He said he’d give us five thousand for our herd an’ brand. That was the real reason I took old Emilio an’ rode down to the Rio Grande—Ike said he was takin’ in water with his fence. I wanted to see how far up he was comin’.”

The horror in Reb’s face shot an arrow of pain into his partner’s heart. “What did ye say to that, Jube?”

“I laughed at it. Natural that I would, seein’ I hadn’t talked over things with you. But to you let me say I think we ought to sell. We can’t hold on here much longer, if the truth’s known.”

“Figgerin’ on quittin’, are ye?” groaned Reb with resignation. “Wall, I cain’t blame ye.”

“No, I ain’t figurin’ on quittin’. An’ I don’t aim to sell for no five thousand dollars, neither. We ought to get six thousand anyhow. Now’s the time. In a couple of years likely we’ll have to take a damn sight less.”

“If we sell, what are we goin’ to do?” It was sad, the old cattleman’s complete dependence on Jubal’s decisions.

“Here it is, Reb. This little ranch of ours is goin’ to pieces pretty soon, no matter what we do. The dab of money we can get out of it, even now, ain’t enough to give us a decent start anywhere else—cattle ranchin’ bein’ what it is these days. We’re out of step with the trend, Reb. Now follow me close! I got a big idea. A really *big* idea, an’ the first part of it will take a heavy chunk of *dinero*—a lot more than we can get from sellin’ the ranch. There’s only one way we can get that money. Do you figure it?”

“No, Jube, I can’t say I do, but whatever ye say is all right.”

“Look, Reb,” explained Jubal patiently. “If you had six thousand dollars, and wanted twice as much, how would you go about doubling it, quick?”

“Why, I wouldn’t know how to go about it, ’cept mebber playin’ poker, an’ of course—”

“There you have it! That’s exactly it, Reb! *Poker!* It’s the only chance we have in the world to get the money we need. And you’re a poker player—an ace poker player. Reb, I don’t believe in gamblin’ much, as you know—unless it’s necessary. An’ then I believe in throwin’ in everything you’ve got, if the stake’s big enough. An’ it is this time. Reb, I want us to sell every critter an’ stick we have, an’ stake you to one *good* poker game!”

The older man looked stunned, his gray mustaches quivering. “What are you talkin’ about, Jube?”

“I’m serious as hell, Reb.”

“Wall, I won’t do it. I’d lose it shore. Lost every time I’ve played lately.” His voice was querulous. “Don’t know what’s the matter with me.”

Jubal looked his friend squarely in the eye. “There’s just two things wrong with your poker,” he said evenly. “I’ll give you your own words: ‘Never play unless you can afford to lose,’ an’, ‘Never let anybody get you mad in a poker game. He may be doin’ it on purpose to make you ripe to be picked.’ Remember when you told me those things? The day we rode up the canyon after our first visit to Mort Bartee. I’ve never forgotten it. Now as to the second of those things, you’ve let this El Paso gambler, whoever he is, jockey you until you’re mad at him not only all the time you’re in the game with him, but when you’re out of it, too. As to the first, you’ve never had enough *dinero* to back your play. This time, with six thousand dollars, you can meet those big gamblers in their own corral.”

Still Reb sat, staring at him as if he were not hearing aright.

“Listen, Reb.” Jubal’s voice was vibrant with decision. “We might as well be broke flat as to have the little penny ante money we’ll get for this ranch. Let’s take a big flutter, just once. Let’s see if we can get enough to play a still bigger game I’m thinkin’ about. If we lose, we can always catch on somewhere as cow waddies. What do you say?”

Imperceptibly the old man’s back had been straightening as the talk progressed. Now he caught the inspiration; his eyes suddenly began to blaze with something like the old-time fire.

“I’ll do it!” he exclaimed. “Shake on it, Jube! Boy, thar never was a partner like ye. If you’re game for me to play the hand, I don’t know why I should hang back from the deal. I’ll shore string my chips along with ye—now an’ forever!”

11

In the succeeding days Reb changed completely. Gone was the indecisive old man, and the epic style, richly humorous, of the raconteur was back. The ranch and cattle were sold, as Jubal had predicted, for six thousand dollars. Then the difficult part came . . . explaining the new order of things to Emilio and his family.

“You can live on in your adobe,” Jubal told the old Mexican and his wife. “The ID outfit says it will be all right. It’s all right with Ike Dennis, the owner.”

That altered the picture for Emilio. He could count on enough work with the ID and other outfits to keep his family. Mamma Maria had her garden; there were some chickens and some goats, lately added, which the two boys herded along the canyon walls. The future seemed bright.

But Paquita remained indoors, refusing to come forth even when summoned by her mother. It stirred an uneasy sensation in Jubal, that refusal, but he pretended not to notice it. The succeeding days passed and he scarcely saw the girl, never spoke to her, while the more she evaded him, the deeper became his worry. Jubal’s conscience began to bother him. He had a very good idea of what Paquita’s emotional status must be and he began to fear that she would prove a problem.

On the last evening of the partners’ stay at the Arroyo Grande, when final details of the ranch transaction had been completed with Ike Dennis, Jubal stepped out of the cabin after dark for a last breath of fresh air, and to feel for the last time the mystery of the great abyss upon the rim of which he had, for so many years, made his home. Thinking of the adventures which lay before him, he strolled over to the edge of the bluff, and stood listening to the occasional night noises from below. Those sounds caused him to think of another evening—and as if to make the similarity exact, a dark figure once more rose at his feet.

“*Paquita!*” exclaimed Jubal.

“*Sí.*”

“What are you doing here?” He always conversed with her in Spanish.

“I had wished to talk with you, and I thought you would come here—on the last night,” she replied. Her face was expressionless, the sullen mask which she inherited from her Indian ancestors.

“I see.” The man was uncomfortably ill at ease.

“Why do you go away from the Arroyo Grande?” Her question was a direct challenge.

“Well, you see we can’t stay here any longer,” he began lamely and guiltily. “We would have gone broke if we hadn’t sold the ranch. We’ve got to get another start—”

“Is this the real reason?” she interrupted fiercely.

“Why, *seguro*.”

“No, it is not! You go because you think you must get rid of—Paquita?”

The way in which the girl combined a question and an accusation was indescribable. Jubal remained silent. It was, he saw, no use to lie to her. The thing she had just voiced was true. He felt the old, sick feeling in his heart—the feeling that many another man has known who has begun an affair in utter light-heartedness, to find that it was a serious matter after all. Apprehensively he stared at her. Mexican women, he knew, were impetuous and sometimes tigerish in fury. What would she do? He sought to soothe her, but she broke in upon him:

“Then I am right! Oh, Jubal, how could you do this thing to me?”

The girl had stolen up close to him, her breasts almost against him, her face bathed in the mystic light of the moon, her fragrance in his nostrils. Jubal could feel his resolution wavering. The woman was so close, so desirable . . . suddenly remote and very unimportant seemed his plans, the world, Reb even, compared to the tumultuous need she had aroused in him. His arms went about her.

“Paquita! *Ai, querida!*” The words came as if strangled from his throat as he bent his drawn face toward hers, the blood pounding in his ears.

As if icy water had been dashed into his features, Jubal recoiled from the girl, releasing her. Paquita was laughing. *Laughing*. Numbed, he stared at her as she laughed, tinklingly, immoderately, cruelly.

“Ah, you are so funny!” she gasped. “You, who would go marching away, leaving poor little Paquita behind—I crook my finger and with calf face you come to me, you beg me, you want me and you forget all your big

plans!" Again she broke into laughter. Suddenly she controlled herself and her face become chiseled in its contempt.

"*Bufo*n—fool!" she sneered at him. "I wanted only to show you how easy it would be for me to keep you if I wanted to keep you. Did you think you had to run away from Paquita? *Mirar!* You could stay here forever—and Paquita would never look at you again. As if men were so hard to come by! My poor friend, for a woman to get a man is so simple, so easy, that it is laughable—scarcely worth the trouble. A nod of the head, a crook of the finger, a glance from the corner of the eye—that is all that is necessary to make any fool of a man come running. Yes, *running!* One does not need to do anything at all, if she does not wish. Provided her looks are only passable—and I am not bad, do you think, my donkey?—a woman can sit perfectly still and the men will flock."

She began to walk back and forth before him in the moonlight, her wide skirts swishing every time she turned, glancing at him from the corners of her slitted eyes, raking him savagely.

"Has it been thought by you, my stupid," she mocked, "that you were perhaps the *only* man who has known Paquita? Be surprised then! Paquita has known many—and more than one right here under your nose, Señor Troop, where you believed yourself lord over all, knowing everything! Yes"—her words cut spitefully into his consciousness—"well have I tricked you and laughed! I have come from another more than once to let you take the leavings. Love you? I laugh at you!"

She turned and walked superbly toward her home.

12

Stunned, Jubal sat long by the canyon brink, looking into the dim blackness at his feet. He felt that a structure he had erected was tumbling about him. In every man there is a conceit, planted in him and fostered through his life by women for their own wise ends. When that conceit is shattered, it is extremely painful.

After a time Jubal returned to his adobe and to his bunk. He went to sleep wondering, jealous, angry, hurt and amazed. In effect he had been neatly cuckolded by the girl, and he felt impotent in his helpless anger. Next morning, however, he saw the world more clearly and in the end the hurt which Paquita had dealt his pride was healed so that he was able to erase the girl cleanly from his memory. It was as if a bitter draught had ended a sickness.

But if Jubal had been able to see Paquita when she hid herself from his sight in her father's house, he might have been bewildered. Not one word did she utter to any of her family, but crept to her pallet, where she lay alone and silent, staring with eyes darkened with anger and pain into the night long after Emilio, Mamma Maria and the boys had gone to sleep. Toward morning she wept, a very little and silently . . . wept for a dead future. Yet after she wept, she sighed and smiled. Jubal's countenance—it had been so stricken when she told him of her betrayals of him—those betrayals which, alone in her bed, she knew were wholly imaginary. All at once she gave a little, savage chuckle. At least she had scored him deeply there! Then, at last, she slept.

13

Into El Paso Reb and Jubal rode three days later. They had taken their horses, for they did not expect to return to the Arroyo Grande. At the restaurant where they ate their evening meal, Reb purchased some smoking tobacco and proceeded to make the air redolent with strong fumes from his battered black pipe. When the sun set, the old cowman stretched his arms and yawned elaborately into the faces of one or two patrons of the eating place.

“This hyar's shore a dull town,” he remarked. “Let's walk over an' see what's doin' at the *cantina*.”

Jubal, crossing the street with his partner, at once recognized the place toward which they were headed. It was the very establishment where, years before, they had encountered Jake Slaven.

“This here is Blount's, ain't it?” he asked.

“Wall, it used to be. Blount was bought out five year back.”

“Who bought him out?” They were at the door.

“Fellow named Gooney. From up North somewhere. Pretty Sam, they call him.”

Jubal came to a sudden halt and his heart seemed to miss a beat. *Pretty Sam Gooney*. It was the first time Reb had mentioned the name of the man to whom he had lost his money. A thousand thoughts, impressions, and fears raced through Jubal's mind. Had it been possible, he would have turned and run away from the portal—but it was too late. Standing facing the door, with her arm resting on the bar, was a woman, looking straight into his eyes. And the woman was Mae Horgan.

For an instant Jubal hesitated. Then he walked directly to the bar and called for a straight whiskey. The woman spoke:

“Jubal Troop!”

“The same, Mrs. Horgan.” He was wondering what she would do.

“Not Mrs. Horgan.” Her eyes were searching his face. “It’s Mrs. Gooney now.”

“In that case I guess I ought to congratulate you, Mrs.—Gooney.”

As he looked at her, Jubal did some rapid thinking. She was still young. Not much more than thirty. And she had taken care of herself. Her skin was still perfect, its fineness accentuated by the thick, heavy brows of her, and by the petulant red mouth. Undeniably she was an attractive woman. Yet the very sight of her spelled danger to Jubal. He could not forget Teton, and what this woman might do to him.

“For old friends, it’s been a long time since we saw each other,” she said, with a hint of irony in her voice.

Jubal glanced down the room. At a table surrounded by poker players sat Pretty Sam Gooney, ornately dressed as ever, his face coarsened, however, by the dissipation of the years, his body thicker, his eye fishier than before. As Jubal gazed, the gambler’s eye met his. Pretty Sam’s look suddenly grew intense. He had recognized the cowboy and he half rose from his chair, but at that moment, with coolest effrontery, Reb Haizlipp strolled over to the table and invited himself into the game. Gooney sank back into his chair and stared at the old cowman for a moment.

“You don’t want in again already, Haizlipp?” There was the faintest hint of a sneer in his voice.

But he counted out the chips coldly and Reb purchased two hundred dollars’ worth. Something seemed to telegraph the fact that an unusual battle was beginning. A poker feud. Men left the other tables in the room and walked over to watch the game. The bar became deserted, except for Jubal and Mae, who remained beside it, talking. Like a wooden idol old Reb conned his cards as the gambler announced:

“Dealer’s option. No wild cards. Joker’s good only for aces, straights and flushes.”

“Who are the players?” Jubal asked Mae.

“There’s Joe Matlock and Uvalde Yates, friends of Sam’s. Those two sitting side by side are cattlemen—Roberts and Winehart of the Doña Ana country—and that lean man is a rancher from down by Ysleta named Pete Howell. The little dark fellow is Chavez. He’s a Mexican with a good family. Gambles all the time. They say he’s wasted away most of a good-sized fortune at American poker.”

Reb lost the first hand, and the next two. Presently he bought more chips, and later still another stack.

“Your partner’s luck seems to be bad,” remarked Mae to Jubal.

“You can never tell when it will change,” he replied shortly.

“Where have you been keeping yourself these years?” she asked after a brief silence.

“Here an’ there. Ranched some, and prospected for gold a little.”

“Any luck?”

“Not much.” What is her game? he was wondering. Is she going to turn me in to the sheriff? I don’t think so—for the present, anyhow. But what is she driving at?

Reb continued to lose. It was not that he held poor cards, but that the hands he held were always a shade lower than those of some of the other players, forcing him to bet high and then lose, which is, in the essence, the worst kind of poker ill fortune. Around the table the faces formed an interesting study. At Reb’s left was Howell, the saturnine Ysleta rancher. Next came Matlock, harsh-faced and dark, one of Gooney’s satellites; followed by the gambler himself, with his florid dish face, blond mustache, and hooded eyes. The two Doña Ana cowmen, Roberts and Winehart, both big, bronzed riders, typical of the cattle country, sat side by side, with Gooney’s other friend, the red-haired, pale-eyed Uvalde Yates, next in order. Chavez, elegant in black coat, broad cravat, and wide sombrero of the finest black beaver, sat at Reb’s right. The old cowman himself, lantern-jawed and taciturn, his short pipe jutting out from between his long gray mustaches, completed the circle.

“I think I’ll go over where I can look on better,” Jubal said to Mae.

“Oh, stay here and talk.”

“No, thanks. I want to see this game.” She shrugged her shoulders, her mouth sullen, but made no further effort to dissuade him as he walked over and drew up a chair behind his partner.

Two hours passed and Reb had lost two thousand dollars. His run of bad luck seemed fatefully consistent. Jubal noticed that Mae had disappeared, probably to her room upstairs. Still the gruff, short voices of the players went around the table.

“Bet two red.”

“Seen.”

“Seen an’ hiked a couple.”

“I call.”

“Where’s yore sportin’ blood? I tilt her two more.”

And so on. The tobacco smoke made a blue haze in the room through which shone the coal oil lamps with a kind of nimbus about them, dim when they were seen at a distance. Jubal knew that Reb understood poker as few men understood it. But to confront such an aggregation of players as this, with the comparatively small sum the old cowman had, was a terrific test. For the first time Jubal really understood the magnitude of the feat he had proposed to his partner. With six thousand dollars, Reb faced in Gooney alone thrice that amount, and every other man at the table could outweigh him, dollars to dimes almost, if it came to matching capital.

Jubal arose, crossed the barroom and stepped out in the street. There were few people moving outside, but he became conscious of, rather than saw, someone standing in the shadow beside the door.

“Worried about the game?” It was Mae again.

“In a way.” He had no thought of making any revelations to Mae Horgan . . . especially now that her last name was Gooney.

She seemed to read his thoughts. “I reckon you’re wondering how I came to marry Sam,” she said. “It happened a year after Shep . . . died. We sold out in Teton and came down here in ’88. Sam Gooney was mighty good to me after Shep died.”

Jubal thought: Why did she add that last sentence? It sounded like she was defending something or other. Aloud, he asked boldly:

“Why don’t you turn me over to the law?”

“Why should I?” Again that long, speculative look. “Let’s leave bygones be bygones, Jubal. We could be good friends . . . again.”

She permitted the last word to linger into all kinds of meanings, but Jubal ignored it.

“You might be friendly—but what about Pretty Sam?”

“Sam Gooney will do exactly as I tell him!” Her chin went up. “Come, let’s walk around a little. I’ve got some things I want to talk over.”

But he shook his head and turned into the saloon. A small frown line appeared between the woman’s heavy brows as she gazed after him.

15

Reb was losing steadily, but his face was as imperturbable as if he were not tossing away his life’s savings with every minute he sat at the table. Gooney, who was winning heavily from the old cowman, began to be jovial in a patronizing way. As the clock on the wall pointed its hands at midnight, Reb reckoned that he had lost three thousand dollars—half of his stake. He looked owlshly around the table.

“I cain’t see how any gent kin have fun in a piker game like this,” he whined suddenly, seeming to throw off restraint. “A twenty-five dollar limit ain’t poker. It’s penny ante.”

Pretty Sam smiled indulgently, as one who could afford to grant whims.

“Make it table stakes,” he invited, “and go as far as you like.”

He glanced around the table and the others, each in turn, nodded slightly. Uvalde Yates was dealing, fumbling at the cards with his big, red freckled hands. Chavez, the first bettor, passed. Old Reb picked up his hand and studied it.

“Since ye took the halter off the hoss,” he said, “I opens this pot for fifty pesos.”

Howell and Matlock, in order, passed.

“I’ll see that bet an’ double it,” stated Gooney. It was the biggest raise thus far in the evening—one hundred dollars—and there was a stir of interest among the onlookers about the table. Not one of the players, however, showed a flicker in his face. The bet came around to Reb again, and he merely called. All the other players, with the exception of Pretty Sam had thrown in their cards. On the table lay two hundred dollars.

“Gimme two cyards,” said Reb, retaining three cards in his hand.

“Holdin’ up a kicker?” sneered Gooney with a gleam in his eye. “I’ll jest play these.” A pat hand! Jubal decided the gambler must be playing either a flush or a straight.

“That’s jest the kind of a hand I wanted ye to have, Gooney,” said Reb. In some manner he put an edge into his words which left with the group an electric feeling of impending events. Gooney’s face was expressionless in the tobacco smoke haze, but under his drooping lids the pupils of his eyes contracted to pin-points.

“Pretty proud of that hand, are you, Haizlipp?” he asked. “Well, to show you how little you scare me—*I’ll jest tap you!*”

He meant that he was willing to bet a sum equal to all the money Reb had to put up—in a word, to break him or double his winnings on the single turn of the cards. The cowman, of course, need not accept so outrageous a challenge. But although it was not Pretty Sam’s turn to bet, he had commenced pushing over stack after stack of chips, until he had matched all the stacks Reb had on the table—three thousand dollars’ worth, all the money the Arroyo Grande partners possessed. Not a muscle moved in Reb’s cold gray face until the gambler, with overbearing arrogance, finished. Then the cowman, in his turn, began to push stacks across the table, not stopping to count the chips, but “sizing up” each stack to one of Gooney’s. When he had met the other’s bet, chip for chip, he spoke for the first time.

“Called!” he said sharply, the same hard edge to his tone. “An’ I announces to all an’ sundry, that I’m puttin’ the old JR brand on yore hide, Sam Gooney, right hyar an’ now!”

Jubal’s heart was in his throat. Their whole life, almost, depended upon the spread of those two hands. The gambler put down his first. Jubal’s heart tumbled from his throat down to his boots. It was not a straight or a flush which Gooney was showing. Three queens and a pair of eights. He had drawn that almost unbelievable hand, *a pat full house*.

All eyes focused on Reb. The cowman’s face was grayer than ever and his sickle blades of mustache quivered ever so slightly, but one by one he began laying his cards on the table. First came a jack. Then:

“Only two pair, Gooney. But they’re deuces—an’ some more deuces!”

Four deuces were staring up into Pretty Sam’s face.

“I thought ye was a gambler, Gooney,” said Reb as he raked in the pot. There was insult in his voice, and the other’s face darkened. Jubal marveled at the way his partner was putting into effect the very wisdom Jubal had

heard him express on that ride from Mort Bartee's years before. Deliberately, Reb had set out to upset Pretty Sam's emotional equilibrium, and he had succeeded astonishingly. The gambler was in a dangerous rage which made him oblivious to many things, keeping before him only the desire to beat this man who was sneering at him.

Reb had recouped his losses now, and there was new respect in the faces of all the men at the table. This was masterful poker. It was not the cards Reb held, but the subtlety with which he had tricked Gooney into forcing the betting and thus rig his own trap, which showed the hand of genius.

16

Weak from the suspense through which he had been, Jubal rose and went over to the bar for another whiskey. Once more Mae, who had been standing with the crowd about the poker table, sauntered over to him. As he drank, she whispered, an odd note as if of anxiety in her voice:

"I've got to talk with you. Where will you be tomorrow?"

"I'll be in Mexico if things go as well as they look," he replied.

"Mexico? What for?" Her tone was insistent.

"Oh, a little speculation." Jubal, preoccupied with the game, turned brusquely toward the poker table. It was a mistake.

"Jubal Troop!" He wheeled to face her. From her features every trace of expression had vanished, except a white line about her nostrils and a look of devil's fury in her eyes.

"You—you—" The woman paused for words to express her tempestuous emotion. "I'm trying to befriend you—to help you. I could send you to prison, perhaps to the gallows, if I wanted to turn my hand. And yet you turn your back—you *dare to turn your back on me*—"

Stridently Mae's voice had risen. A sudden silence fell in the room and at the poker table, the eyes of players and onlookers alike turning toward Jubal and the furious woman. Jubal saw Pretty Sam's face redden angrily. His own anger rose now. Deliberately he turned away from Mae and walked toward the poker table.

Yet even as he did so, something resembling panic was in his breast. He did not doubt the literal truth of her statement of her power over him. What was going to happen? Would Mae, in her rage, turn him cold-bloodedly over

to the law? Such thoughts tore through Jubal's brain as he seated himself once more behind Reb's chair.

17

Gradually, however, his mind cleared. Now he saw that the tide had turned for Reb and that the cowman was cashing in on his run of luck while it lasted. By two o'clock in the morning, Jubal's partner was sitting comfortably behind ten thousand dollars, having more than trebled his pile, and almost doubled his original stake since midnight. Pretty Sam was in a fury. Jubal could see the gambler betting savagely, trying to beat down the leather-faced cowman, and Reb won and won.

Dawn at last began to gray the east and weariness showed not only in the faces of the players, but in those of the tense watchers who still sat or stood, packed around the table, held by this epic game, unable to leave its fascination. Since two o'clock Reb had lost a little, but he still had about nine thousand dollars before him, his winnings piled in high yellow stacks. Everything must come to a climax soon, was the thought around the table.

Howell was the dealer. Matlock, with his heavy frown, opened for fifty dollars and Gooney raised it by two hundred more. To the surprise of everyone, Roberts and Winehart, who had lost heavily, both stayed for the two hundred and fifty dollars which the pot now cost, and Uvalde tossed his hand in. But Chavez, with a flash of his white teeth beneath the waxy little mustache, raised the bet an extra hundred.

"Must be some big hands out," thought Jubal as he looked over Reb's shoulder. Four clubs, headed by the ace, and an odd heart were the cards his partner held . . . a bob-tailed flush, worth nothing.

"He'll throw in," Jubal said to himself. But the guess was wrong.

"Three hundred and fifty to stay?" asked Reb, screwing up his face and examining his cards. "That's a piker bet, gents. Make it five hundred!"

Inwardly Jubal gasped. Was Reb going crazy? Howell dropped out, but Matlock grimly put up the four hundred and fifty dollars which was the difference between the present size of the bet and his opening fifty dollars. Only two men had been crowded out of the pot—Howell and Uvalde Yates. Before the draw there was three thousand dollars on the table . . . and Reb with a four-flush.

"Cyards to the gamblers," grunted Howell, no longer personally interested in the pot, and becoming suddenly the cool and unprejudiced

arbiter. Two to Matlock. Gooney held up one thick, stubby finger. The Doña Ana men asked two apiece. Chavez, his aquiline, olive face deeply abstracted, studied his hand and said, “*Una carta.*” Reb also took a single card to end the deal.

The surcharged atmosphere heightened in excitement as Matlock, the opener, checked. It was Gooney’s turn to bet. He rolled his bloodshot eyes over toward Reb.

“Time for all tin horns to get out,” he said with a hint of menace in his voice. “I hereby makes this hand worth while. An even stack of yeller chips.”

A thousand dollars at one bite! Roberts and Winehart glanced at each other and whistled. Neither had helped their threes and now they both tossed in their hands.

“*Salir de lodazales y entrar en cenegales,*” smiled Chavez with a shrug. “Out of the mire and into the swamp.” Then he followed the example of the others.

For the first time Reb picked up his hand and examined it. One after another, Jubal saw him reveal four clubs. The fifth card . . . the seven of diamonds. He had failed to fill his flush.

Jubal was nearly sick with disappointment. But what was Reb doing? Instead of discarding the worthless hand, the cowman was pushing chips out on the table.

“One thousand,” he said, “*and* one thousand.”

Gooney’s eyes were congested. “I’ll see that an’ raise you back fifteen hundred,” he snarled after Matlock had sighed and gotten out.

Even a pair would beat Reb, Jubal hopelessly knew. He believed the gambler held not less than two pair—maybe threes, but more likely a flush, straight or full house. But there was never a quiver in the old cowman’s voice.

“I tilts it another two thousand,” he said.

Twelve thousand dollars in the pot . . . and Reb without a prayer.

“Seen an’ raised three thousand,” Pretty Sam’s voice grated.

“Table stakes!” suddenly proclaimed Reb, and Jubal could have sworn there was a happy note in his voice. “That jest measures my pile. Gooney, I calls ye!”

Looking at Pretty Sam's face, Jubal saw a startled change in expression. It was as if the man perceived for the first time that a pit had been dug for him and he had fallen into it. The gambler was suddenly haggard. Down went his cards on the table. And Jubal's amazement rose. Like Reb, Gooney held only a bob-tailed flush. Four diamonds and the four spot of clubs. But:

"Two fours!" he announced. One of the diamonds was also a four spot, to match the club.

Then, with a flourish, Reb spread his own hand. Jubal's blood leaped as for the first time he saw:

"A pair of sevens!" The seven of diamonds paired up with one of the clubs the cowman held.

There was twenty thousand dollars in chips on the table.

BOOK 7

Corsair of the Horse

1

As soon as the air grew chill with the presage of dawn, Jubal and Reb mounted. Only a few lights glimmered in the dim streets of El Paso, but the two had been up for an hour, eating breakfast, then loading the pack mule which Jubal was to take with him on his journey.

“Looks like ye was worried for nothing,” remarked Reb.

“Mebbe I was wrong, but there was a threat in her eyes if I ever saw one.”

They were speaking of Mae Gooney, Jubal having related to his partner the story of his early acquaintance with her, described the conversation of the night before, and expressed the opinion that she might try to make trouble for him.

“One thing I’d like to ask,” said the younger man. “How did you know Gooney was four-flushin’ last night on that big hand?”

“His eyes. When he held the pat full against me an’ thought he had me cinched, I noticed the pupils of them orbs of his grew as little, almost, as pin-points. But when the last hand come up an’ the big bettin’ begun, I saw them pupils git wide an’ black. He was excited, ye see. I knew right then it was bluff, an’ gambled on high cardin’ him with that ace of clubs I was holdin’. After him an’ me got the others run out—an’ that was easy, considerin’ that none of them could forget that pat full house an’ four deuces which we butted heads on before—I knew it was between us. When I looked over my hand after the draw, I was plumb diverted to see that I had a pair of sevens—an’ I figgered he didn’t have a chance. Believe me, them fours he showed staggered me some. If they’d been a little higher, ye’d have seen me look mighty sick. But I knew right up to the last draw that he didn’t hold as good as me, which made me bet high, wide, an’ han’some, to help him force them others out, because any one of them had both of us beat.”

It was the old Reb again, his humorous self-confidence all restored, with whom Jubal rode with a light heart toward the international border. Reb was to remain in El Paso, while Jubal, with his pack-load of gifts, sought the

bandit Mesa in the wilderness to the south. In salmon-pink glory the sun was rising, outlining in inky blackness the buildings silhouetted against it as the partners reached the international bridge. Two horsemen, Jubal observed, seemed to be waiting at the bridge head.

“Halt!” came a command in a deep rumble of bass.

“Why, it’s you, Gatling!” exclaimed Reb as he pulled up his horse. The ranger captain it was who had stopped them.

“How yo’-all, gentlemen. Ah hope yo’ will understand that this is a mos’ unpleasant duty. Ah have to put yo’ under arrest.”

“But what for?” asked Jubal, his heart sinking.

“One of yo’ is wanted fo’ murdeh.” The ranger glanced shrewdly at them. “Info’mation Ah got didn’t say which. Ah was told to stop yo’ an’ bring yo’ back.”

“You wouldn’t arrest both on suspicion of the same crime?”

“It seems to be the only way out.”

“On whose complaint is this arrest to be made?”

“That Ah don’t know.” He gave them that same shrewd look, his long face quizzical. “Ah’ve allus heard, tho’, that theh ain’t no accountin’ fo’ the actions of a jealous woman.”

Jubal turned the last remark over in his mind. Clearly the ranger was in no sympathy with the complaint or the complainant, and was making the arrest with the poorest of grace.

“Gatling,” Jubal said earnestly, “it’s a frame-up. Last night Reb, here, won fourteen thousand dollars off of Pretty Sam Gooney. This is his way of getting even. It’s tremendous important to me to get goin’ on this trip of mine right now. To delay me even a few hours would ruin my chance in the deal I want to make.”

“Who yo’ goin’ to deal with?”

“Mesa.”

“The bandit? Holy cow! Yo’ got yo’ onmitigated gall to tackle *him*.” Gatling hesitated. It was apparent that the daring nature of Jubal’s proposal intrigued him. “Ah’ll tell yo’ boys somethin’. Thar ain’t been no warrant sworn out fo’ yo’ yet. If one of yo’ will stay with me as a guarantee the otheh will come back, Ah’ll let one of yo’ go.”

“That’s jake with me,” said Reb quickly. “I’ll stay with ye. Jube kin go.”

His face was turned toward his partner and the ranger did not see the preternatural wink into which the old cowman screwed up his face. With misgivings in his heart, Jubal acquiesced to the arrangement, and led his mule across the thundering planks of the long bridge.

2

Southward across the desert rode Jubal, a speck in the vastness. The sun climbed high in the heaven, warmed the chilled morning air, then steadily squeezed from it every atom of moisture, substituting the heat of a bake oven. Small and withdrawn into their sockets grew Jubal’s eyes, his wide-brimmed hat casting a deep shadow over his bronzed face. There would be many days of this and he might as well become accustomed to it.

Toward noon he halted to permit his horse and pack mule to drink at a small pool, called in the desert a “tank.” While Jubal lolled in the shadow of a clump of yuccas, the rapid thud of hoofs came to his ears.

She drew up before him, her pony in a lather.

“Mae, what are you doing here?” asked Jubal, slowly rising from the ground, his face expressionless, but his mind in a whirl.

“I ought to ask you that,” she retorted. “What are *you* doing here?”

“I see that you know.”

“Yes, I do. You told me last night you were going to Mexico, and that dog-faced ranger friend of yours told me this morning . . . that you were going to the camp of Mesa, the bandit.”

“What’s it to you?” Suspicion was on his face.

“Oh, nothing much.” She shrugged her shoulders, staring indifferently at the distant mountains. “Of course you know that Mesa is death—a killer who hates like snakes half of his own people and all Americans?”

“I don’t reckon he’ll try killin’ me.”

“And why not, may I ask? Is it because, by any chance, of your sweet and courteous disposition? Don’t be a fool, Jubal! He’s a bandit, isn’t he? The boss-bandit, and plenty bad. Why shouldn’t he kill you like anybody else?”

“I think I can show him why.”

“My God, quit being so stupid. Mesa is hunted like a mad dog by the *rurales* and regulars both. I’ve heard that Porfirio Diaz has offered ten thousand *pesos* for Mesa’s head. That’s important *dinero* in any country, let alone Mexico. Mesa can’t afford risks—with plenty of his own men, probably, aching for a chance to earn that reward. To an outlaw whose account already is so long with the government, is it likely that one more murder—of expediency, let us say—would make it any the worse for him?”

The woman was deadly serious, but Jubal smiled thinly.

“And what would you suggest if I don’t go?”

“Return to El Paso.”

The bitter smile grew harsher on the cowman’s lips. “An’ be thrown into the hoosegow—like you tried to have me thrown this mornin’?”

She stared at him a full minute, a conflict of emotions playing on her face. At last:

“I don’t know why I wasted my time. Jubal Troop, you’re an ungrateful idiot! Isn’t it enough that I’ve gone out of my way, ridden miles in the desert just to warn you that you’re committing certain suicide—isn’t that enough, I say, without my having to sit here and listen to you insult me? Listen to this: I had nothing whatever to do with the Ranger stopping you this morning. It was all Gooney’s doing. I knew nothing about it until Gatling came back with old Haizlipp, and then I wouldn’t let them rest until Sam Gooney withdrew his charge and the Rangers turned Haizlipp loose. Then I followed you to warn you about the kind of a *hombre* your friend Mesa is.”

Jubal rose to his feet and removed his hat. “I’m mighty sorry if I misjudged you, Mae. You see—I’ve never been quite able to forget Teton, and that posse—”

She gave her horse a cut with the whip which made it jump; then took out her feelings in bringing it to a stand again. When once more she faced Jubal she was calm.

“I know what you mean,” she said. “And I guess that I can’t blame you very much. I did set that posse on you. But, Jubal, you were enough to drive a woman mad with your remarks when you came back to the ranch—after . . . Remember that I was all unstrung, and after you finished with me I was so furious I would gladly have seen you killed. But there’s this much to remember in my favor: I repented of it, and spent half that night looking for the posse, to stop them. If I hadn’t come just when I did you’d never have gotten away—”

“You came to stop that posse?” This was new light and a new viewpoint for Jubal.

“Certainly.”

There was almost a look of friendliness on the man’s face as he stepped forward and laid a hand on the withers of Mae’s horse. “Now, Mae,” he said, “I’m downright glad you told me this. It clears up one thing that’s always bothered me. I had thought you came to witness the lynchin’.”

“Jubal! You couldn’t!”

“I’m sorry if I wronged you. But you see I didn’t wait long enough to hear what you had to say to that posse—an’ in the absence of that evidence, the conclusions I come to were pretty obvious.”

She was silent for a moment, and an expression as if of pain passed over her face. Then: “Now that you understand this, will you come back with me?”

“I’m sorry, Mae. I’m goin’ through with what I started.”

She frowned down on him at that. Then suddenly her eyes changed to an odd, speculative look. “All right,” she said suddenly, coming to an unexpected decision. “I’m going along with you.”

“No!” Jubal’s exclamation was abrupt and aghast.

“How are you going to keep me from it?” She appeared to be amused at his horror and alarm.

Jubal swore heartily. Woman trouble. Again and again it had risen to complicate things for him. But Mae seemed different from other women. What was behind this move of hers? There was certainly no coquetry in the look she was giving him now. To Jubal it seemed that her motives were malicious, bitter, sardonic. Yet, as he had never fully understood this remarkable woman in his tempestuous experience of her in the past, so he did not understand her now. There was something far more impelling even than malice in Mae’s sudden decision to accompany him on his adventure. . . .

For the present, Jubal could think of nothing to say, save to reiterate weakly: “I won’t let you,” as he mounted and rode away, leading his pack mule. Presently, glancing around, he saw her jogging her own horse after him. He stopped.

“Go back!” he ordered savagely.

She sat in her saddle looking at him, a mocking grin on her face.

“If I was a woman, I’d be ashamed to follow where I wasn’t wanted,” he growled.

“Yes? Perhaps I’ve got a pretty good reason of my own for wanting to go along—whether you like it or not.” She was defiant.

Nothing was to be gained by this kind of exchange. Jubal, disgusted, angry and baffled, spurred forward once more. Through the long afternoon his horse trotted and the pack mule lagged. Frequently Jubal turned impatiently, to find the woman riding always fifty yards or so to the rear of his little caravan.

That evening the man made his camp by the side of a desert tank. While he fried bacon over a small greasewood fire, he could see Mae hunched on the other side of the little pool. She had no fire; apparently no food.

Jubal stood up at last and swore for at least the hundredth time that day. With a look of resignation on his face, he strode around the water to where Mae sat. She glanced up at him with the same impertinent expression. For a moment he stood over her, glowering.

“Come on over an’ get something to eat,” he snapped at length and stalked away.

“Thanks, pardner,” she responded cheerfully. “I was wondering how long it was going to take you to remember that there was a lady present.”

She followed him to his fire.

3

They were awake long before dawn. In the days across the desert, their schedule had been reduced to a routine. Mae was up first, leaving the snug round nest where she had burrowed a depression in the sand and lined it with her blankets for the night. Jubal, on the opposite side of the fire, remained outstretched for a minute, frowningly considering the microscopic globules of water formed by the impalpable mist on each of the tiny filaments standing up from his woolen covering. The woman was now a definite part of his expedition, and he, helplessly acquiescent, still resented it. But the globules of mist already were disappearing and Mae was brewing coffee and hurriedly cooking a skillet of bacon. Jubal left his blankets and began packing for the day’s ride.

In all respects the country they were now traversing differed from that over which they had previously passed. The orange desert was behind them. That had been a landscape which staggered the mind with its vastness, in which all ordinary measuring sticks of size and distance were missing. A hill appeared to be half a mile away, until closer study revealed the fact that a tiny green spot on its slope was a clump of trees growing about some small *laguna*. Instantly the hill receded ten miles. A scattering of pin-point spots suddenly took on new meaning—cattle or wild mustangs, so far away as to be unidentifiable.

To the west and south loomed the frowning immensity of the mountains, always in sight, mauve shadows in the first days, later growing into clear-cut black masses. Nearer were the foothills, each great in itself, but dwarfed by the tremendous piles beyond. Thus for days they had ridden. But at last the desert was behind and the mountains on this morning were all about them.

Breakfast was eaten in silence. Jubal, tight-lipped and sulking, still smarted under Mae's unwanted presence. She, on the other hand, was deceptively sweet, yet she had learned by this time that it was impossible to draw him into a conversation.

"Cinch your saddle good," said Jubal briefly as they prepared to mount. "We'll be climbing today." Directions such as these were almost the only words he ever uttered. The hot sun bit into their backs. Mae rode first, the man following and tugging at the unwilling pack mule which lagged behind at the limit of its tether. After hours of riding, always upward, a distant rushing sound came to their ears.

"A river," the woman called back to Jubal, and presently they were beside it as it brawled noisily down the bottom of a canyon up which their trail seemed to lead. The stream rushed clear, sweet and cold at this place, but they had seen its fate out in the wastes, where it grew sluggish like an aging man, and eventually died in a fading *laguna* the salty water of which had no outlet save evaporation.

They lifted their horses to a steady trot, the pack mule with his neck stretched forth and his chin lifted to the halter, shuffling morosely behind.

"There's some kind of a village ahead," Mae said presently.

"Just a little *rancheria*," grunted Jubal.

Nobody was in sight as they neared it. The men were away. Somewhere in the tiny hidden fields, chopped out of the mountain jungle with the *machete*, they were at work, cultivating the ground with unending toil for a

meager sheaf or so of crops in the fall. In this *rancheria* only women, children and aged abode during the day. At the first word of the appearance of strangers, all these had gone into hiding. Doors to little thatched huts slammed shut behind the shrinking back of women who cowered in the dimmest corners, while some white-haired old gaffer, still retaining a spark of his pristine male boldness, dared to risk one eye in a furtive peek through a crack in the barrier. Higher up the hillsides a rustle of bushes revealed where some of the older children, boys and maidens, had sought sanctuary in the jungle itself, trusting not even the walls of their own homes for safety when the white man came. A few ill-conditioned curs rushed forward barking, the skin pulled drum-tight over their skeleton ribs. With great show of fangs and snarling lips, and the hackles stiffly risen on their chins, these raised a mounting clamor, yet took good care to remain beyond any possible reach of stick or quirt. Even the wretched, thin chickens, wild almost as the jungle fowl which were their forebears, scattered cackling, their speed enhanced by sudden, blundering flights which took them swooping, with clumsy flapping wings, into the thickets.

In all the village not a living thing was to be seen save the dogs. Wait . . . one little thing. A tiny *muchacho*, too young to be afraid, stood stark naked, with little bloated belly protruding, beside the single alley which was the *rancheria's* only street. Sucking his thumb, his short bandy legs supporting awkwardly his baby torso, he stared at the strangers with eyes as bright as great, black diamonds. But at the appearance of Jubal and Mae there came a poignant scream. Her loose, dirty white dress of unbleached muslin fluttering in panic, a small coppery woman scurried wildly from one of the huts. Momentarily her breasts were revealed in the loose neck of her garment as she stooped over the child. Then she whisked him up and they vanished together into the house.

Wonderingly Mae turned to Jubal. "The sight of us has scared these people into fits," she said. "Why?"

"Afraid of the soldiers," he replied.

"I don't understand. These Indians are peaceful, aren't they?"

"It's because we're gettin' nearer to Mesa's stronghold, likely," he explained. "Each mile we come nearer, we'll find the people more scairt of Diaz's *rurales*. His hand is mighty heavy. *Casas* burn, men hang like strange fruit from the trees, women are carried off screaming—that's what happens when the *rurales* come, so Emilio told me. No wonder these poor folks take to the bush at the first sight of anybody they don't know."

“Why do they let Diaz do such things?” Mae demanded hotly.

“Because he is the *presidente*, the dictator. He has the army and all the power.”

“But the people could rise against him and overturn his power.”

He shrugged. “Old Emilio used to say: ‘*Para el mal que hoy acaba, no es remedio el de mañana.*’ That means, ‘Tomorrow’s remedy is too late for today’s evil.’ ”

She studied him curiously. “You talk Mexican pretty well, don’t you?”

“There was a Mexican family on our ranch,” he replied shortly. The question had recalled him to his present situation and his resentment at this woman.

He relapsed into sour silence as they rode through the village and up the trail on the other side. Mae was showing the effect of the hard days in the desert. Her face was burned and although each morning she carefully dressed her hair, sand and sun are not beauty treatments. She wore a divided skirt, an article of feminine wardrobe new to Jubal. This permitted her to ride astride, but it was wrinkled and stained with grease, campfire ashes and smoke. Their experience in the village, moreover, seemed for the first time to make her realize the real nature of the adventure upon which they were embarked and as they climbed higher and higher in the canyon, it appeared that her courage was breaking. The gorge, which at first had been thinly sprinkled with scrub cedar and other trees, had become dark with pines, and the sweetness of the needles was a welcome change after the blasting heat of the orange sand. Jubal rode with his face set grimly ahead, but Mae’s eyes, widening with fear, glanced this way and that in growing agitation.

4

“*Alto!*”

Like a pistol shot the command rang out in the canyon. Mae gave a little squeal, yet the very sound of the cry came as a relief from their tension. Both Jubal and the woman brought their horses to a stop and raised their arms. From around a massive boulder which half-blocked the trail, sidled an old Yaqui Indian with a face like one of the stone idols of the Aztecs. At the same instant the click of rifle hammers being raised showed that others lay in the bushes from which he had issued.

The old Yaqui, with his wide straw sombrero, and his *serape*, a flare of gorgeous scarlets, blacks and whites, wrapped backward about his skinny

throat, glared at them from under grizzled eyebrows.

“*Quién es?*” he demanded.

Jubal explained, in Spanish, that he was a trader from El Paso, with a desire to see *El General*. The suspicion in the old man’s eyes intensified.

“*Que quiere?*”

He had gifts for Mesa, Jubal replied, and he wished to talk about certain advantageous matters with him. A different face to the question. The Yaqui’s bitter eyes wandered over the *Americano* woman’s handsome figure, then past her to the suggestive hummocks under the covering of the pack load on the mule. Too well he knew his leader to interfere with a convoy of this kind. The *gringo* could always be shot at leisure. Perhaps the woman might furnish diversion for Mesa. And afterward, when *El General* tired of her, she might even fall to the lot of a certain faithful lieutenant whom the Yaqui could name. He licked his thin chops. The woman was tempting, without question. Right now he was willing to guarantee that if ever she went to him, he would not leave her lonely . . . even at his age. Having decided these matters in his mind, the old Indian waved his arm.

With appalling swiftness a dozen mounted men rushed about the two riders on the trail—so quickly that Jubal could not see whence they came. One ugly little wisp of a rider, with a yard-wide peasant’s sombrero, laid a brown hand on Jubal’s bridle rein. Another horseman jerked from its holster the American’s revolver. Helplessly Jubal was led, jolting, up the canyon as still a third bandit lashed his horse behind. Looking back he could see Mae, her face pale and her eyes filled with terror, being hustled along in the same manner, with a knot of grinning men about her. Still farther to the rear came the pack-mule with its load.

Dusk was almost at hand and the swift mountain sunset was beginning when the party emerged on the lip of a steep hill overlooking a wide valley, down which the river wound its silvery way through a fringe of trees. Jubal’s first impression was that he was gazing down upon a field of huge, brownish mushrooms. Then he saw black ant-like figures moving among them, and realized that the mushroom-like objects were thatched *jacales* of the type in which the savage mountain Indians lived, and that the ants were human beings. He was looking at Mesa’s camp.

No time was permitted for a long survey. Among the huts, a rifle cracked. At the same moment every man in the band which was guarding Jubal and Mae, began to whoop like an exultant fiend. In a cascade of

running horses they poured down the steep bluff and swept toward the *rancheria*, while out of the *jacales* scurried a mob of yelling men and women.

Without question the voices were hostile. Jubal knew he was provoking most of the throaty roar of rage because he was a *gringo*. But there were shrill female shrieks of hate mingled with the deeper masculine snarling. Those were for Mae. His muscles tightened and his jaw set. This was the crisis. If he were to succeed, it would be within the next few minutes. Otherwise . . . the brandished guns told him what would be his fate.

Around the two prisoners swirled the throng. Rough hands clutched at Jubal, dragging him from his saddle. Out of the tail of his eye he saw Mae similarly pulled from her horse, her mouth opened grotesquely in a scream which was inaudible because of the noise. Then the crowd swallowed her and he was looking into dark, scowling faces . . . faces of depravity and bottomless cruelty. Faces of men and women who had developed a thirst for death and agony in a victim. Back and forth he was hustled, hard thumbs, even sticks, prodding his sides and belly. The sour odor of unbathed bodies rose with the powdery dust which was trampled up by the mob. His ears ached with the noise which seemed to explode in his eardrums with a strange crackling sensation.

As if a window had been closed, shutting it out, the noise stilled suddenly. Jubal became aware that in front of him the crowd was parting. Like a ship plowing through the waves, a great, burly man was pushing his way toward the prisoners. Quickly a lane fell open and the dark figure strode forward, limping slightly. Jubal had a brief impression of broad shoulders, thick barrel of a body, bowed legs of a constant rider. Then the newcomer thrust his face fairly into that of the American. It was a massive face with a heavy, putty nose, loose lips under a rank black mustache, and a fatty hardness in the dark, greasy cheeks. The man wore an old military tunic, very stained and splotted with food and weather and with half its buttons gone. Faded trousers were tucked into high riding boots with deep wrinkles at the insteps which told of long use. And low at the hips sagged a cartridge belt, with two pearl-handled Colt revolvers dangling in their holsters.

Planting himself wide-legged, his jaw pushed forward, this formidable individual surveyed both Jubal and Mae with a silent, masterful glare. In his eyeballs was a red gleam which looked supernally baleful until Jubal decided it was a reflection of the sunset in the deep sockets under the sombrero. So quiet had the crowd become that its heavy breathing could be heard.

“*Pode usted descifra?*” The sheer irrelevancy of the question was stunning. There stood Jubal and Mae, in horror of death or torture within the next five minutes, and this man asked them if they could read! Perhaps it was a trap. Jubal nodded guardedly, not trusting himself to speak.

Immediately the burly figure turned and the old Yaqui with the grizzled eyebrows jabbed a finger after it.

“Follow. He is *El General Mesa*,” he said in guttural Spanish.

Jubal had surmised as much. With Mae crowding fearfully at his side, he obeyed the Yaqui’s order, his eyes fixed with growing interest and apprehension upon the hulking shape ahead, noticing the strength and massive power in the broad back. The bandit chief, without looking behind, limped stolidly through the *rancheria*. Stories of how this man treated prisoners leaped into Jubal’s memory. There was, however, nothing to do but follow those mighty shoulders.

As Mesa led the way among the thatched *jacales*, Jubal could not help gaining an impression of disorderliness and filth. The huts were huddled together without arrangement. All about, the ground lay strewn with horse furniture and camp utensils. Flies rose in swarms from refuse scattered everywhere. Barking, skulking or filching on every side were dogs, the inevitable concomitant of every Mexican village, no matter how temporary. A dirty, lazy camp. Not in any respect military, save that all the men carried rifles or revolvers; and cartridge belts about the waist or worn bandoleer-style across the chest were *de rigueur* as a part of every costume. Jubal observed that women were almost as numerous as men, and that there were many young girls. Not a few appeared to be pregnant. And there were hordes of dirty-faced children. Evidently breeding and banditry went hand in hand in this encampment.

Mesa stopped before a hut no larger, cleaner, or better than the rest.

“*Anda!*” he shouted, turning toward the crowd which had followed. The people halted in their tracks, stood still for a moment, then began to drift away, some of the women pausing to cast back spiteful looks. With Mae closely following him, Jubal stooped and entered the darkness of the *jacale*. She bent beneath the low opening, her body for a moment against his, and he could feel her heart thumping like that of a frightened bird.

Then Mesa entered and, striking a match, lit a battered stable lantern which hung by a thong from one of the poles of the *jacale*. A typical Mexican-Indian habitation was revealed by the light. The pungent scent of

cedar ashes reached Jubal's nostrils. There were a couple of stained canvas camp cots, with soiled Mexican blankets and *serapes* upon them. A plain wooden table and a camp stool with a canvas seat, stood at one side. The floor was the earth, pounded hard by use. Near the door lay a wonderful saddle, heavy with mountings of silver and gold, its leather crusted with hand carving; here and there about the sloping walls of the hut were many bundles, while an iron-bound Spanish trunk bulked opposite the doorway.

Mesa stooped over the trunk. From it he drew something and held it toward Jubal. A bottle. Plain, brown glass, thick stopper. A paper inscription was pasted on the side.

"*Descifra,*" Mesa ordered.

With the bottle in his hand, Jubal stepped beneath the lantern and turned the inscription to the light. It was scrawled in English:

"*Take one spoonful in half cup water, every two hours.*"

A simple task. Yet as he read, translating into Spanish, Jubal saw a dawning look of remembrance and relief on Mesa's face. Eagerly the bandit seized the bottle. A smeared glass tumbler was found. From a clay *olla* he dipped water, then with a spoon measured out the medicine and swallowed the dose.

"*Bien!*" grunted Mesa with satisfaction. Then a wide grin spread across his swart features. "*Amigo! Mil gracias!*" he roared delightedly, clapping Jubal a blow upon the shoulder which, had the American been any sort of a weakling, would have sent him spinning.

5

The mystery of the brown bottle was explained later when Jubal grew acquainted with El Rejo, the Yaqui *jefe del guardia* who had taken Mae and himself prisoners and brought them to Mesa's camp. The old man, with his skull-like face, its harsh cheekbones almost jutting through the stretched skin, and his shaggy eyebrows protruding so that the little glittering eyes seemed lost in the shadows, acted as Mesa's chief lieutenant. His name signified "the Sting," and later Jubal agreed it was deserved.

From El Rejo, it was learned that Mesa suffered from a chronic illness, a kidney trouble which afflicted him recurrently. A year previous he had obtained medicine from a frightened American doctor in a border town. The great bandit stood over the physician with a drawn revolver, describing minutely his pains and swearing that if the prescription prepared failed to

work, he or his men would return and tie that doctor upon an ant hill, to be consumed bit by bit until he died. White as paper, and with hands trembling from terror, the wretched physician prepared a bottle of fluid. Fright, apparently, had not prevented a close diagnosis of Mesa's ailment, for the prescription was efficacious. A few days after he obtained it, the bandit rode back to the border village to reward the doctor. But there was no doctor there. So great had been the physician's panic that he had sold his property and departed in haste for Tucson, to be far away from the vicinity of the terrible man with the huge revolvers.

Months had passed since Mesa had last been ill and in the interim the bandit leader forgot the proper dose to take. Only a day before the arrival of Jubal and Mae, the old trouble had returned. In vain Mesa searched through his camp for someone able to read, an art he did not himself possess. There were few who could decipher Spanish; none who knew English. So desperate was Mesa that he was on the verge of ordering out his *charros* to capture him a *padre*, when Jubal providentially arrived. The instant the latter read the prescription, Mesa remembered it and his mind verified the truth of the rendition.

Circumstances could not have turned out more favorably. From the first Jubal was in high favor with the bandit chief. This, of course, the American did not know in the beginning. He brought up the pack-mule and presented the gifts: a new Winchester rifle, two silver-plated Colt revolvers with ammunition, and liquor. With the revolvers Mesa was particularly delighted, grinning like a child, dropping them into his holsters in place of the old pair, and drawing and snapping them several times with incredible swiftness. In the end, however, he put the new weapons away in his trunk and returned the old, well-oiled and familiar ones to their places.

"The accustomed friends are the best in trouble," he said. Then he ordered an empty *jacale* prepared for the visitors and invited them that night to share a feast with him.

More than once Mesa's eyes had wandered over Mae's trim shape.

"*Casada o corteja?*" he suddenly asked Jubal, indicating the woman with his dirty thumb.

Jubal's eyes were on Mae's face. He saw that she had caught the drift of the question: *Wife or mistress?* For the life of him he could not read her expression. It seemed a composition of many expressions actually—curiosity, perhaps slight apprehension, certainly mockery. She was waiting his answer and it angered him to know that she was expecting him weakly to

lie for her protection. Nevertheless he knew that it was his duty to keep her out of a dangerous situation, so, cursing himself, he replied: “She is my *casada*.” The mockery deepened in her eyes. Furiously he realized that she was inwardly laughing at him.

But after the Americans departed for their new *jacale*, Mesa’s eyes followed their retreating figures, dwelling with appreciation upon that of the woman.

“*La mujer y el vidrio siempre estan en peligro*,” he quoted. A woman and a glass are always in danger.

6

“I suppose I should thank you for your extremely chivalrous falsehood,” said Mae when they had been ushered into their dwelling. “It was very noble, especially when you would rather have bitten out your tongue than say it.”

Jubal did not answer, but scowled toward the door.

“Why did you do it?” she pursued tauntingly. “Did you think it wouldn’t be respectable for Mesa to think you were traveling with a—a mistress?”

“No,” Jubal growled. “I did it maybe to save you trouble.”

“To save me trouble?” Again the sardonic look was in her eyes. “Mr. Mesa wouldn’t cause me trouble. In fact, I think . . . he might have some interesting possibilities—”

“Mae, why in hell did you follow me here?” he broke in furiously. “I didn’t want you! You have no business here. You’re a damned nuisance and yet I’ve got to take care of you. Why did you come?”

“Why did *you* come?” she countered.

“That’s my business!”

“*My* coming is my business, too.”

He stared at her. There was an endless perplexity in his mind concerning her. Would this woman follow him down into the desert merely for a spiteful chance to thwart him? More possible, had she guessed his plan, and accompanied him to capitalize in some manner on his adventure? He wondered how much Reb Haizlipp had told her before she set out in pursuit of him. Mae was bold enough to do these things—and yet, somehow, Jubal could not believe they were part of her purpose. A subtle change had come

in their relationship during the last few days. He remembered her unfailing good humor in their journey across the desert, a journey which must have been full of hardship for her. And he pictured again in his mind how, in spite of her evident terror, she had ridden doggedly up the canyon into the ambush of the bandit outpost. These things had made a levy upon his admiration, and, in spite of his sharp words, a warm spot for the woman was growing in his heart. Perhaps she knew this and took delight in provoking him accordingly.

A summons from Mesa to come to the feast interrupted the train of thought. Indian cookery made Jubal's gorge rise, and most of the people in this encampment were Indians—Yaquis or Tarahumaris—with their own primitive culinary ideas. Walking with Mae to Mesa's hut Jubal saw the feast in preparation near the *jacale*. Messes of meat and entrails, thrown in together, were boiling in a huge kettle, while in another pot a brace of chickens stewed, their feathers only half plucked, no attempt made to remove their viscera, and their horny legs protruding stiffly from the bubbling water. After the cooking, it was customary to leave the meat standing in containers beside the fire. Anybody who wished to partake squatted beside a pot and helped himself with a flat piece of *tortilla* for a spoon.

By sheer will power, Jubal forced himself to eat. He was sorry for Mae who poked squeamishly into the kettles, trying to swallow some of the less nauseous bits. Mesa ate with them, and afterwards his retainers devoured what was left. The liquor Jubal had brought was now broached, together with many bottles of *tequila* and quantities of *pulque*, so that the men and women of the camp became intoxicated together, and went yelling and singing through the village, firing frequent "joy shots" at the moon, to punctuate their racket. It was a situation fraught with danger and Jubal took Mae to Mesa's own hut. In spite of the bandit leader's decision to befriend them, there were many in the camp who were murderous. Sober, few would dare harm the *Americanos*. But drunk, there was no telling when one of them might yield to the impulse to slip a knife into one or both of the visitors.

Not until late at night did the noise subside sufficiently to permit Jubal and Mae to return to their *jacale*. On opposite sides of the hut Jubal spread their blankets. She surveyed this with an enigmatic smile.

"Do you think . . . all that distance between our beds will make you good and safe?"

He ignored the question.

“You don’t take very good care of your—*casada*, Mr. Troop.”

“I didn’t invite you to come, did I?” he snapped. “It was your own idea. Now that you’re here, leave me alone.” It was churlish, and he knew it. And this made him even more furious with himself and the situation in which he was.

He lay grumpily in his blankets for a time, trying to sleep. But the lantern in the *jacale* was still alight, and he was conscious of her movements. Presently he stole a glance at her at her toilette. A mirror had been provided in the *jacale*, one of the few mirrors in the camp, and now she was doing her hair. The soft play of her arms about her head fascinated him as men have always been fascinated by the graceful arts of women. There was an intimacy about this simple act, which, coupled with the challenging curves of her body, made the blood pound in his temples. His mouth felt dry and he suddenly found himself exerting his will to keep from arising from his pallet and going over to her. The woman was in his blood vessels. He clenched his teeth and turned his face to the wall. After a time he heard her extinguish the light and slide into her blankets.

Jubal slept little that night. An imperious want tormented him and he tossed in his bed, fighting with himself. Twice or thrice he half rose on his elbow, staring across through the pitchy blackness, but each time he sank back and at length fell restlessly into slumber.

Sometime during the dark hours he woke with the feeling that Mae was sitting bolt upright in her bed.

“What’s that?” he heard her electric whisper.

There was a sudden scuffle back of their hut, a scream and a sound of blows. He heard her bound from her pallet and she came in a rush to him, whimpering with fright, the softness of her body imperiously demanding from him . . . comfort. In that hut’s warm murk, he found her mouth with his lips. The darkness became audible with a heavy breathing, broken whispers, and a strange silent commotion as if the two in the hut were struggling together . . . a whispering sibilance of furious yet gentle locked embraces. To them all outside sounds were lost, even the shouting which followed the scream and the blow behind the dwelling, and the multiple thud of running feet.

After a time silence descended within the *jacale* as well as without, and toward morning the entire bandit *rancheria* slept deeply.

Shortly after daylight a woman with downcast eyes and patient face brought fresh-baked *tortillas* and steaming *chile con carne*. While his guests were still eating, Mesa came wandering over to their hut and smilingly told them about the disturbance of the night before. One of his men, a fool fuddled by too much *tequila*, had been found lurking behind the *jacale* of Jubal and Mae. Very properly, Mesa added, the man had been slain on the spot by the guards, and his body cast away in the woods.

Standing in the doorway, the bandit pointed across the valley. Dark, spreading wings came spiraling down from the skies. The buzzards were gathering.

“The *buaros* today; the coyotes tonight. He will not be lonesome,” grinned Mesa.

7

In the long days which followed the Americans' arrival at the *rancheria* Mesa came to visit their *jacale* with growing frequency and the reason for his visits was becoming obvious. The bandit's eyes, which had looked so balefully red with the sunset's reflection that first time they saw him, were soft, seal-brown when he was near Mae. It was as natural for the woman to flirt as it was to breathe, and her own tactics were to blame for the bandit's growing warmth. Conversing with Mesa in her limited Mexican vocabulary, she amused herself by speaking lightly and frivolously, and casting coquettish sidelong glances and smiles.

As for Mesa, he was obviously going headlong for her lure. All this Jubal observed with misgivings. There was something ardent and compelling about the great outlaw, the American was forced to admit; and with half-amused resentment, he saw himself, the ostensible husband of Mae, virtually thrust into the background while Mesa paid open suit to her. Knowing the bandit, Jubal had reason to fear the potential results of this flirtation.

At last he protested to Mae, but she only gazed at him in mocking wonder.

“Why, what are you talking about?” she asked.

“You know what I'm talking about—the way you're making sheep's eyes at Mesa. I tell you it's dangerous monkeyin' with a man like him. He's not like the men you've known—he's a savage. You can't tell what he might do if you get him stirred up enough.”

“Why, Mr. Troop, how you talk!” she jibed with an impish, maddening smile. “I flirt with Mesa? Ridiculous! I’m only being nice to him. We’re supposed to be agreeable to him, aren’t we? I find him quite entertaining, and anything but a savage as you call him. Sometimes, indeed, his manners might be imitated by some other people I know.”

“You mean me. Well, we won’t argue. But remember that I told you to take it easy and watch out.”

He turned away in helpless indignation. There was nothing he could do against her mockery. He left her in the *jacale* and went to talk with Mesa.

Jubal had long debated how best to make his business proposition to the chief. There was a certain amount of peril to be considered. If Mesa knew that Jubal had a friend with twenty thousand dollars to spend, it might occur to the outlaw that an easy way to obtain the money would be to put Jubal under guard and hold him for ransom. Mesa’s chief boast, moreover, was: “*Yo estoy puro Indio*,”—I am pure Indian. His followers also were largely of Indian blood. Such being the case it was best to wait until they became fully accustomed to Jubal before the proposition was placed before them. Therefore the American sought to avoid any friction, which was one other reason he disapproved the game Mae was playing with the chief.

About them the routine of the camp went on. Women in the *jacales* kneaded, patted, and baked *tortillas* fresh each morning. Mexican *frijoles*, or beans, usually were bubbling in pots. And every day or so a steer was driven up from the stolen herd held in the valley and slaughtered for meat. At such times little of the carcass went to waste. Trained by generations of meat-poor forebears, the women saved and used everything. Intestines were looped up and stripped out between thumb and finger; whole beef heads were boiled to obtain every vestige of flesh; sometimes the liver was eaten raw flavored by a few drops squirted on it from the gall bladder. A score of little children invariably straggled back to camp after a butchering, with their faces smeared with blood from their macabre feasting.

To Jubal, Mesa explained that one reason why he had been able to keep up enlistments in his “army” was the plenitude of *carne*—meat—which his people enjoyed. Most Mexicans and Indians of the peon class were habitual vegetarians by necessity. A *tortilla*, rolled up with a pinch of salt or chili pepper in it, or a bowl of *frijoles* constituted the standard meal, with a calabash of water to wash it down. Meat was a luxury and Mesa took care always to have it for his followers. Even the dogs in this camp were well fed, he said with pride.

Under the tireless raider, El Rejo, small bands of *charros* often foraged for more cattle, sheep, or any kind of livestock; and there was always a tumult of welcoming shouts and excitement when one of these parties returned successfully laden with spoils. Mesa never took part in those flurries. He sat on a camp stool in front of his *jacale*, or walked through the *rancheria*, or conversed with Jubal and sometimes with Mae.

Some of those talks were long and Jubal found himself developing a deep respect for the primitive intelligence of the man. There was, it became apparent, more to the character of Mesa than mere banditry. Of his early history, Jubal could learn little, yet there was in him the fire of that class struggle which very soon was to revolutionize Mexico, sweeping even the terrible Diaz and his iron soldiers from power; upsetting a regime which had controlled the land since the days of Cortez—yes, and before that, when the Aztec *caciques* ruled the masses which cowered under the fear of the obsidian knife and the sacrificial stone before the idol of Huitzilpochtli, their grim war god.

Mesa, however, was no student of history. His own bitter experience at the hands of the *hacendado* and the *jefe politico* was the crucible in which his hatred of the aristocrats was fused. Upon the wealthy classes of Mexico he laid the total responsibility for the wrongs of his people. He lived the life of a brigand with a ragged band of followers, hoping for the event to occur which would change his bandits into real *soldados* and give him a chance to become a patriot instead of an outlaw.

These things he expressed in short, non-articulate sentences. And also his hard, primitive philosophy.

“To hold one’s thought within one’s self, that is good,” he said to Jubal upon one occasion. “Talk is not good unless for strict reason it is needful. That man becomes a leader who can turn the thoughts of other men upon himself, holding them in speculation concerning what his thought is, and keeping them always supple to his will. Thus do I. The bravest of my men is a thing—a weapon like my six-shooter—for me to use and command.”

“Is not bravery to be admired?” objected Jubal.

“*Seguro*,” agreed the bandit promptly. “To be brave is good. The *soldado* who does not fear to face the bullets of his enemies is a brave man, but the *jefe* who does not fear to accept the consequences of his policies, well thought out, is braver. Because the consequences he must face are greater than mere life or death. Always the courage of the mind is to be regarded above the courage of the body, for there are many reckless young men eager

to risk bodily wounds, but only a few wiser men able to understand and accept the results of action for a whole people.”

Jubal was deeply interested in this theory for it concurred strongly with his own. The next sentence might have been uttered by Machiavelli himself, of whom Mesa never had heard:

“It is well always to speak the truth to one’s friends, and whenever convenient to one’s enemies. But no man is bound by any rule to speak truth to his enemies unless it pleases him to do so, since it is an assured fact that his enemies will not speak truth to him. Thus it is best to speak by roundabout courses to an enemy, or to a stranger whom one does not fully trust (as I fully trust you, Señor Troop), at the same time striving to discern what is really behind that which the other is telling one.”

“And when the enemy is beaten, what then?”

“To be remorseless with one’s enemy when one has overthrown him *is* good,” came the instant reply. “It is to be expected that one’s enemy will in like manner be remorseless, if the advantage is the other way. Therefore one should take the utmost care to make no complaint if the fortune of war falls against him. Then is the time to exchange the courage of the mind for the courage of the body, and to suffer any kind of consequences, no matter how incredible, with no feeling revealed.”

Thus the bandit leader talked, over their drinks, and Jubal listened and was stirred. In few respects did he disagree with the essential views of the outlaw. His own hard life had built up within him a viewpoint never expressed before, but now stated in many of its fundamentals by Mesa. He warmed to the Mexican.

8

Mae was Jubal’s chief worry. He knew now that Mesa watched her with speculating eyes whenever she appeared within his vision. Since her stay in camp, Mae had removed the traces of the long desert trail. Her complexion had regained its freshness and she had exchanged the drab riding skirt for a costume created by herself, a variation of the Mexican woman’s *reboso* and dress, put on with a dash and style which set it apart from the dress of any other woman in the camp.

In their days together in the *jacale*, Jubal and Mae had made many adjustments. The old tension was gone. Their new relationship was an accepted thing, and their life was keyed to it.

They sometimes talked of the past years. A new clarity had come to him in his comprehension of her, and one day he said to her:

“I’ve had you wrong about a lot of things, Mae.”

“Almost everyone has had me wrong all my life,” she answered somberly.

All the more, therefore, was he disturbed by Mesa’s too cordial glances as she moved before him. The big man’s dark, oily face, with its hard-fat cheeks and opaque black mustache, lit up whenever the woman appeared. Only the fiction that she was Jubal’s wife, possibly, had saved her thus far from unpleasant and even dangerous attentions, and Mae herself at last was beginning to recognize the danger of the condition which her own perversity had created.

She was still supremely confident of her power to handle any man when the crisis came, however. Jubal, on the other hand, was growing worried. He felt it was only a question of time until Mesa would take the obvious, impulsive step. Then would come the moment when exceptional wisdom and quick thought would be required to save them both.

It came more quickly than he expected. Returning one morning from a stroll, as he approached his *jacale* his instinct warned him that something was wrong. Perhaps it was a half-grin one of the passing brigands gave him, as if to say that the man knew something which Jubal would like to share. He quickened his step. Then, with a sudden inspiration, he began to whistle loudly before he reached the entrance to the hut.

His fears were justified. Mesa was there with Mae. The bandit’s hat was askew, his bandanna handkerchief half-twisted over his shoulder. The woman sat back on her pallet of blankets, as if she had been thrown there, with her skirts disarrayed, her waist pulled open, and her hair rumped. Both were breathing heavily.

“*Alto!*” ordered Mesa, his eyes narrowing and his Colt coming out of its holster.

Jubal caught the look of fear in Mae’s eyes and his mind raced like a dynamo. It would never do to comment on the obvious. His soul was black with the rage of the male jealousy which resents another man’s approach to a woman he has possessed. But no hint of it showed in his face. To reveal it would be to die.

“Ah, *mi general*,” he said as pleasantly as if the evidence of invasion, and rape at least attempted, were not plain before him. “So you are here—

and I have looked for you throughout the *rancheria*.”

“What do you want with me?” growled the outlaw, still clutching his Colt.

“To ask you a question.”

“*Que es?*”

“Why do not your men bring in larger herds of cattle from their raids?”

“*No hay necesidad,*” replied Mesa with a shrug, the deadly look fading from his face. “We bring only as many as we want for meat.” Seeing there was no prospect of trouble, he thrust the revolver home in its holster. His expression was half ashamed, half relieved.

“But could you not sell them?” persisted Jubal.

“*Donde?* Where should I sell them? No cattle buyer in all Mexico would risk purchasing stolen cattle. Diaz would skin him alive.”

“But what if you could sell them *outside* of Mexico?”

Jubal recognized that he possessed a moral advantage, at least for the time being, in that the bandit was guilt-stricken. The iron was hot to be struck.

The incident of a moment before had faded out of Mesa’s thoughts. Mae sat up and brushed the fallen hair from her eyes. Then she rubbed her bruised arms and made shift to fasten her waist which gaped until her bosom was exposed. But the men apparently had forgotten her. Mesa, his broad back turned toward her, was looking keenly at Jubal with his small, shrewd eyes. If she had a gun . . . or a knife. Suppose she stabbed and even killed Mesa—what then? Her fate would be horrible; Jubal’s no less so. She fought for self-control and gained it. In the meantime Mesa was keenly interrogating Jubal.

“What do you mean by the selling of the *vacas* outside of Mexico?” he demanded.

“I mean this,” replied the American, relieved that the crisis was over. “If you could drive a herd of cattle to the Rio Grande and across at a point I would name, I know where to find a buyer for it.”

Mesa’s interest grew. “How do you know this?”

“Because it was for this purpose that I came into these mountains to talk with you.”

Question and answer followed with rapidity. Need for money always was pressing to the outlaw. He could capture food and liquor and women. But ammunition was scarce. It could be secured chiefly from north of the border, and to secure it money was needed—money in hand.

The time was now propitious for Jubal to make his proposition: “If you will deliver a herd of two thousand cattle at the mouth of the Arroyo Grande, on the American side of the river, I will guarantee payment of sixteen thousand dollars.”

“Mexican?” The old peon suspicion spoke there.

“No. Gold, American.”

“I agree!” With immense gusto Mesa instantly threw himself into the plan and seeing him fall in with it so easily, Jubal almost cursed himself for not making the proposal sooner. Then he reflected and realized that it was the circumstances in which Mesa had been caught which made him so amenable. It was just as well that he had delayed until the time was ripe.

Mesa’s face was furrowed with deep concentration. Never before had it occurred to him that there was a way to make money out of raiding the *haciendas* which he hated. A combination of pleasure and profit. Another idea suggested itself and he glanced up craftily.

“You have the money here?”

Jubal shook his head with a grin. A hearty laugh greeted this.

“*Sobre dinero no hay amistad*—there is no friendship in money matters,” cried Mesa. “Ah, *amigo mio*, you were wise—most wise.” He walked out of the *jacale*, chuckling hugely to himself.

As soon as the bandit was gone, Jubal turned to Mae. “Did he . . . hurt you?”

She shook her head. A bruised smile seemed to twist her lips.

It was characteristic of Mesa that he should be precipitate to start the expedition for cattle, now that it was decided upon. *Vacas*, up to this time regarded somewhat indifferently as a necessary article of the commissariat but having no other value, suddenly became something vastly more important with this *gringo* offering large sums in gold American dollars for beef on the hoof. Those herds which dotted the lower country were a

glorious, untapped source of revenue. *Vacas* now meant *oro* later, and the outlaw could not begin too soon the process of transmutation.

He was in boisterous good humor as preparations went forward in the camp during the succeeding days. Early in the morning his great voice could be heard rolling over the valley as he shouted orders to his scurrying followers. And the last thing at night that same hearty bellow could still be heard, incessantly driving. A great supply of rolled up *tortillas* must be made and there was much bustle among the women while they pounded and ground corn in the *metates*—heavy stone mortars exactly like those used by their Indian ancestors of pre-Spanish days. A supply of *frijoles* would be taken along also. With a small sack of these essentials tied to his saddle horn, the Yaqui or Tarahumari raider was good for indefinite days of riding.

“There will be a sufficiency of meat on this *jornada*,” said Mesa to Jubal with a nudge and a leer, “so it is unlikely the men will suffer if they fail to take any along at the start.”

Now that the point of Jubal’s visit was at last known and found to agree with the outlaw’s interests, Mesa’s manner was more cordial than ever. But where he had been full of warm interest in Mae before the episode of the *jacale*, he seemed absolutely indifferent to her now.

Mae had seemed slightly ill the night after the brigand’s visitation. Accepting her word that nothing untoward had occurred, Jubal did not speak further about it. But she burned within with anger still at the remembrance of the indignity of the occasion. Her terror when Mesa’s face appeared, framed in the small door of the hut. His proposal, simple, direct and primitive. She had refused him, which seemed to astonish him; but then he seized her and when she silently fought him off, hurled her on the pallet. His weight . . . his simian face . . . the very recollection made her sick with repulsion.

But she kept her silence. It was far better to attempt to forget the whole affair. Something like gratitude was in her heart that Jubal had not been stirred to some resentful action even as things stood—with Mesa holding both of their lives in his hand.

Old Rejo, “the Sting,” rode into camp one morning, his skull face as inscrutable as ever, but his bushy gray eyebrows quivering with excitement. Straight to Mesa’s *jacale* he spurred, with a couple of lithe young Indians at his back. The mounts of all three looked leg-weary, the sweat salt in gray

streaks on their sides, making little bunches of stiff hair all over their bellies. With heads hanging low and eyes closed in gratitude for the surcease from travel, they stood, swaying slightly, their nostrils blood-red, while the old Yaqui and his young scouts dismounted and entered the hut to confer with the general.

Jubal and Mae watched this from a distance. The whole *rancheria*, in fact, watched it with excitement and speculation. Past doubt the old Yaqui was back from some scouting expedition. Evidently his news was good, for Mesa's heavy lips were seen to curl under his black bush of a mustache, in a grin as sinister as if he were *El Diablo* himself, come fresh into the possession of the soul of a *padre*.

One of the young Indians came trotting swiftly toward Jubal's hut.

"*El General* would speak with you," he said.

When Jubal approached, Mesa was all smiles and anticipation.

"My *jefe del guardia*, this old Yaqui no-account whom they flatter by calling El Rejo, has brought information indeed," he began. Old Rejo grinned. The words, while they were slurring, were spoken in a tone of affection. The Yaqui, explained Mesa, had just returned from a long, horse-killing ride on which he had gone immediately after the agreement with Jubal was made.

"Clear to the *estancia* of Don Cirilo Soliz he has been, *amigo*," continued the outlaw chief. "And what think you he learned there? Soliz' *caporal* is holding a roundup preparatory to driving a herd to Chihuahua City. A sending from the saints! Our cattle are gathered for us by our enemies. We strike toward this place at once. Do you, Señor Troop, be prepared instantly to ride."

This was something for which Jubal had not bargained. He had planned to return to El Paso, secure the gold, and meet Mesa at the appointed place to accept delivery of and pay for the cattle. But as soon as he opened his mouth to protest, he saw the quick look of suspicion return to those heavy features, and desisted. The bandit, he readily perceived, could afford no risks. It would be too easy, if Jubal were a spy or foe, for him to slip away, warn the *federalistas*, and have an ambush waiting for the raiders. This was not expressed in words, but Jubal could read it in Mesa's little, glittering eyes.

"I go at once," he assented. "What of my woman?"

“Let her remain in the camp,” said Mesa. “One less mouth to feed on the raid.”

But Jubal shook his head. “No,” he countered decisively. “Where I go, she goes.”

The bandit gave him an odd, speculative look. “*Bien*,” he said at last, with a shrug of his huge shoulders. “The woman can accompany us, provided that she keeps up. If she falls behind she shall be left to her fate.”

Jubal found Mae awaiting his news and ready at once to pack her effects. In a few minutes they were ready and in half an hour everybody was mounting. Presently Mesa glanced back, his mustache a bristling blackness, his mouth wide and red with a grin, and saw his *charros*, the picked riders of the camp, in a long queue behind, their horses nervous, some sidling and champing, others turning in circles, eager to be off. Each rider sat impassive and still in the saddle, with a hand on the reins to curb his mettlesome mount, and a rifle held across the pommel, or resting, butt on thigh, akimbo as it were, with the barrel pointing upward at an angle.

Seeing that all was ready, the bandit chief rose in his stirrups, waved an arm in a magnificent forward gesture, and the whole cavalcade, metal jingling and leather creaking above the muffled thunder of the hoofs, began its march down the canyon trail, the women of the *rancheria* screeching their farewells through cupped hands, and a mob of ragged children scurrying at the tail of the procession.

Mesa was in prime spirits. His horse was a fine one, a bay with powerful shoulders and haunches, but trim legs and hoofs, indicating speed and bottom. The bandit’s seat was made easier on this superb mount by the wonderful saddle Jubal had seen in the *jacale*—eighty pounds of gold, silver, elaborate stamping and leather carving, with a broad horn of the Spanish style and richly fringed and tooled skirts and *tapaderos*. On Mesa’s left rode old Rejo. On the right was Jubal, with Mae close at his elbow.

“*Valgame dios!*” swore the great outlaw. “Something tells me that this may be the beginning of a different life for Mesa. You, *amigo*, may be the opening of a way for me. Do not doubt it! *Las vacas por el oro*. You wish *vacas*, *amigo*! You shall have *muchas vacas!*”

When they debouched upon the lowlands, and he saw the first small herd of cattle stippling with tiny specks the distant landscape, Mesa’s eye lit up again. Already he was beginning to compute the value of this ready source of revenue, translated into terms of gold dollars and brass cartridges.

The first camp was by the river, but the next would be out in the desert, where the Yaqui scouts reported a "tank"—one of the small pools formed by rainfall, which had not yet dried up. Sixty miles of desert lay between the river and the tank, and the men drank as much as they could hold. The horses also were taken to water repeatedly, coaxed to fill their skins with moisture. Finally the canteens and gourds were replenished. They were for emergency. Most of Mesa's *charros* prided themselves upon not touching liquid between water hole and water hole. They would ride those sixty burning miles without a swallow of moisture.

Across the plateau of sand and rocks with its everlasting appearance, at a distance, of being covered with herbage due to the scattering sagebrush, cactus and yucca, the raiders wound their way. Jubal counted fifty men about him. There were scouts also, he knew, far ahead and coasting miles out on the wings, occasionally seen as distant flitting specks, questing, nosing, ever on the alert for the faintest hint of danger. He estimated that the total strength of Mesa's force must be approximately sixty men. Each *charro* carried his own rifle, revolver and ammunition, the latter in belts about the waist or slung across the shoulders. Two or three pack mules bore extra cartridges, a few medical supplies, and some ugly boxes of dynamite. Thus, strenuous and wiry, the sunbaked brigands marched.

Soft, sandy valleys were interspersed with low hog-backs in the flinty plain over which they rode. Sometimes antelope were observable, twinkling in the distance. Great-eared jackrabbits also were scared up frequently, and even an occasional coyote which ran, grinning and skulking, for the nearest cover—the men popping their rifles after it, until Mesa called a halt and forbade any further shooting without orders, not only on account of the waste of ammunition, but for fear of accidents in the column.

The day dragged its endless length. Monotonous, glittering sand which reflected the blazing sun in their faces. An interminable hot wind, feeling as if it would cool, but really scorching the skin and reddening the eyes. The overpowering weight of thirst. The men grew surly and Jubal looked closely at Mae. She was worn in the terrific heat, but she smiled at him.

Eventually, after dark, a deep valley was reached, in the bottom of which lay a small lake or pond, formed by the spring rains and prevented from seeping into the ground by an undercoat of clay. Evaporation had been great; the cracked and dried mud, extending far up and down the hollow, showed where the lake once had spread. But at this time only a puddle existed, its

water hot and brackish, smelling vilely stagnant, and with a strong infusion of urine from the animals whose tracks pocked its edges. Ill-smelling and ill-tasting, it was the only water available for miles and the bandits camped beside it with philosophic gratitude.

The next night would find them at the edge of the great Soliz *rancho*. In the light of the very small fire by which he sat, Mesa talked over plans with his old Yaqui *jefe* and Jubal.

“It will not do to arrive in the vicinity of the *hacienda* before night well sets in,” he remarked.

“The great roundup herd,” interposed El Rejo, “is being held near the main buildings of the *hacienda*. It is held by a few *vaqueros* only, so saw the scouts.”

“*Bien*. It is better to take a herd already gathered, even if it be close to the *hacienda*, than to attempt the difficult and lengthy task of gathering a new one,” Mesa pointed out.

“But how,” asked Jubal, “can you drive away those cattle, without the knowledge of the *hacendados*?” Already he was beginning to be sick of his part of the bargain, foreseeing things in the future of which he had not dreamed.

“It cannot be done,” the outlaw chief replied. “Therefore, this is my plan: We will attack the *hacienda* at early dawn. If we hit it hard enough, while a few of my *charros* dispose of the herd guard and start the cattle toward *los Estados Unidos*, there will be no question of our being followed. We must stun them. This is necessary, because several days will be required to get the herd up to the Texas border. We cannot afford to fight a second time for the possession of the herd. That would be embarrassing.”

“You mean you are going to kill the people in the *hacienda*?”

“*Seguro*.”

Jubal stared first into the gargoyle face of old Rejo, then into the heavy, sinister features of Mesa. “My God—isn’t there any way this can be avoided?” he burst out. “Look here—let’s call the whole thing off. I had no thought it would mean a massacre. I do not want the cattle at such a price!”

Mesa laughed. A short, ugly chuckle. “There are more reasons than the getting of a few cattle for attacking the *hacienda del Soliz*,” suggested Rejo quietly.

“*Sí!* That there is! I and my *charros* have a long score to settle with that proud Soliz breed,” exclaimed Mesa. “It is on this very *rancho* that I spent my childhood. A beautiful childhood! I starved here, I tell you. I was beaten, and forced to work like an ox or a donkey. I saw my father hanged. Oh, *sí sí!* There is indeed another reason for striking the *rancho!*”

Under the brutal scowl, Jubal fell silent. Presently he went back to his own fire, where Mae awaited him.

“What are they going to do?” she asked.

“They’re goin’ to attack the *hacienda*. A hell of a business, but there ain’t no way to stop them. Seems that Mesa has a grudge against the people there.”

Mae half whimpered. It was the first time she had shown signs of breaking. “I’m—I’m scared,” she said in a small voice.

“You’ll be safe enough,” he assured her.

“Yes,” she sighed, “maybe.” After that she made no more comments.

12

Below the dark hill lay the lights of the *hacienda del Soliz*. It was past bedtime for the *vaqueros* but the lamps in the windows of the adobe bunkhouses were slow in winking out. Perhaps there was some sort of a celebration. This was not a *fiesta* day, but Jubal reflected that Mexicans were always ready to make excuse for a jollification.

On top of the hill lay Mesa, a great, hunched bulk in the darkness, trying to descry the wide-spreading dim outlines of the grounds and buildings.

“As I remember—*Madre Dios* but it is long since I was here—the horse barns are over there on the left, the big corral yonder, the *casa del caporal* near the windmill. The larger building with the big arched windows lighted—it is the *casa grande*.”

Dimly Jubal could see the low adobe wall which surrounded the buildings, and the outlines of the ranch palace, with a small church outlined, its rude cross silhouetted against one of the lighted windows behind. Close under the hill on which the bandit party lay, was a deep shadow—a small ravine with trees in it. From one of the bunkhouses moved an opaque dot. It passed through a gate and made slowly for the little canyon, which it entered, being swallowed up in the blackness. Then a light flared below—a match for a cigarette. It revealed a flat, yellow face with a thin mustache,

under a broad hat. It also revealed that the man was squatting busily, his clothing down.

Without a word the old Yaqui and two or three of his Indians snaked their way down into the canyon. A few minutes later, when the peon stood up to adjust his garments, he heard a slight noise, turned, saw the revolvers all looking his way, and came along quietly, his hands up and no sound issuing from his fear-drawn mouth.

Mesa, with a muffled curse as he encountered a small cholla cactus, arose and went to the rear with the prisoner and his captors. After a long time the outlaw chief was back, with a hog-like grunt of satisfaction.

Another moment and the old Yaqui slid up beside him, wiping the blade of his knife with a handful of grass and giving Jubal a flash of his teeth.

“*Esta muerto,*” he remarked casually.

The wanton murder chilled Jubal. “Why did you have to kill him?” he asked Mesa in horror. “He was only a peon. One of your own people. Surely it was not his fault that he had to work for the *hacendado*.”

Up went the outlaw’s shoulders in a shrug. “*Anda cada oveja con su pareja*—each sheep goes with his fellow,” he quoted. Immediately he began to explain the information which they had obtained from the captive before El Rejo slit his throat.

“There is a company of *rurales* quartered in the *hacienda*,” he said. “This is why the lights are still burning. They came in late, having been sent from Chihuahua as escort for the beef herd, which is to be driven south tomorrow. There also is an estimate on the possible number of enemies in the *hacienda*. Our captured *mozo* said, just before he died, that of the *rurales* there are thirty. An equal number of *vaqueros* and *servidors*, together with the family of Soliz at the *casa grande* itself, makes all told seventy men—more than we have with which to attack them.”

He paused to let this sink in. “But, *Dios quiera*, we will do this thing I have planned yet. They do not know we are here. We will be upon them before they can defend themselves.”

With a chuckle he dug his thumb painfully into Jubal’s side. “Always you are lucky, amigo. ‘*El mal entra a brazadas y sale a pulgadas*—misfortune comes by the yard and goes by the inch.’ So says the proverb. *Santa Maria!* I believe that in your case at least, good luck does the same thing! There are many cattle in the herd—hundreds more than you contracted for with me. But if we take any, we may as well take all. You will

be rich. The herd is held out on the plain to the south—only a dozen *vaqueros* with it, night herders and the like. The *rurales* are quartered in that big bunkhouse yonder, and such of the *vaqueros* as have no families in the other. *Servidors* sleep in the *casa grande*, together with the Soliz brood and their guests. The married peons live in those small adobe huts you see in the darkness over on the other side of the compound from the church.”

13

In the gray dawn, Mesa’s *charros* rushed down like lobo wolves on the outbuildings and the chatter of rifle fire rose as a steady roar above screams and crashing timbers. Bundles of rags lay flatly here and there among the buildings, as daylight gradually revealed the scene. These were the dead. The raiders had vaulted the retaining wall and taken the barns, outlying adobes and the smaller bunkhouse, in which lay now most of the *vaqueros*, sleeping eternally in their blood, as they had been caught by the first rush.

Discipline had saved the *rurales*, who, shooting with deadly effectiveness, retreated in a body to the *casa grande*, where gray wisps of smoke now wreathed the windows and other openings.

Jubal crawled in the lee of the low wall to a gate, followed closely by Mae, in spite of his order to her to remain in the safety of their hill position. Behind the bunkhouse crouched Mesa. Jubal watched for a lull in the shooting, then darted across the small opening to the outlaw, Mae clinging desperately to his hand, her eyes wide with fear, her face suddenly appearing years older. Not since her brief wail of the night before, however, had she uttered a word of her terror. They found Mesa taking an accounting of the losses.

“In the bunkhouse are ten men, dead,” he told them. “There are twelve more lying in the smaller adobes—with a few women and children, whose deaths, unfortunately, occurred—and two or three of the *rurales*, also, were killed while they retreated.”

Old Rejo, the Yaqui, crept up to report that of the dozen night riders with the herd, three had been slain and the others escaped into the hills.

“*Bien*,” growled Mesa with satisfaction. “Of the defenders, then, twenty-seven or twenty-eight are dead, and nine more have fled. There cannot be more than thirty fighting men left in the *hacienda*.”

“Would it not be possible to spare these . . . the herd is ours . . .” Jubal began in a last effort to mitigate the horror of the attack.

Mesa looked at him sourly. “*Hablar sin pensar es tirar sin encarar*—speaking without thinking is shooting without aiming,” came one of his endless sayings. “If I spare these, how am I to get to the Arroyo Grande with the cattle, unscathed? Besides, there is the score I must settle.”

As Jubal made no reply, Mesa went on to say that his own losses in the fight thus far were small . . . two killed through their own carelessness in exposing themselves to the fire of the *rurales*, and a few wounded. He had been forced to detach ten men to brush away the *vaqueros* with the herd, and to start the cattle toward the border, it being necessary to circle the ranch buildings at a great distance. This circumstance, more than his losses, had cut his effective strength. His confidence was perfect in spite of the fact that a large group of desperate men still defied him from a strong building whose adobe walls made it a veritable fort. While the constant roar of the drum-fire echoed to the hills and back, he waved his arm in a signal.

Two or three of his Tarahumaris crept forward under cover of the second bunkhouse, which stood within thirty or forty feet of the small, thick-walled *casa del caporal*, in which the ranch foreman lived. In this building the *caporal* himself, with one or two others, still held out grimly, rifles coughing sullenly from the windows.

“Now, *amigo*, you will see some sport,” grunted Mesa, and Jubal felt Mae’s hand tremble on his arm.

The Tarahumaris were carrying something. A box with markings familiar to Jubal from his mining days. Dynamite sticks. Kneeling, the Indians began, with serious, intent faces, to fix detonators and fuses to each stick, adding especial efficiency by splitting the fuse ends and inserting in them match heads for quick lighting. Each of the *dinamateros* smoked a long black cigar, which gave him a curious air of rakish indifference, but was really for a lethal purpose, since the cigar would be used, later, to light the fuses.

Suddenly two of the Tarahumaris leaped out from the protecting corner of their building, their arms poised. End over end whirled the long, brown dynamite sticks as the Indians jumped back to safety, evading the quick answering snapshots from the defenders. An appalling double roar, a geyser of black smoke, and the near wall of the *casa del caporal* disintegrated. One big man staggered out to wilt under the waiting rifles.

“The fuses we use to make certain, although in this weather, with the sun so hot, the *dinamita* usually goes off when it strikes,” shouted Mesa into Jubal’s ear, as the snarl of battle rose still more savagely.

Forward leaped the Tarahumari *dinamateros*, and glinted across the small space, then plunged into the tottering ruins of the little building they had just blasted. They were still a hundred feet or more from the main structure, but Jubal soon saw they possessed yet another expedient.

A stringy brown Indian, with lean shanks and immense feet—the *dinamatero* leader—began to unroll a bundle. In a moment Jubal could see that it was a sling—a simple, old-fashioned device with a wide piece of soft leather to hold the missile, and two long buckskin strings, very much like the slings the Negro Jeff had taught him to use on the decks of his father's steamboat when he was a boy on the Mississippi.

Behind the shattered walls of the *casa del caporal* the *dinamatero* stood, using the ruins as a shield, fumes of the explosion still rising acridly about him. He was proposing to hurl his dynamite stick over the ruins, to the walls of the *casa grande*, no simple feat. With deep concentration on his face, he lit the fuse, placed the dynamite stick in his sling, swung it once around his head, and let it fly. But he was hugging too closely the safety of the masonry. The dynamite soared upward, cleared the wall, but fell far short of the target, exploding heavily but harmlessly.

Again the Tarahumari tried, but with no better effect. He must fall farther back, to flatten the trajectory of his throw. Lighting a new dynamite fuse, he swung his sling about his head, leaping lithely backward. Away went the deadly stick, but it flew awkwardly at a tangent to waste its force on open space, and the thrower was on the ground. In leaving his shelter, he had stepped within range of the *rurale* marksmen and death spoiled his aim.

Cheers and jeers came down from the windows of the *casa grande*, answered by a yell of anger from the *charros* who crouched behind every possible covert, shooting fast and close in an effort to keep the defenders away from the windows. The remaining *dinamateros* had lost all enthusiasm for their role. One or two casts they attempted, half-heartedly, but neither of them was willing to expose himself enough to make the throwing effective.

Mesa was roaring with rage. He sent the old Yaqui *jefe* scurrying with word to the flankers to keep every opening in the *casa grande* under fire. Then he turned to Jubal.

“Señor Troop!” he cried. “Come with me to where the fools of *dinamateros* are. I will show you a thing!”

Jubal thought swiftly. There was danger in crossing that open space. But the excitement of the battle was on him, and his blood was up. He could never allow these Mexicans to believe that he was behind any of them in courage.

“Mae, you stay here!” he cried. “Don’t try to follow me. I’m going with Mesa!” Ever since they had reached their present position, she had been clinging to his hand, and now he gave her fingers a little friendly squeeze. Instantly he felt the answering hot pressure of her palm, but he mistook its meaning. Without looking back at her he freed his hand and in a moment was running across the open space. Something struck at his feet and screamed away like a crippled cat. There were angry whisperings in his ears. Then, with a final, great bound he was in the shelter with Mesa and the two surviving *dinamateros*. A second later, with a gasp, Mae flung herself behind the wall beside him. That was the meaning of the squeeze, then. In spite of his orders she had followed him across that alley of death.

“*Locos!*” the bandit was bellowing. “Stop wasting the *dinamita!*”

The two Tarahumaris gazed at him, faces stricken with fear. One of them had just prepared to sling a stick of the explosive. The fuse was lit, but he stood there, a doltish statue, transfixed by Mesa’s glare, forgetting the death in his own hands.

“*Diablo!*” roared the outlaw chief. With a sweep of his huge arm, he snatched the sizzling fuse out of the detonator and flung it away. There was not half an inch of it to burn. Mesa had saved all their lives.

“I’ll show you how!” he was snapping in furious bad humor. “Nobody but I can do anything right around here. Give me that *dinamita!*”

Mesa’s small, sharp eyes were on the explosive in his hand and the sling was made ready.

“I know the trick,” the outlaw was saying. “I learned it when I was a boy right here at this very *hacienda*, and now I shall use it to good purpose against this *hacienda!*”

The fuse was lit. Around and around his head Mesa whirled his sling, his wrist revolving with supple cunning. He leaped far out from the walls.

So intensely preoccupied was Jubal with the fate of the cast that he leaned far out from the corner of the ruined building. Even above the uproar he heard Mae’s scream: “No, no! Jubal, come back!”

A glimpse he had of her, crouched in the corner of the wall, unbelieving eyes widening with fear as she watched him. Then she sprang to him, tugging at his sleeve as a bullet snicked past his head. At the same moment Mesa released the throwing thong and Jubal caught a glimpse of the dynamite stick against the sky.

In the heart of the stunning explosion, he seemed to hear a whimpering wail. At the base of the *casa grande* wall a mountain of stinking black smoke mushroomed suddenly up, white at the stem. In the smoke fragments flew, of walls, of doors, and of shattered humanity.

But Jubal had turned with a certainty that something was very wrong with Mae. She reeled and he seized her in his arms to keep her from falling.

“Where? *Where?*” he demanded.

Mae was wordless, her great brown eyes pleading against something which was sure upon her. Mesa’s shrewd glance looked her up and down.

“*El estomago*. The stomach.” He pointed. The stricken woman gasped, agony driving the color from her face, imploring eyes turning from one to the other, almost without understanding. The bullet aimed for Jubal had found its billet in Mae.

“Lay her down, we have work to do,” Mesa ordered.

“But we can’t leave her here!”

“Can’t is a strong word. We must leave her. The breach is in the wall. She will die in a short time anyway. Leave her!”

Jubal’s horror translated itself into sound and action. “I won’t leave her!” he screamed. One step forward he took, fury in his eyes as they burned into Mesa’s, one hand groping for his revolver, while the other held Mae’s sinking body. But with a motion quicker than that of a striking snake, the nose of Mesa’s Colt was in his stomach.

“*Alto!*” Jubal dropped his hand from his own holster, but still pressed forward. The outlaw suddenly raised the barrel of his revolver and struck with it a terrible blow on Jubal’s head.

Mae’s eyes fluttered open as Jubal bent over her. He had carried her back to the place behind the hill near where the horses were tethered. Heat as from a furnace beat down from the sky, and great, bloated flies buzzed about. In the distance, over the rise, women still shrieked and occasional

shots sounded as Mesa's *charros* completed the sack of the hacienda which they had carried shortly after Mae was shot and while Jubal lay unconscious from the bandit's pistol blow.

In his lifetime Jubal had never been so ill. His body was sick, his head splitting with an ache from Mesa's blow, his stomach retching. But his soul was sicker with remorse and loathing of himself and these brigands.

On his knee Mae's head stirred. "Jubal."

"Yes, Mae."

"Oh—I just wanted to be sure it was you," she whispered.

She was silent for a minute or so. Then:

"Jubal, this is a funny wind-up. Kind of ridiculous, isn't it?"

"You mustn't say that, Mae. Everything's going to come out all right. Old Rejo'll have you patched up an' you'll be well quicker than you can imagine."

She shook her head slightly. ". . . Too easy to see through . . . you are, Jubal. Always were. I could read you . . . just like a book. Big strong man . . . but pouting like a little boy all the time you were trailed around by a woman . . . that you didn't know how to get rid of. Isn't that so?"

"Yes, I guess so—" he said miserably.

The old mockery gleamed faintly in her eyes. "Honest to the last, aren't you, Jubal . . . too honest to be gallant even to a dying woman?"

"Oh, Mae—please!" he implored.

"It doesn't make any . . . difference," she went on, her face softening. "I . . . can say anything . . . I want to, now. Death gives its consent, doesn't it? I do love you, Jubal. I always have . . . since the day you rode into Teton with the . . . cold sores all over your face. And it's that honesty . . . that downrightness I love. When you came to El Paso . . . such a contrast to . . . scheming, fishy-eyed Sam Gooney, something just made me leave everything and follow after you . . . even to the death. Do you believe . . . that?"

He nodded, gulping.

"Yes, you believe me, but you don't love me . . . you took me, but you didn't love me . . . you never could. I know . . . I understand." She sighed

wearily. "It was too good . . . to happen that way . . . with me. Jubal, just one thing . . . kiss me?"

He kissed her lips and felt them growing colder.

"Mae!" he cried, his voice sharp with protest against this final, brutal thing, death. "You can't die! You're too young! Keep fighting until old Rejo gets here—"

"Sorry, Jubal," she said with a weakening smile. "I'd like to oblige . . . death, you can't help it . . . I would not have denied anything else you . . . asked me in the whole world . . ."

She turned her face from him and died.

16

Jubal covered Mae's face with a blanket and found his way to where he had left his horse. A brisk, solid step came up behind him.

"Ah, *amigo!*" Mesa's heavy features were lighted by a smile of terrible happiness. "You have done for me the greatest favor possible. The Soliz brood is no more! The men are all dead. The women too." A volley of piercing screams came faintly to him. "Or will be, when my *muchachos* grow tired of them," he qualified. "Now we can complete our little *transacción.*"

"Keep away from me!" cried Jubal brokenly. "You God damned killer, stay clear of me!"

The bandit's face hardened. "Have a care, *amigo,*" he said sternly. "You have drawn on me—and lived. Let that be sufficient good fortune for one day, and do not tempt me forever."

He looked toward the north. "The beef herd already is on its way to the border." His voice was hard. "We will drive slowly. No hurry; there will be no pursuit because there is nothing left to pursue us, this side of Chihuahua. Therefore we will progress by easy stages, that we may not unnecessarily tire the cattle. In eight days we will reach the Arroyo Grande. *Sabe?*"

Still too numbed by his horror and pain to understand, Jubal shook his head.

"In eight days," said Mesa slowly, "I will be at the Arroyo Grande. In eight days I will expect my money."

Jubal now saw what he meant. Word must be sent to Reb in El Paso so that he would draw the cash from the bank and meet them at the appointed time and place. Gradually Jubal's mind was beginning to clear. This was the purpose for which he had come to Mexico and although the horrible events he had witnessed had removed from it the zest, he realized that Reb would be waiting in anxiety, depending upon him.

The intense practicality of his nature already was enabling him to regain self-control. This had been a desperate, sickening adventure, but the risks had been run and it was time to profit from them. Besides Jubal was assured in his own mind that his shrift would be short indeed if he failed to keep the pact. He nodded glumly.

“Give me a sure man, and I will write a *carta* which he will deliver to one I shall name, at a certain *fonda* in El Paso. That one will meet us with the gold.”

Mesa's smile returned. He placed his arm affectionately on Jubal's shoulder.

“*Amigo*, I, Mesa know what it is that is the matter with you. It is the thought of how the woman came to her death. Now, *amigo*, I do not blame you for feeling badly, but you must not feel too badly about this. The woman was beautiful—*sí*, I would be the last to deny it. But the most common beauty in the world is the beauty of women, although each new example of it stirs one unflinching as if he had never seen it before. Still, there are many other beautiful women in the world. I, myself, will get you one, if it will comfort you. I know a girl in Fuentes—” He stopped and sighed, as if in self-abnegation. “I had planned her for myself. But for you, *amigo*, I will send my *charros* and fetch her. She will wail a little at first, maybe, but you will soon train her and content her. She has eyes of the most beautiful and large breasts—”

“I don't want a woman!” Jubal's voice was harsh.

“*Bien*. I only thought to offer.” Mesa shook his head sadly, but brightened with a new thought. “Your woman is dead, it is true, but in her death she saw her wish fulfilled—victory to her comrades, and a fine herd of cattle to you—to say nothing of sixteen thousand gold dollars, American, to Mesa!”

Jubal still was not able to bear the feeling of the outlaw's arm across his shoulder. He shook it off. Instead of being ruffled by this gesture, Mesa only smiled again. His voice was a calm rumble.

“I know how it is with you. You are thinking that I murdered those people at the *hacienda*, and that I also caused your woman’s death. Now this is my belief: A man has a certain allotted time for life and at the end of that time death will come for him. It makes no difference if he be in bed, or at the altar of his church—the skeleton hand will be laid upon his shoulder anyway. I have, before this, seen men die in church, on their knees. And think of the many who perish in their beds—by the thousands, far more than on any battle field. It is fate, *amigo*. It was the time for those people to die. If it had been my time, or your time, we would have died. And even had your woman not come with us, when her time arrived she would have died, had she remained in the *jacale* in my *rancheria* or had never come from *los Estados Unidos* at all.”

Surprisingly, under the persuasive, deep voice of the bandit, expounding the fatalistic philosophy of the Indian, Jubal began to feel better. There was an appealing something in what Mesa said. In the end, although his heart still burned sore within him and pain shot through his brain, he found himself shaking hands with the outlaw, the greatest tribute he could have paid to the wonderful magnetism of the man.

An hour later old Rejo himself was riding north, with Jubal’s note to Reb wrapped in oiled cloth and hung in a leather sack about his scrawny neck, inside his dirty cotton shirt.

17

The Rio Grande was low and the cattle had no difficulty in fording it. Mesa splashed across, too, to greet his old *jefe de guardia* who met him on the American side, in the yawning mouth of the Arroyo Grande. Jubal could almost have laughed at the expression on Reb’s face when the latter rode down to the river with El Rejo. The lanky cowman’s mouth hung agape; for once he was struck dumb by what he saw.

“This is Mesa,” introduced Jubal.

“*Amigo!*” came the bandit’s joyous bellow. “We are here as we promised your partner. Here are the *vacas*. I suppose that is the gold in the fat sack on your saddle. *Bien!* Count it? No! If Señor Jubal says there is sixteen thousand gold dollars, American, there, I believe him. And to prove to you both that Mesa is always better than his word, the herd we have just brought across the river numbers not two thousand, but half a thousand more than that. You see,” he explained with a grin, “on the way up here, herds strange to ours were always getting mixed up with ours, and it was impossible to tell

the cattle apart. So, since these *vacas* were full of determination to accompany us, whether we would or no, we were forced to bring them with us. *Mirar!*”

The heavy canvas sack was transferred to the bandit’s saddle, and he turned back and splashed once more across the river. On the far bank Mesa wheeled his horse and waved a magnificent arm aloft in a last farewell, before he led his men out across the desert.

18

“Ye mean all them cows is ourn?” demanded Reb as soon as Mesa was gone. “Jube, in less’n a month, ye’ve cleaned up more than I did in all my years of workin’ cows!”

“I risked plenty an’ did some things I’ll never get over feelin’ sorry about,” replied his partner somberly. Then the talk turned to their handling of the herd and Reb was to find he never could induce Jubal to give a full account of what happened below the border. It had changed the younger man, that much was certain. The boyish Jubal who had ridden south toward the Mexican mountains had been buried among them in some manner. It was an older, sterner, harder Jubal who had returned, and the passing days made this steadily more clear.

The first necessity was to move the herd far enough away from the border to avoid any chance customs official with an inquisitive nose who might be prowling about. Reb had brought along Emilio and his two sons, who rode like a pair of little demons, and with the help of these it was not difficult to drive the cattle up past the ID fence, past the ruins of Bartee’s *ramada*, and into the upper canyon. But they could not be kept even there forever.

“Them cows is in pore shape, what with that long drive,” Reb pointed out. He had been thinking deeply. “Jube,” he continued, “I got an idea. What them cows needs is fattenin’. An’ to fatten ’em, we’re goin’ to have to take them whar thar’s good grass an’ feed, an’ away from ticks. Jest now, my mind was goin’ back a spell. Ye’ve been in the Injun Territory, ain’t ye? If ye was ever in the Osage hills thar, ye’ll be bound to remember the grass. That rich, soft, thick blue-stem, whar the critters stand up to their bellies in it, an’ eat all day till they can’t hold another blade or stem, an’ then lay down an’ chaw their cud that contented that they jest put on the fat in double handfuls.”

Jubal nodded his head. He had seen the blue-stem prairies, a place of peaceful green pastures, instead of sun-blasted desert with its bunch-grass and cactus and chaparral. Reb went on:

“If we could git this bunch of stuff on pasture like that, they’d be worth fifty, mebbe sixty dollars a head in jest a few months. Now they ain’t worth thirty. Do ye see? What I’m suggestin’ is that one of us goes up to the Injun Territory an’ leases up a bunch of pasture. I hear the old Cherokee Strip’s been opened up an’ settled. But I feel certain ye kin still git plenty of grazin’ ground thar. Supposin’ ye go, an’ leave me take care of the cows. I kin do that. I used to think I was good at makin’ deals, too, but not no more. Ye’ve showed ol’ Reb he’s jest a scrub cowpoke, while his pardner’s a master of feenance!”

BOOK 8

Naoma

1

Ben Hur was monotonous. The book had been out for years and everybody had read it . . . everybody but Naoma. She had heard it discussed until the subject was threadbare, as such discussions always eventually become, yet until the present she never had read it. Now, when the book was *passé*, she was at last finding time for it.

With a sigh, Naoma raised her eyes and looked over the empty school room, quiet in the drowsy warmth of early September. Monotonous rows of little desks stretched out before her, their lines so exact that the perspective from her own table, on its low platform, created the illusion that they radiated toward her slightly from some point in the back of the room. Scribblings of the blackboard classes covered the dark slate on the walls. This slate had been the especial pride of the board of education when the building was constructed. The teachers, at that time, were solemnly adjured to see to it their pupils used no soft chalk, but only the hard chalk furnished. It was supposed that the hard chalk would make less dust and that its marks could be more easily cleaned from the board, but with the inevitable conservatism of children—who cling to tradition far more stubbornly than do adults—the pupils preferred the old, soft chalk, and gradually, by tacit agreement, it came into general use once more.

Naoma stared absently at the blackboard in the rear of the school room. Just before dismissal, the sixth graders had diagrammed upon it the human heart. The figure on the right was Edith Swinney's. Edith always drew her diagrams with extreme precision, her lines small and even, her dotting, to show the course of the blood stream, painfully exact. Yet her diagrams lacked the dash of Richey Benner's, which Naoma could see on the next section of the blackboard. Richey drew with unfettered abandon, and he particularly prided himself on being able to push his chalk across the board in such a way that it took a series of short jumps, automatically leaving a dotted line which stood out in beautiful relief against the dark background, to the admiration and envy of everyone in his class.

Naoma smiled very slightly. Children, with their little accomplishments . . . how they resembled their elders who took an equal pride in useless arts.

It was time to sponge the blackboards. The pupils were supposed to perform that task, but Naoma never had the heart to keep them after school for the duty. Each evening she swept the room, and on wintry mornings she had the additional janitorial obligation of coming early to light the stove. This seemed no hardship to her, however, for the other two instructors in the three-room school performed the same functions. One of these was a frayed, middle-aged New England spinster, addicted to black dresses and stiff curls hanging at her temples. Her name was *Miss* Maude Hostetter. In signing her name she surrounded the title with parentheses, and the emphasis she thus placed on it was a correct index to her character. The second teacher was Georgia Tarton—a strange, hard woman, with tragic eyes and an imperious ego, whose wish to dominate those about her, whether by force of personality or, failing that, by knife-in-the-back tactics, was something verging on the psychopathic. Georgia, tall, somber of appearance, accentuated her height which someone had told her was regal, by winding the thick masses of her dark hair into a high coiffure on top of her head. She wrote sentimental “poetry” on occasion, and at other times descended to vicious alley-cat altercations. Naoma was sorry for her. Georgia, not less than forty—although she clung to the fiction that she was ten years younger than that—in the opinion of Naoma needed a man.

The thought of Georgia Tarton was an unpleasant one. Naoma took her mind, as it were, in her hands, and placed it in a different groove.

It was time to begin plans for the Hallowe’en party. The drab lives of the children whom Naoma taught impelled her to other activities as extra-curricular as the janitorial tasks she performed. At each succeeding season of the year, for example, she interested the girls of her room in decorating it “appropriately.” Thus, with Hallowe’en approaching, the room was festooned with colored paper figures of ill-cut orange pumpkins and black witches. Later there would be brown turkeys and gray pilgrims for Thanksgiving; green Christmas trees and red Santa Clauses for Yuletide; red hearts and pink cupids for Valentine’s day; yellow chicks and white rabbits for Easter; and flowers of various hues for May Day.

Too well Naoma knew the ritualistic repetition of those small symbols, and also the incorrigible conservatism of the little folks who clung to the same figures year after year, resenting any variation.

There were parties, too. “Speaking” always was in favor, with renditions from *Cumnock’s Choice Readings*; a weak-voiced solo or duet sung to the accompaniment of the wheezy little portable organ which Naoma had learned to play indifferently; and a main event usually consisting of a box

supper, sure harbinger of added work next morning in “tidying up” before school opened. Thus went her slow round, day after day, week after week, year after year.

2

Idly Naoma turned the pages of the book in her hands. She had purchased it only a few days before at Holloway’s drugstore, one of the establishments fronting the country road which served Wettick as its sole street. On the fly-leaf was her name:

NAOMA HOCKTOR BAIN
September, 1896.

Naoma Bain . . . never for one moment had she thought of resuming her maiden name. A widow . . . yet a virgin. Married, yet cheated of marriage.

Even the thought of this with its inescapable trend of imaginings, brought the red brightly to Naoma’s cheeks. She shied away from her own thoughts, like a colt frightened at something on the roadside. Her habits of mind, her training and instincts, were grooved in the belief that sex was something to be banished from the mind, taboo in polite society, never to be thought about by a *good* woman, who remained, theoretically, in total ignorance of this most vital thing in her life.

Naoma primly spread the wrinkles from the lap of her dress. It was her rose alpaca dress, thriftily preserved for formal occasions, which, for some reason, she had put on that day, although she rarely wore it to school. Oh, she remembered now. The theatrical performance was to begin early and she had remembered she would not have time to prepare fully after school. The dress was pretty. Naoma looked down on it with graceful pride. There was a neat little ruff of ruching above its prim high collar, a white jabot of net sprayed her bosom, and more ruching at the wrists. The sleeves puffed above the elbows and tightened on the forearms, and there were gathers at the hips to accentuate her tight basque, making the waist appear even smaller by comparison with the voluminous skirt.

She stepped over to the mirror by the door and regarded herself briefly. Above the demure collar with its white ruff, her face appeared a little thin and tired. Her thick, light brown hair was cut in bangs and curled across her forehead in the mode of the time, but was arranged in heavy, rich-looking rolls at the back of her head. She had not lost the delicate fineness of her skin, she thought with a small thrill of satisfaction.

It had been long since Naoma Hocktor bade a young horseman with strange, changing eyes to leave her because she was to wed someone else. Those intervening years showed in her face now, leaving it slightly drawn, the eyes deeper with living and thinking. Yet men still turned to gaze after her, because of her quaint, childlike charm, and in her face the look of seeming immaturity which some women never completely lose.

A pretty widow in her twenties was a challenge and a temptation to the men of the frontier community. Naoma had discovered that, and although there had been times of anger and times of fear for her in the discovery, there was, under it all, the pride of her power over men. She had received dozens of proposals, some of them honorable, but for the most part she had adopted the policy of kindly rejecting all invitations to “go out” with gentlemen. One lesson had been learned with definiteness: most men believe greater liberties can be taken with a widow than with a maiden . . . it is assumed that initiation in the marriage bed removes doubts and fears which are grave obstacles in the path of the conquest of a virgin. Also, a man is a gentleman chiefly when there are other people about. Even with the safeguards which she had built about her, life had not been uneventful. More than one male in Wettick was puzzled over her, from Ansell Goff, the fat banker, who thought his money might count against the fact that he was already married thirty years, down to Adams Jennings, the buck-toothed, simpering barber next door to Holloway’s, who proposed marriage to her honorably and loudly whenever he could approach near enough. These were the reasons why, of late, she had found it convenient to permit herself to be accompanied by the lawyer, Webster Grattan. He was young, handsome in a bold way, and he at least had proved himself a gentleman . . . thus far.

Yes, Naoma had repelled every male advance . . . and she wondered, sometimes, if she had been wholly wise in so doing. Anything, it seemed today, would be preferable to this life of drab monotony, stretching without a prospective break into the illimitable future. Naoma at times felt a rising resentment against her very virginity. It was a heavy burden to uphold, for a woman with warm blood pouring richly through her veins. A time comes when every woman, if occasion and circumstance are exactly favorable, is vulnerable . . . but no man had ever been with Naoma at the proper time and place.

In the otherwise dead silence of the empty school room, a constant, irritating buzzing sounded surprisingly loud. A fly, trying to make its escape through a closed window. Absently, Naoma watched the small, dark creature with its diaphanous wings and tiny legs. It crawled patiently up the pane,

over and over again, baffled each time by that strange transparency which had the visual clarity of air, but presented the hardness of a wall. Then it would fly into a futile flurry of impatience, bumping stubbornly again and again on the glass with buzzing wings, as it sought to reach the freedom of the out-of-doors.

The realization stole over Naoma that her life was not unlike that imprisoned fly; that she was beating her head vainly against the impossible, with no hope ever of achieving what she wished . . . although she did not herself really understand what it was that she wanted so imperiously. Why could not women have their existences ordered like men? There are, Naoma considered, three periods in a man's career, each full of consequence. First is his gay and thoughtless youth, with thrills and new experiences and adventures. Then comes the rich, full period of middle life and maturity, when a man achieves a mental background, with books and art if he be of the reflective and esthetic type, with a family and property perhaps, and a settled course of existence. Finally, there arrives the philosophic period, when in contemplation and serenity, he looks upon his waning years. And the last period, Naoma felt sure, must be the best of all to a man, if he have the wit to know the good from the bad.

A woman's life, on the other hand, is built all topsy-turvy. The great years are her first ones, Naoma thought. As a girl, when her face is freshest and her body most perfect, while instinct still plays a role which makes thought secondary, she reaches the summit of her power and glory. In those days, normally, love comes to her, and with it marriage. Marriage is the climax of her life—and it occurs on the very threshold. After that everything becomes an anticlimax. She who has been the center and focus of attention, must learn to live vicariously in her husband or her children—if she be fortunate enough to have children. Otherwise she must face an existence completely without meaning to anyone, least of all to herself, no matter how hard she may strive to convince herself and the world that it possesses significance. The final years, married or single, are inconsequential ones, with gossip, family vital statistics and religion, as a substitute for any activity, mental—or physical, for that matter, since the bee does not come to the withered flower.

Naoma rose from her chair on a sudden impulse and walked to the window. She lifted the sash and with her hands shooed the little insect out into the open freedom it craved.

The ten years since Naoma had run away from the Rawhidiers seemed long, and yet because of the placid tenor of her life since the first flurry of excitement and activity there were no pegs upon which to hang individual remembrances of the period. From a fledgling girl she had emerged into a woman in one night. That experience, at least, was violently vivid in her recollections.

Her wedding night—never would Naoma forget it. Apart from the pain of knowing that she had forever lost Jubal, there was the dread, coupled with a vivid sickish anticipation as she prepared in her wagon domicile—all shiny and new, a *Studebaker*, much sought after by the Rawhidiers—to receive for the first time in awful intimacy that strange, mysterious, terrifying creature, a man. Her flesh alternated between burning heat and chills which brought up the gooseflesh on her arms and thighs.

Women took her, shivering, to her bed, undressed her and placed her in it after the Rawhider custom, with many a chuckling feminine innuendo and wise saw, quarried out of the centuries of experience of their sex in the art of manhandling. Afterward they left her there, frightened under the wagon tilt, her heart pounding in her throat, her eyes wide in the gloom and fixed on the narrow strip of night blue sky, with its silvery flecks of stars which shone through the aperture at the end of the wagon cover.

Then came that shot. She heard it detachedly, failing to associate it in any way with her own fate. Shots were frequent about the Rawhider camp, and her thoughts just then were on something else, something far more intensely personal. A hubbub of noise, voices shouting above one another, drew her attention. Finally somebody crying out over all the tumult:

“It’s Sollerman! Sollerman Bain!” Quickly his shout was cut off as if a hand had been clapped over his mouth. They did not want Solomon’s bride to hear. . . .

4

In the hours afterward, when the rough kindness of the wagon people worked to alleviate what they supposed was her grief, Naoma wept; but more from relief than sorrow. Now that she no longer had to face it, she realized how much she had shrunk from the ordeal of marriage with Solomon. Yellow-faced Solomon, with his thin beard and bad teeth . . . in her bed! She felt as if she were twisted inside into a tight ball at the thought. Yet, trained to obedience like all the women of her race, she had never questioned the decision of her father that she should marry this man.

After the fate was averted, however, she saw with sudden clarity what it would have meant. Crouching over *his* fire to cook . . . feeling *his* lank hands taking liberties with her body, night after night . . . bearing rat-faced children for *him*. . . .

A horror that such a thing might yet happen to her, and that another like Solomon Bain might still obtain possession of her, clutched at her throat. *Anything* was preferable to that.

In the night she slipped out of the wagon train.

From the moment she left the looming hulks of the tilts and the dying embers of the cook fires, events began to move with a rapidity which bewildered Naoma. She, whose life had followed a pattern so settled since babyhood, with its horizons limited by the size and scope of the wagon train, its only contacts the gaunt people of her tribe, passed through a series of dizzying changes.

In the hotel at Roswell was a woman from California, frantic with the loss of her maid, who, from homesickness, had made a sudden decision to return to a lover in San Francisco. At the sight of Naoma, who timidly entered the lobby and spoke to the man behind the desk in hope of finding something to do to earn a bed and meals, this overmastering woman felt that heaven had made a direct sending.

“Did I understand you to say to the clerk that you desired a situation?” she interrupted in a stentorian voice, her bonnet quivering on top of her iron-gray hair, while her dove-gray silk dress flounced hugely behind, for the styles were slow in reaching the Pacific and she still affected bustles.

“Ye-es,” was Naoma’s frightened reply.

“You will do to take Isabel’s place!” exclaimed the California woman triumphantly. “Can you make tea? Can you iron acceptably? Can you wait on table? But no matter—you probably cannot. *Nobody* in this heaven-forsaken country knows *any* useful thing. You shall go along with me anyway. I will teach you myself! Judge McReynolds!” This last was delivered like a horse pistol at the head of a small, dapper man who stood at her side, with a mournful expression on his dark face, the look of gloom accentuated by a pair of large *pince nez* glasses, which he wore, and which were attached to his lapel by a flowing black ribbon. “Judge McReynolds!” repeated the imperious voice. “The young woman will do to take Isabel’s place. Arrange with her. At once!”

Like a beskirted cuirassier the voluminous gray figure turned away with a swish of silk, and waddled off, leaving the husband to stammer apologies.

“My wife means no offense,” began Judge McReynolds, raising his silk hat and revealing a bald, polished skull. “She becomes a little rattled when anything upsets her—”

“Yawl needn’t apologize none,” Naoma assured him. “Ah’d sho’-nuff like to go ’long with yo’. When yawl leavin’?”

Her reply was inspired by desperation. Naoma was taking a mighty hazard, because she was willing to do anything to place herself beyond the reach of the Rawhidiers.

“I beg pardon?” The Judge cleared his throat. “Did I hear you aright? You were saying—?”

“Ah said Ah’d be right pleased to go to wo’k fo’ Mizz Jedge.”

Delight struggled with relief in the Judge’s countenance, for many of his formidable helpmeet’s demands were not so easily satisfied. Two hours later, on the next stage, Naoma found herself, duly ensconced as a member of the McReynolds household, headed for “back east.”

5

Thus the Rawhidiers passed out of Naoma’s life. Sitting in her empty classroom on this September afternoon, Naoma smiled as she remembered the broad accent with which she had addressed her first employers in those days, ten years ago. “Back east,” to the Californians, meant Kansas, where Judge McReynolds was traveling to attend to some land investments near Arkansas City. He was a railroad attorney and had purchased land along the right-of-way when the tracks were laid south to the Oklahoma territory.

Naoma thought of how breathlessly she worked—and learned. The Judge’s wife, for all her redoubtable appearance, proved kind in a harsh-faced manner. Her husband she ruled sternly, but to Naoma she displayed a loud-voiced gentleness. Early in their association Naoma discovered that her mistress liked to be addressed as Mrs. *Judge* McReynolds. Indeed she, more than her spouse, looked the magisterial part. Quick to learn, Naoma began to lose her nasal drawl, to adopt more cultivated tones and diction from her employers.

For her part, Mrs. McReynolds, a Massachusetts woman who had the New England feminine instinct of “tidying up” everything with which she came into contact, found it contrary to her every feeling to have about her a

girl Naoma's age who scarcely knew how to read. So she addressed herself to the task of "tidying up" this bit of human flotsam. Mrs. McReynolds had been a school teacher—it was this circumstance that took her from Boston to far California, where she met and married the Judge. She still derived enjoyment from teaching, partly because it offered her the opportunity to play the martinet, a role she dearly loved.

Shortly after the McReynoldses arrived in Arkansas City, Kansas, therefore, Naoma found herself sitting three hours each day under the dictatorial frown of the cuirassier in skirts. There was in this some satisfaction for the girl, but also a good deal of anguish of soul. She progressed surpassingly with the McGuffey reader, the copy book and the geography; but the grammar, the Blue Back speller and the arithmetic book were arduous, and she never quite succeeded in making clear in her mind some of the details of the Barnes American history, with its intriguing footnotes and prosy text.

After all, however, it was needful only to teach Naoma to read well; her mind was a sponge, craving the opportunity to absorb information, and once she had mastered the printed word, launched in the McReynolds library she devoured books omnivorously and incessantly in the hours free from work—puzzling out the hard passages with a small dictionary, asking incessant questions, first of Mrs. McReynolds, and then, when the woman's school-teacher education with its parrot memory began to reach its limits, Naoma went to the Judge himself, and found his knowledge immensely broader, although lacking in some of the small preciseness of his wife's.

The Judge and his wife made a strangely assorted couple. Half a head taller than her husband stood the woman, and in the home she was master. Judge McReynolds, respected and admired by the world for his wisdom and attainments, took that respect only as far as his own threshold. Once within the door of his own domicile, he had learned long years before from his hard-visaged helpmeet the power which determination and a loud voice can hold in any argument. A tactful, easy man, who hated discord, in the end he made it a policy not to oppose her, preferring peace to victory in debate, and arranging a life which was not unsatisfactory to himself, remote among his books and letters, in the refuge of his own thoughts.

Sometimes in the evenings after supper, the Judge would go to his study, his wife taking her crocheting to a wide-bottomed rocking chair in her room. On such occasions, after she had done the supper things, Naoma would often steal in and start the Judge to talking.

Then the small, dark-featured man, with the shining bald pate, the graying imperial and goatee, and the immense *pince nez* with which he used to tap the arm of his chair to emphasize his words, would launch haphazard on the ocean of human knowledge. Sometimes it would be history he discussed, and he would hold Naoma breathless with the story of how Xenophon's ten thousand fought their way to the sea, or how, to avenge a broken promise, Genghis Khan marched half the circumference of the globe with his uncouth Mongol cavalry. Sometimes he would discourse upon literature, and then his face would become transfigured as he quoted long passages from Shakespeare, Dryden and Pope, or from Sidney Lanier, the American, for whose verses he owned an immense fondness. Another time he might dwell on the sciences, particularly delighting in discussing the theories of the Englishman, Charles Darwin, whose word *Evolution* just then had the world by the throat, with the pulpits thundering against it, and a few broader intelligences discussing it with growing excitement and delight. Judge McReynolds was a churchman, an Episcopalian by family tradition; his wife by adoption. Born into the church, baptized at its font, a choir boy, a crucifer, an acolyte, a lay reader, and later at various times a vestryman and churchwarden, he was deeply steeped in the beautiful lore of his religion. From him Naoma learned to love the rich symbolism and reject the shallow ritualism.

As the months passed, Mrs. McReynolds watched her ward as a very domineering and ducky old hen might watch a lone chick—half disapproving and half admonitory.

“Naoma, keep your feet together!” she would exclaim. “No lady stands or sits with her limbs sprawled. It's awkward. A woman cannot be too careful with her postures. Besides it's—unladylike and suggestive. What would a man think, seeing you spraddled out that way? It is dreadful to contemplate! Always sit with your ankles touching each other. So! Back erect—now fold the hands in the lap. There—now that is better. *Now* you look as if you possessed some gentility.”

At another time: “Naoma! Modulate your voice, my dear. I cannot permit you to go about the house screeching like a peacock! Always remember, ‘A voice soft, gentle and low, is an excellent thing in woman.’”

Not that the good lady observed the latter piece of advice herself. She was notorious for the high, strenuous voice which the neighbors could clearly hear whenever she scolded about anything which failed to please her. Naoma, however, profited by this, as by other lessons in deportment.

One who had known Naoma in the Rawhider camp would have had difficulty in believing, at the end of three years, that she was the same girl. The uncouthness of her childhood was gone and in its place were grace and dignity and a kind of serious natural beauty. The broad drawl had passed. Her speech now was almost primly correct, saved from stiffness by the soft slurring which was the only indication remaining of her Southern breeding. How to dress was something for which she possessed a natural art, and although she was, largely, her own dressmaker, having little to spend upon clothing, she was endowed with the faculty of becoming the things she wore, rather than requiring them to become her.

One day the Judge came home and after dinner called her to his study.

“My dear child,” he said, “I have been making some inquiries concerning your parents. From Silver City, New Mexico, I have obtained the definite information that neither of them are now living.”

It settled the unanswered question in Naoma’s heart. She did not even weep, although that night in her bed, pain and sorrow gripped her heart for all the dark hours—and remorse, too, because she had run away from Uncle Shem and Aunt Charity. But in the days which followed, helped by the Judge’s wise tact, she came to the belief that she had done rightly after all, and the poignancy of her grief at last departed.

Eventually had come the day when, after many serious conversations with the Judge, Naoma applied with beating heart for a position as a teacher in a country school. To her astonishment, she received the appointment. Not until she began to teach did she realize how ill-prepared she was for the task, but she was a ceaseless worker and she managed to finish the year, partly because the biggest boy in school, almost as old as herself, suffered a case of puppy love over her, and solemnly thrashed every youngster who transgressed her rules. At the end of the term her contract was renewed, with a salary of thirty dollars a month, and “board around.” The next summer was spent by Naoma with the McReynoldses, but no longer as a servant.

“You’re the only daughter we have,” Mrs. McReynolds said. From that day Naoma considered the Judge’s home her own. The summer was given over to study; there should be no such nightmare school year again if Naoma could prevent it.

There came a morning when a dense, black fringe of people stretched mile on mile along the Kansas-Oklahoma border. Southward lay the

Cherokee Strip, immemorial freehold of the Indians and the cattle ranchers, for which the government had fought a losing battle with the encroaching myriads of importunate settlers. Naoma, who read the *Wichita Eagle*, was thrilled by the account of how, in August, 1893, President Grover Cleveland had signed a proclamation at last setting a date when the long-coveted area should be thrown open to settlement. And on September 16 of that year, she rode south with Judge and Mrs. McReynolds to see the great event.

Upon the border for weeks there had been an air of almost hysterical excitement. Unpainted pine board registration booths were opened on the line, and thousands swarmed about them like insects, until the grass for acres about each little shack was trodden off, and the ground beaten into deep, powdery dust by the countless feet of the homestead seekers. Everybody had to register and receive a card before he could claim land in the scheduled rush.

South of Arkansas City alone, more than thirty thousand persons had gathered along the border, two miles below the town, and there were thousands more at Caldwell, Hunnewell, Kiowa and elsewhere along the Kansas line; while additional multitudes poised to the south, the west and the east of the great quadrangle, two hundred miles long by sixty miles wide, for the partition of which they were to race.

The good humor of the crowds, in spite of the heat, the dry wind, the scarcity of water, the lack of every comfort and convenience, amazed Naoma. Hundreds of women and even little children were there, although by far the greater number of the "pilgrims" were men. Some persons had driven in wagons or ridden on horseback for hundreds of miles, and then camped on the open prairie; for every accommodation in the town had been taken months before. Yet they joked, men and women alike, and the small, dirty-faced and unkempt tots tumbled happily among the wagon tongues and heaps of harness, with the soft yellow dust rising about their soiled little bare feet.

Wherever two or three men foregathered, they soon engaged in the time-honored contest of horseshoes, for the equipment for this sport was always close at hand in this equine land. Money changed hands constantly over blankets spread upon the ground, where little knots of men sat cross-legged at poker, seven-up or monte, or sometimes knelt to the rolling of dice, a lantern lashed to a post or a wagon tail to enable them to see after the sun dropped below the horizon. Horse racing helped also to while away the time, and long lanes of spectators quickly formed whenever two men, proud of their nags, bet each other which would be first to reach a given mark. There

were occasional fist-fights, and dog fights were frequent, for the place was full of curs which were total strangers to each other and therefore must, in canine fashion, decide among themselves questions of precedence. When the peculiar snarling made by fighting dogs was heard, everyone dropped whatever he was engaged in, joined the gathering at the place of combat, craned his neck and shoved his neighbor, made expert comment, usually punctuated by equally expert squirting of tobacco juice, and in the end tried to place a small bet on the outcome of the battle.

Weather-beaten women, some of them fat and misshapen in their stayless Mother Hubbard dresses, but the larger number thin and slat-sided, peered with dull eyes from beneath their sunbonnets, or sat cradling and suckling babies under the wagon covers or in ragged tents. Occasionally, however, a different type of woman would pass, swaying purposefully through the crowd. In “peekaboo” waist and trailing skirts which she raised daintily—and revealingly—from the dust, she held every masculine eye, and as she passed she gave forth the rustle of a taffeta petticoat, while the aura of a heady fragrance followed her. The unattractive wives of the “pilgrims” observed spitefully that her face was painted, and then they noted with jealous rage how the eyes of the men traveled from their own features to those of this brazen creature—and how the trail of her slinky finery was marked by a progressive wave of male heads turned to look over the shoulders of their owners as the dangerous feminine enemy swept along, challenging all with her eyes and her gleaming smile. Then the women of the camp gathered in close, gabbling groups; and watched their own men carefully that night. Not that it did much good, men being the perfidious animals that they are.

On the crucial day of September 16, when Naoma rode with the McReynoldses to the boundary, with the sun a blazing ball of fire above the baked plains, a blistering south wind scorching the cheek and raising clouds of reddish dust to add to the discomfort of the heat, final arrangements were being completed for the “run.”

“Watch everything carefully,” Judge McReynolds told Naoma. “You are seeing history made here. I want you never to forget it.” The Judge was present only as a spectator. He was a Democrat and hoped for appointment to a court bench in the new territory as soon as it was organized. His property interests in Kansas already were sufficient for him. So he hitched his buggy well back from the mob and, with the two women, circulated through the crowds on foot.

To Naoma it was superlatively interesting to see the varied nature of the gathering. Here was a Swede, with bland blue eyes and a shock of yellow hair, come all the way from Minnesota with his plain wife, and his covered wagon full of tow-headed youngsters who gazed mutely forth. Yonder was a hillbilly from the Ozarks, cadaverous and awkward, standing beside the scrubby mule he had ridden. Cowboys on their ponies, lounging with a knee hooked over the saddle horn; smartly dressed men from the cities in derbies and high collars, with “fast steppers” hitched to their sleek buggies; nondescript farmers from Kansas, Iowa and Illinois, in ordinary lumber wagons; hundreds of spring wagons, buckboards, carts and even staid and respectable surreys, all were interwoven in the shifting, exciting scene. A few had prepared for a speedy race by fixing a tongue to the rear wheels of a wagon, and mounting upon this arrangement a spring seat, thus forming what was, in effect, a chariot—a vehicle which promised violent action when it should begin to bound over the rough sod behind a team of wicked little mules. Hundreds of bicycles, which had just become the rage in urban centers, could be seen in the crowds, and many persons, too poor for a vehicle of any kind, were present on foot, miserably hoping somehow to be fortunate enough to secure a piece of land.

In that heterogeneous mob were men from every part of the United States, drawn by a common lodestone. And although she did not know it, two of those men were to play a vital part in Naoma’s own future life. One was a thin, horse-faced physician, addicted to linen suits and Latin phrases. He was from the Mississippi levees, and men called him Doctor Shanks. The other was a tall young lawyer named Webster Grattan.

7

Noon approached and a mounting tension ran through the crowd. Wagons and buggies began to back and wheel into line on the starting mark, with loud whip cracking, the plunging of horses, rising dust, and constant bitter profanity creating still greater confusion. A railroad track ran south into the Strip, and on this, just north of the border, stood an engine, panting quietly with steam up, ready to pull into the territory its long train of freight cars, upon which the people swarmed blackly.

A throaty roar ran the length of the miles of massed humanity. In front appeared the blue uniforms of three mounted soldiers. At the distance the men looked like toy people, but one was clearly identifiable as an officer, and upon him every eye was fixed in strained attention. The tiny blue arm of the miniature officer went up. There was an almost microscopic puff of

cottony white smoke, which should have been followed in a second or so by the crack of the revolver. But nobody ever heard the report. Already, before the sound could travel across the intervening plain, like a giant, savage beast let loose, the crowd had surged into action.

R-r-r-r-ooooooooooooooooo! A sudden, terrific avalanche of vehicles, animals and people rolled southward, with a guttural, earth-shaking roar. Whips rose and fell, there was a crescendo of clattering, jingling harness and wheels leaping suddenly forward, the tumultuous thunder of tens of thousands of frantic hoofs, over all the mighty diapason of everyone shouting at once. Right in front of where Naoma stood, a light buggy tangled wheels with a lumber wagon. Down it went in a smother of dust, its driver dragged behind the frightened horse which galloped on, the wheelless vehicle bounding after. Soldiers caught the animal and two or three men lifted a limp figure from the ground and carried it to the now empty registration booth.

The men on horseback had some advantage. They strung out, at first, like a huge spreading fan. One horse stumbled and went down just ahead of a covered wagon. With a sick feeling, Naoma saw the canvas tilt jerk up and over as the wheels rolled on like some juggernaut of the plains. Never stopping for an instant, the prairie schooner clattered away, its driver insanely lashing his team. When the dust cleared, the horse on the ground was still kicking, but the prostrate rider was very still.

Two young fellows, with jeering, impudent faces, swept by, a crudely lettered sign on their wagon cover:

WHITE CAPPED IN INJIANNY, CHINCH BUGGED
IN ILLINOY, SICLONED IN NEWBRASKY,
BALD KNOBBED IN MISSOURY,
OKLAHOMY OR BUST!

R-r-r-r-ooooooooooooooooo! The thunder of the mob died in the distance. The mighty, choking cloud of dust gradually subsided. Traffic slowly formed into giant processions, following the well-known trails, and eventually, except for scattered figures here and there where early claims had been staked, the Cherokee run had disappeared over the horizon.

The political ambitions of Judge McReynolds found speedy gratification. Within a year after the “run” he received his appointment from President Cleveland and assumed a seat on the bench of the new territory.

Soon after he and Mrs. McReynolds moved to Enid, still very much a city of shacks and tents. There the Judge learned of a school vacancy at Wettick, near the eastern end of the Strip, and exercised his political influence to secure the position for Naoma.

From the moment of her arrival in Wettick, it seemed to Naoma, as she sat in the school room that afternoon thinking back upon these events, life had barely crawled. For two years now she had lived in the little town, her horizon bounded by its constricted limits. Everyone in Wettick was known to her, but she had few friends, and Naoma knew the great loneliness of the single, unattached woman. Within her was a timidity which prevented her from giving too fully her confidence to any member of her own sex. This was in large measure due to her lack of sureness in herself. Too recently had Naoma been a Rawhider girl. In the presence of other women she could not overcome a feeling of inferiority; could not escape the fear that some slip would reveal her rude background. Women, it seemed to poor Naoma, appeared to exist in the world chiefly as critics of other women's bearing, clothes, and actions. Never did she pass by two women talking together on a street corner without a back-prickling sensation that their conversation would turn on her as soon as she passed, and the knowledge that nothing very complimentary was ever uttered in such conversations.

As for men, Naoma lived almost in terror of them. Mrs. McReynolds saw this and attempted, in her explosive way, to remedy it.

"Don't keep the young men at such distance, my dear!" she exclaimed, shaking her gray curls with earnestness. "A woman simply cannot do without men in her life. Who's she going to boss, and manage, and scheme for, if she doesn't have a man? Without men, my girl, where's the use of all the primping and fixing we do? Where's our value? We're precious beyond all price—but only to men. The other women have mighty few delusions about us, I can tell you! Every proper woman's life work is some man. No, no, Naoma. Don't be so cold to the boys who come to call upon you. Let 'em flock around—you need 'em—every woman does—if only for the blessed feeling of self-confidence the stupid dears give you when they are so fatuous that they actually adore the silliest, most witless things women do!"

"But I don't know how to make men come around me," Naoma had protested.

"Oh, yes, you do!" retorted Mrs. McReynolds firmly. "Any girl as pretty as you are doesn't need to know, for that matter. If she only sits and stares

off into space, men will come to her. But there are little ways and tricks, too, that every woman knows, and some you'll find out for yourself alone."

"Tricks! That is exactly something which I don't know!"

"Stuff! Don't know any little women's tricks? Why, Naoma, how you talk. The way you use your eyes is one of the deadliest of them—you do it unconsciously. But there are others that can be done consciously, and very effectively by an artful woman. Take clothes, for instance. How does the jingle go?"

"Red and yellow, catch a fellow;
Blue and white, hold him tight—

"That's it—and not bad advice, either. Bright colors interest men, demure ones keep them once you get them. And there's the matter of flowers. It's positively sinful the way a woman can work on the sensibilities of a man with a bouquet of posies—if she studies how. Carry them in your arms. He'll think to himself, 'How artless, how innocent, how beautiful and childlike.' Men want women to be like that, you know, and they're always ready to believe it at the slightest excuse. Or hold the bouquet to your face, bury your face in the flowers. Unavoidably his imagination will make the obvious comparison—another blossom among the bunch of posies. From that day he'll go around thinking of your face as a flower, even if you have big ears and freckles. Men are like that—no sense to them, only perfervid imagination, where women are concerned, and that's why it's so easy to work on them."

"Easy?" cried Naoma in naive disbelief.

"It's the simplest thing in the world," was the positive reply. "The most ignorant little numb wit, if she has just an ordinary figure and passable eyes, can twist the biggest, most important man in America right around her finger, if she knows how to handle him. I've seen it a thousand times. History shows it, too—look at the Du Barrys and the Nell Gwynns and the Cleopatras who upset history just because they could make the most powerful men of their time act like a bunch of love-sick school boys."

She shook her grizzled head at the girl and raised an admonitory finger.

"Above all, Naoma, be always amiable. And trusting—up to a certain point. Of course there are always the wolves—the wicked rascals—and, worse luck, they seem always to be the most attractive ones. I knew one in California—but no matter; that was when I was young. You will not believe it, Naoma, but I was considered *lovely* . . . once. Not that I am so bad now—

for a woman of my age,” she added defiantly. Then she sighed and went on more slowly. “For a woman of my age—that’s just it. Too much water has passed under the bridge. Anyway”—she brightened and returned with animation to her subject—“the big majority of men are just like stupid, woolly sheep, ready to be herded and sheared by the first smart woman who comes along and takes the trouble to do it. And after a while, when you’ve had your fun, you can pick out one and marry him. Make sure he’s a coming young man. You have your future to secure for life.”

A coming young man. That, Naoma thought, as she sat in the school room remembering the conversation, applied to Webster Grattan. In a loyal attempt to follow Mrs. McReynolds’ advice, the girl had shyly encouraged men at first. The results were not reassuring. Men, she decided, seem only to want one thing of a woman . . . the one thing she, alone, can give them. At about the time she arrived with disgust at this conviction of disillusionment, Webster Grattan, the lawyer, came into her life.

Webster was tall, dark and correct, with a coat tightly buttoned about his spare figure, a collar always spotless, and a cravat in the latest mode. His manners were admirable. Above all, he treated her with consideration and respect. In spite of these facts, Naoma was far from sure concerning him. In some manner he failed to stir or excite her. Still—*a coming young man.* Webster’s law practice already was considered prosperous for a young attorney. Moreover, his name came much into discussion as a promising figure in the Republican party. It was reported that he might be asked to run for the legislature. If he accepted the nomination and won the election, it would be the first step and an important step up the political ladder. Congress, the governorship—even the Senate might beckon to him. With Webster Grattan, Naoma felt sure that she would have security . . . and that was something her woman’s nature yearned for strongly.

The clock on the school room wall ticked noisily and Naoma realized with a start that it was half-past five o’clock. For an hour and a half she had been sitting in a brown study. Jumping up, Naoma began whisking her things together—hat, *Ben Hur*, purse. She would be late if she did not hurry. Webster was to take her to the “opera house” that evening for the performance of “Repented at Leisure,” to be given by a traveling troupe. It was not often that plays came to Wettick—not frequently enough so that chances of seeing them could be wasted—and Webster always was a little impatient when he was kept waiting.

Naoma hurried from the school. Already the sun was low. She could feel the weeds catching at her skirts as she hastened down the narrow path.

“How do you do, Mrs. Bain?” Naoma glanced up. A thin, frail old man had raised his hat to her, his hair snowy white and the veins showing through the transparent skin of his temples. He was attired in a wrinkled suit of linen, and wore a perpetual look of astonishment upon his somewhat horsey features, due to the arch of his eyebrows and the fact that he was usually drunk in a mild and gentlemanly way.

“Why, how are you, Doctor Shanks?”

Since the first meeting between the two—when she was ill with the grippe the previous spring—there had been between them a bond of friendship.

“Bain?” He had pronounced her name on that occasion, with the air of one sampling something, as he prescribed for her. “Bain? That sounds, ma’am, like a Southern name. I am a Southerner myself, although I received my—ah—professional training in the North. The medical schools there were superior to ours, before the War. . . . I am, however, by blood and lifetime habit, a citizen of Dixie. Related, on the distaff side, I believe, to the Fairfaxes of Virginia. That, however, is unimportant, is it not? ‘The rank is but the guinea’s stamp; the man’s the gowd for a’ that,’—eh?”

This last was said in a tone which revealed clearly that not one word of Robert Burns’ democratic doctrine was believed by the speaker, who retained a smug pride in his aristocratic Virginia relationships.

Naoma found that the doctor, in spite of the fact that he drank far too much for his own good, possessed a background of culture, and that his conversation contained a wealth of allusion which reminded her of Judge McReynolds’ erudition. Whenever she met the old man, dawdling along on one of his leisurely professional calls, or perhaps idly gossiping in front of one of the stores, she always took occasion to stop and speak with him, unless he was intoxicated. Even in that case, Doctor Shanks was the one who invariably offered an excuse and departed. He had old-fashioned ideas about the propriety of a gentleman’s conversing with a lady when in what he termed “a state of mild bibacity.”

On the present occasion, however, he was sober, and Naoma observed that his linen suit seemed less soiled and wrinkled than usual.

“Can you—ah—inform me if Miss Georgia Tarton is still within the school building?”

“I believe not,” replied Naoma. “It seems to me that she left an hour or so ago. You may find her at her lodgings.”

“I am most grateful to you. Good day.” He lifted his hat and turned on down the street.

Naoma’s face was troubled. What was Georgia Tarton’s interest in Doctor Shanks? She remembered that on several occasions she had seen the teacher with him. Could it be that Georgia—Surely not! Georgia was not more than forty, and Doctor Shanks nearer to seventy. But on the other hand, the doctor owned land on Shoo-Fly Creek, he had a medical practice, most of all he possessed a social entree into the “best homes” of Wettick—like those of the Ansell Goffs, of the town’s bank. *That* was it—a social entree! Naoma remembered how Georgia, with her brooding dark eyes and her tall figure, longed to be “received” by spiteful, unattractive Mrs. Goff. Naoma grew more worried than ever.

10

As she moved on up the street, there was distaste in Naoma’s face—unhappiness and discontent. Forcibly she was reminded that she had been in Wettick now for two years. And what had she gained? Nothing that she could enumerate except a sense of added years, a faintly wistful look about her eyes, and complete oblivion as far as the world was concerned.

She must plan to visit Judge and Mrs. McReynolds at Thanksgiving. It always did Naoma so much good. The Judge’s goatee was almost pure white now, and so was the bushy hair at his temples, accentuating the dark, Italianate quality of his skin. He had that summer, due to the pressure of his business in Kansas, resigned his judgeship and moved to Wichita, a growing city on the plain. Mrs. McReynolds, for once, was happy, since almost immediately after her arrival, she had become a figure in Wichita society, was invited to become a member of the Hypatia Club, and was elected head of the Altar Guild of the Episcopal church. The Judge, as a matter of fact, was happy too, at least for a portion of the time, for he had joined the Commonwealth Club, and in its masculine seclusion he found a circle of oldsters like himself, some of them of a philosophical turn. When his aggressive helpmeet harassed him too unbearably, he could always find refuge there, and a game of billiards, or a tall glass, although Kansas, even in that day, maintained its paradoxical pose of “voting dry and drinking wet.”

Because of their removal from Oklahoma, Naoma saw the Judge and his wife rarely. Her own life grew each year more circumscribed. Although she was only twenty-five and a widow, she felt like an old maid. Already she was becoming sensitive to questions concerning her age. In some manner, it seemed to Naoma, the world had marched on, leaving her stationary. Other women of her age had husbands and children. Their patterns of life were settled. Contentment was in their faces, the contentment which security, peace and motherhood bring to women. Their existences possessed a steady cadence and a meaning which Naoma, in some manner, had missed. Some of them, it was true, had become lazy and slovenly with marriage, and others had grown shrewish. But almost without exception, the school teacher regarded the matrons in her acquaintance with a half-realized envy. That she was missing something important in life, she resented deeply. Her instincts fiercely urged that it was hers by right to have a home and children and a placid peace of existence like these other woman. *A coming young man.* Webster Grattan. Naoma glanced up and saw him standing beside the path awaiting her.

11

“Are you just leaving school?” Webster asked in surprise, lifting his derby hat as he always did when he met Naoma.

“Yes, I was delayed.”

“It seems to me you’ll have to hurry if you are to be ready in time for the theater. You know it opens at seven-thirty.”

About Webster Grattan there was something assured which always made her feel humble and unimportant. Tall, dressed in a suit of close checks, his shoes flecklessly polished, he looked the personification of the qualities which Mrs. McReynolds had recommended to her. There was no doubt that Webster Grattan would be a success. But sometimes his assurance annoyed her. *You’ll have to hurry.* It was almost as if the man already was married to her, instead of the suppliant admirer which a woman feels she has a right to expect a man to be at least during the courtship stage. Perhaps it was his confidence in his future, and his belief that he was a prize any woman should be glad to win. Naoma stiffened.

“I had hoped to come for you within the hour,” he chided.

“I’ll be ready in that time,” she said, suddenly meek again.

They were walking slowly past Holloway’s drugstore. A tall man, carrying a gray portmanteau, appeared before them. He was deeply tanned,

dressed in a dark suit, the trousers of which were stuffed into cowmen's boots. On his head was a battered, broad-brimmed hat like those worn on the range, and beneath the brim a stern mouth and a pair of remarkable eyes, changing at that moment from gray to a shining blue of surprise and joy. Naoma stared wildly at the stranger while recognition sprang into both of their faces.

"Naomy . . . is it you?" the newcomer cried.

Joy was in her voice. "Jubal! Why, Jubal!"

The portmanteau was in the dust and they had seized one another's hands. But the constraint of the years and the presence of a third person held them. Jubal's blood clamored to him to take her in his arms: Naoma would have given the world to melt to him. Instead they stood, oddly ill at ease in this unheralded meeting, trying to speak of commonplaces while both their hearts were thumping.

He's probably married, she was thinking.

It's so long . . . everything must have changed, was the thought in Jubal's mind.

Aloud, she said formally: "Mr. Grattan, may I present Mr. Troop? Webster, this is one of my oldest friends."

"Delighted to meet you," said Grattan, extending a hand. "Just get into town?"

"Why, yes," replied Jubal. He had a dazed sensation. Naoma . . . she was so different from when he had known her. Was this self-possessed young woman the Rawhider girl whom he had loved and sought for years? Her talk, her light laughter, her manner, all amazed him. Yes, it was Naoma—but it was not exactly Naoma, either. Awkwardness and awe came over him.

"How long are you going to be in town?" she was asking.

"I don't hardly know. I just got here—on my way to a hotel now. Business trip," he mumbled.

"Could I be of any service?" put in Grattan.

The lawyer's voice was a reminder to Naoma. "If you are going to be here for some time, Jubal, we must have a talk. There are so many things I want to know. Won't you save a little of your time for me? At present I must run on, for I am almost late for an engagement."

This was not what she wanted to say. Naoma almost wept from disappointment. She had dreamed so often of this meeting—and now that it had come, they stood like strangers, formalities on their lagging tongues.

“Why, yes,” Jubal was saying. “Where could I find you?”

“Mrs. Bain is an instructor at our public school,” Grattan told him.

Mrs. Bain. Mrs. Solomon Bain. So she had not remarried. But who was this Grattan? She called him Webster. That sounded intimate. For the first time Jubal looked closely at the other man. Tall, dark, with a well-trained mustache. Dressed like a dude. City man—likely a lawyer or land speculator. Jubal disliked him. He thanked him, however, and assured Naoma that he would communicate with her. Then Grattan led her away, Naoma turning once to wave back at the big man standing gazing after them on the street, the portmanteau still in the dust at his feet.

That night Jubal rolled and puffed cigarettes until nearly dawn as he sat on the edge of his hotel bed. The mystery of life utterly confounded him. After so many years, in which at last he had surrendered hope, he actually had found Naoma. And under circumstances so unexpected that he had been tongue-tied. A sort of despair took possession of him. All his old longing for her returned, and with it the sick feeling that he must be too late. Grattan . . . *Webster* . . .

12

Never in his life had Doc Shanks been so greatly astonished. Now that it was over he could not down the feeling that he had committed the greatest blunder of his career.

What fools we mortals be, he thought to himself as he trudged down the moonlit pathway from the house where Georgia stayed. Georgia Tarton. Georgia Tarton Shanks. In a way the event was the most exciting thing which had ever happened to Doc Shanks. At seventy, engaged to be married. To be a benedict after all these years of bachelorhood.

Hardly could he understand how the thing had occurred. Georgia, with her brooding dark eyes, her tall figure, and the heavy masses of her dark hair, braided and wound round and round her head, seemed to take everything so for granted. True, he had escorted her to one or two evening functions. This evening, for example, he had purchased tickets for the play. What was the title? Ah, yes—“Repented at Leisure.” He had almost forgotten it. They did not attend after all. Instead they talked. Doc Shanks did not clearly remember just how the conversation went. He did remember

that he was awed by the tragedy in her voice. Alone . . . alone in the world, with nobody to turn to for understanding and sympathy. He gallantly offered himself. I will be your confidant, your sympathetic friend, Miss Tarton. Those dark eyes turned on him, burned into him. Am I to understand, Doctor Shanks—Oh, Marcus! Bewildered, he found her in his arms. After that everything was a daze. She talking incessantly, he groping back into his mind to think what it was he had said to give her the impression of a proposal. Suddenly he realized that she was setting their wedding day. As soon as possible. I know how impetuous you men are, but a woman must have a little time to prepare . . . let us say next Saturday. I can obtain a substitute for my position by then.

Doc Shanks was more than surprised. He was nearly paralyzed. Yet the more he thought about it, the less he disliked the idea. He was growing old. Georgia—he was getting the hang of calling her by her first name—was a fine woman. A fine, intellectual type of woman. It might be pleasant in his after years to have someone to care for him. The old man actually was smiling as he reached the cottage which served him both as living quarters and dispensary.

13

Naoma was vexed to the bottom of her soul when word came that someone wished to see her in the hall of the school building. Georgia Tarton, bursting with news, had descended upon her fellow teachers in the morning.

“. . . and I wanted you two girls to be the first to know it,” she gushed to Naoma and Miss Hostetter. “We’ve been co-workers, you know.” She simpered. “I’m to be married! It was *such* a surprise. To Doctor Shanks. Last night he literally stormed my heart. You have no idea, girls, how impetuous he is. He would *not* take no for an answer, and he has already set the wedding date—I could not refuse him—for *next Saturday*. Isn’t it amazing? I’m so thrilled and happy!”

And so she twittered on until Naoma walked away from her in anger and disgust. Well could she imagine how simple-hearted, gentle old Doctor Shanks had “stormed” this scheming creature. If she could have done anything to thwart Georgia Tarton in this iniquity, she would have leaped at the opportunity. But there was nothing she could do except rage within herself. At that moment the knock came at the class room door.

It was Jubal, awkward and nervous, who awaited her. So preoccupied was she with the problem of Georgia Tarton and Doctor Shanks that the

sight of Jubal startled her almost as much as if she had not seen him on the previous evening.

“Oh!” she cried.

“I don’t aim to keep you long from your work,” he explained. “I was just wondering if you’d take supper with me at the hotel tonight?”

Gradually Naoma pulled her wits about her. She promised to dine with him. Their conversation at the door seemed nervous and jerky as he told her he was in Oklahoma looking for cattle range. Part of Naoma’s confusion arose from being with him alone for the first time since their separation; moreover there was an ineffable something about him which fascinated her. An air of latent power, mysteriously breathed, frightening yet satisfying. At the last, they looked embarrassed into each other’s eyes. A question hung trembling between them, yet was not uttered. Naoma broke the tension.

“Oh, I simply must be going,” she exclaimed, turning with a flutter toward her class room.

“Yes, I reckon,” he assented. “I’ll see you tonight then.”

14

It was different in the evening. The tension was still there, but Jubal and Naoma were busy in the appraisal of each other. The woman saw a man with a mighty thickness of chest and breadth of shoulder, a burliness which was little like the flat-backed, lithe boy she had known. Across the table from her was a powerful face, deeply tanned, with a wide, grim mouth, a granite jaw, and twisted-wire wrinkles at the corners of the eyes—the latter blue, just now, but sometimes gray with despair, or blazing white with wrath, as she remembered in the past. It was Jubal’s forehead, however, which drew her gaze most often. A broad, wall-like width above his brows, with his hair curling in ringlets above it. Naoma was reminded of something . . . the frontlet of a great bull, with its wide expanse and curling hair about the base of its horns. She tried to dismiss the thought, but it came back to her. To plague and harass her.

For his part, Jubal saw a woman whose face was thin and whose waist was slender, but whose bosom and hips were richly promising, and whose eyes, in spite of the fact that her hair was darker now than that of the girl he had first known, were still wide wells of violet, with long black lashes around. It was Naoma, but a deeper, more splendid Naoma. Still did her manner and way of speaking awe him. But the awe only built up his desire for her, although it kept him from saying what was on his mind.

“It has been so long, and yet I knew you instantly,” she told him as they seated themselves in the cheap little hotel dining room.

“I knew you two blocks away,” he boasted, laughing. “You haven’t changed a bit.”

“Now you’re flattering. I was only a girl when you saw me last!”

“You’re only a girl right now!” And there was high justification for what he said, for Naoma looked years younger, her cheeks pink with excitement, her eyes shining, and her face alight.

Thus were the preliminaries attended to—the first meaningless phrases.

“Tell me—all about yourself,” she commanded presently.

“There ain’t much to tell,” he replied. “After I left the Rawhiders, I rode south with Reb into Texas an’ started a little ranch. I didn’t know for two years what happened . . . your husband.”

He fell silent and looked at her bright head, momentarily bowed. “Naomy,” he went on, “I left the ranch right there an’ hunted blamed near the whole Southwest for you. I went clear back to the Silver City country, trailing the Rawhiders, an’ mined three-four winters. Then I made a strike.” He smiled a little at the recollection. “But it wasn’t to be. I lost my stake in an accident—my own carelessness, too. Then I got snowed in, dead broke, with—who do you suppose?—Brother Bain!”

“Brother Bain?” Her eyes flew wide open, their violet darkening with intense interest.

“Yes. He was winter camp-eye at a glory hole in the mountains. Touched in the head.” Jubal described how nearly he came to losing his life. “Finally he told me about you leavin’ the wagon train back at Roswell. Couldn’t find a trace of you there, though. I saw I’d simply lost five years in hunting, and went back to the ranch. We pulled a little deal in Mexico, and I’m up here lookin’ for a place to grade up a herd of cows—and I find you here! Luck shorely seems to have changed for me. I guess that about sizes up the stack.”

She drew a deep breath. “You spent five years looking for *me*?”

“I shorely did.” He leaned suddenly across the table. His eyes, which changed so with his moods, grew almost black with deep emotion. “Naomy, I’ve found you, an’ before I run the risk of losin’ you again, I want . . . I just *got* to ask you one question. I’ve been waitin’ these years to ask it. I reckon you know what it is. May I?”

Her heart suddenly was pounding, and she drooped her head, her lashes brushing her cheeks. He took the action for assent.

“Then I’ll put it short,” he said. “I’ve been lovin’ you for ten years. Will you marry me?”

To his surprise she rose abruptly from the table. “I must get out . . . away from here,” she choked. He followed her, dazed, to the door and she almost ran down the dark street. Presently he overtook her and placed his hand on her soft arm. In the gloom his eyes sought her face but he could see only a luminous blur.

“Naomy . . . Naomy, I haven’t made you mad, have I?” She could hear his anxious voice.

A sob came from her. “I didn’t mean anything out of line,” he pleaded in sorrow and alarm.

She faced him, desperate decision in her look. “You didn’t! It was . . . only that my throat swelled up . . . so I couldn’t talk. Oh, *Jubal!*”

The town, the world, the universe whose myriad suns twinkled above, were forgotten. Their kiss was salty with her tears, yet she was laughing. In Jubal’s arms she trembled, hot as fire, and he felt he could not get enough of her, crushing her until she begged him to stop so that she could catch her breath. At last, hand in hand, the two walked aimlessly, without direction, far out across the prairie. It was late when they returned. Very late. Neither Naoma in her room at the boarding house, nor Jubal in his hotel, slept much that night. The sun rose for both of them in a thundering splendor of glory.

For the present the lovers decided to say nothing about their engagement. Jubal’s business was pressing; there could be no delay in its transaction. As for Naoma, the school year was ahead of her.

Coming as he did fresh from one of the last sections of open range, Jubal was shocked to see how the “run” had altered the Cherokee Strip. All the West was changed for that matter—so much so that he experienced difficulty in recognizing it. Jubal remembered the Strip of his boyhood as a land of undulating hills, with creeks in the wooded valleys and rich blue-stem grass knee deep in the spring; while a man might ride day after day with never a fence to stop him, unless perchance he ran into some horse corral or crowding pen. This well-remembered country, he was depressed to discover, now was a vast checkerboard of fenced-in farmlets. In all

directions stretched the barbed wire, here as everywhere in the West constricting the freedom of movement. No longer was there any thought of cutting across the country. One followed roads between long vistas of wire—roads both rutty and rough, far worse to travel than had ever been the open prairie.

Riding a saddle horse hired at a Wettick livery stable, Jubal spent days on those roads, scouting the country as if he had been a bird dog quartering a patch of quail bush. Wherever he went he looked at the arrangement of the farms, with particular attention to the question of whether or not there was a sufficiency of unbroken prairie for his purpose, the putting together of many small pastures to create a single large one.

One day Jubal halted his horse beside a little stream which wound through groves of cottonwoods, willows and elms. Suddenly enthralled, he realized that the spot seemed an answer to his dreams. To one side of the creek lay a broad, grass-covered flat, ideal for the buildings and corrals of a ranch. All about stretched broad areas of unbroken blue-stem sod—crisscrossed by wire fences, it was true, but unscarred by the plow.

Down by the ford where the road crossed the creek, Jubal saw a farmhouse and turned his horse toward the lane which led to the ugly shacks. Weeds grew thickly where a shiftless attempt had been made to raise a garden near the shanty, and a few half-built sheds stood to the rear, with a creaking windmill turning lazily.

At the hoarse barking of a brown dog which greeted Jubal, the door of the shack opened and a man slouched out. He was tall, slow-moving and gaunt; a tobacco-chewer who stood in perpetual need of having the slime wiped from his mouth's corners.

"Pleased to meetcha," said the householder, extending a lackadaisical paw as Jubal introduced himself. "I'm Sile Agnew. Yep, this here's my land. I take keer of another piece, too, for a feller up at Wettick. Me an' the old 'oman come from Crawford County, Missouri, whar the tiff minin' be. Wisht we was back. When a man's crop goes bad thar, he kin allus git a job diggin' tiff. Hyar, all he kin do is starve."

As he spat disconsolately, a woman extended a frowsy head out of the door. She was brown and sun-scorched, her body twisted with toil, and she had never, at the best, been handsome.

"How you?" asked Jubal politely, removing his wide hat. She nodded, then shrilled crossly: "Sile, ye better be gittin' them cows in."

“All right, Mattie. Old ’oman’s allus tryin’ to hurry me,” he explained apologetically, making no move. Jubal observed that the sun was low.

“You couldn’t put me up for the night?” he asked . . . and discovered something at least in this part of the West which had not changed, something which is not changed today—the tradition of hospitality. At his question both the man and his wife came eagerly forward. With shining faces they urged him to dismount. It was little they had to offer, they said, but if he would only alight and share it with them, they would feel honored and overjoyed. So did the West ever treat the stranger at its door, and Jubal saw his horse placed in the one stall of the barn from which Agnew evicted his own lean nag; then followed the man to the house where Mattie, forgetting her recent acidity, had already disappeared. In a single instant by the mere circumstance that he had requested the privilege of being a guest at their poor home, Jubal’s status had completely altered in their eyes.

It was rough fare to which Jubal sat down in the Agnew kitchen—fried sowbelly, corn bread and white gravy, but he ate it with gratitude and a healthy appetite. After the meal there was conversation. Jubal had no difficulty in appraising the character of his host—a shiftless combination of farmer, miner, odd-job man—anything which meant plenty of talking, smoking, drinking and loafing, but little actual labor. Sile’s farm was neglected; his buildings were in disrepair. But he was a fountain of information.

“What’s the name of the creek here?” Jubal inquired.

“Folks calls it the Shoo-Fly.”

“Who owns the place below here—the big level bottom?”

“Feller by the name of Doc Shanks. He tuk up the land in the ‘run,’ but he ain’t livin’ on it. Has me watch after it.”

“I thought a man had to live on his own claim.”

“Wall, I suppose onder strict law he does. But Doc comes out hyar about every three-four months, an’ stays a night or so in the leetle shack he built over in that cottonwood grove. Lots of folks is provin’ their land that-a-way. Mebbe it ain’t legal, but it’s shore pop’lar.”

“What kind of a man is Doc Shanks?” pursued Jubal.

“Nice enough old feller, from all I’ve seen. Purty fair doctor, so I hear. He’s dosin’ folks up to Wettick now. Tumble drunkard, though, they say.”

A vague recollection stirred in Jubal's mind. Where had he heard the name of "Doctor Shanks" before? He remembered. Naoma had mentioned him—the physician was a friend of hers. He continued to question Sile.

"The quarter over yon, on t'other hill, belongs to some Dutch. Amish, I guess. Name of Yodel. We-uns never has nothin' to do with 'em. No furriners for me," said the excellent Agnew, who no doubt considered himself a shining example of all that is highest in "native" American manhood. Jubal probed on for details concerning other properties. They talked until late, Sile occasionally pausing in his discourse to draw crude maps to illustrate the location of different tracts which he described. Next morning, after breakfast, Jubal departed with kindly farewells sounding in his ears.

"I don't know what you're after," was Agnew's parting words, "but whatever it is, I wish ye luck in it." And in keeping with the heart-warming custom of the West, under which nothing is too good for one who has been a guest, the farmer meant every word of it.

Riding back toward Wettick, Jubal had an unusual opportunity to observe how rich the farm land was. The gray stubble and rounded yellow-brown stacks of the wheat fields, alternated with green acres of broad-leaved corn and occasional stretches of open pastures where cattle and horses grazed. Over the countryside fell one of those hushes which are so distinctively a feature of the prairie at times. No wind stirred the grasses, and except for the soft thud of the horse's hoofs, the only sounds were the drowsy songs of the birds. A sensation of well-being took possession of Jubal. He was forming a mighty plan in his mind; the burden of worry and disappointment seemed suddenly to have been lifted.

At Wettick, which was the county seat, Jubal spent a long afternoon going through the records of the register of deeds and the county clerk. When at last he returned to his hotel, he was dreamily content. It had been a good day's work. In his pocket, Jubal carried information concerning every farm in the Shoo-Fly district; information which might prove of vital importance later. That evening he wrote a long letter to Reb Haizlipp:

FRIEND REB [he wrote]:

I can now report progress. Do you recollect the Shoo-Fly country? I think it would be a first-class, A-1 place for our ranch, and I think I can arrange to get it cheap. There is some good places here that we can pick up if we want to or lease. I think I can have things ready to move up here by the first of the month.

I am hoping you are not getting no grief with them cattle. Emilio is a good hand and them boys of his ought to be a help, but I know you will not get much sleeping done until we get them away from where the customs inspector might get too nosey about where they come from. Lucky the ID let you lease the upper Arroyo Grande until we can move them cows.

Reb, I have found Miss Hocktor (I mean Mrs. Bain). You remember her. It was the gurl I spent that long time hunting for. Naoma is up here teaching skool and I have got her to promise to marrie a mangy, uncurried bronk which you know and if she don't change her mind, when you come up with the stuff, you can be best man.

Your pardner,
JUBAL TROOP.

16

The same evening that Jubal was writing his letter to Reb, a very serious and suddenly humble young lawyer was asking Naoma a question which she had expected and dreaded to hear. Webster Grattan's buggy stood waiting for her when she left school, and she could hardly refuse his careful invitation to ride. They turned down a road leading toward the country.

"No, Webster, we mustn't," Naoma warned him quickly. "I must go right home."

He pulled the horse to a stop and turned to her. "There's something I want to tell you," he said. "I think we've been going together long enough to know our own minds." He was summing up the evidence as if it were a legal argument. "Naoma, I want to marry you. I have wished it for a long time, and I believe you must have known it. I can't, perhaps, offer you a great deal as yet, but I think my prospects are as good as those of any other young man in Wettick. Will you be my wife?"

"—I can't," she cried, almost wildly. He made no offer to put his arms about her, nor in any other way did he display the actions of an impetuous lover. He simply looked at her.

"May I ask why? It is this fellow Troop?"

She nodded her head, then climbed out of the buggy and almost ran toward her home. He stared after her.

“It’s Troop,” he groaned. “A week ago it was all right between Naoma and me. Today she is through with me . . . forever. Merciful God, why did this man come to ruin everything?”

In his bitterness, Webster made Jubal the symbol of all his disappointment and frustration.

17

The next Saturday Thaddeus Stone, justice of peace, married Doctor Shanks and Georgia Tarton. Wettick gossiped loudly but that evening, in the fashion of the time, old friends of the doctor called on the newlyweds. Among these were Naoma and Jubal. As he waited for her at her gate, he could see the smile on her lips, and the little toes of her slippers twinkling beneath her skirt as she hurried to him. Others saw the pretty picture, too. In fact most of Wettick, before the more startling news of Doc Shanks’ marriage, had been discussing Naoma’s affair with the visiting cattleman. Jubal might have anticipated this could he have remembered one of the saws of his old friend Mesa: *Amores, dolores y dineros, no pueden estar secretos*—love, grief and money cannot be concealed.

“I’ve got business with Doc Shanks,” Jubal told Naoma as they walked. He discussed with enthusiasm his project for a ranch. “If I can get the Shoo-Fly, I’ll make a home on it for us,” he said. “We’ll build a big, white house in the grove by the creek. An’ you can have a nigger cook, an’ Reb can come an’ live with us. You remember Reb, don’t you? A squarer or whiter gent never forked a saddle. An’ we’ll raise cows by the thousand, an’ get rich, an’ mebbe when our boy grows up, we’ll send him to college.”

“Our boy?”

“Yes. Or did you intend for it to be a girl?”

“Jubal! You’re not even nice!” But she giggled deliciously, and his heart was big within him as they turned in at the gate of Doc Shanks’ little home. He did not notice her failure to reply to his proposal of a home on the Shoo-Fly.

“Mrs. Bain! My dear child—how glad I am that you have come. And this is Jubal Troop, the young man concerning whom I have been hearing so much!” The old doctor crowed with delight. His breath smelled strongly of whiskey, but he seemed sober enough and that sobriety became enhanced when a dark woman, with massive braids of hair wound about her head, and glooming eyes, stepped out on the porch where they were talking. Taller

than the doctor and wearing a dress of somber colors, she seemed to Jubal unpleasantly foreboding.

“My dear”—the doctor hastened to her side—“you, of course, know Mrs. Bain. But have you met Mr. Troop? An old friend of Mrs. Bain’s—a page out of the past, my precious!”

“I’ve heard of him,” sniffed the new Mrs. Shanks, making no motion otherwise to acknowledge the introduction. She turned to her husband. “It is almost time for the Goffs to arrive,” she said. “I can’t have Mrs. Goff see the parlor in the condition it is now. You must come in and help me rearrange it!”

“But, my dear, these are guests also,” he reminded her. With no reply other than a second sniff, the new Mrs. Shanks disappeared within.

She thinks Jubal is nothing but an ordinary cowboy, thought Naoma indignantly. The prig. I will never forgive her for this. Or for taking advantage of poor old Doctor Shanks, either. The cat.

“I must, as you have just observed, be going,” Doc Shanks apologized to Jubal nervously. “Mrs. Shanks is—ah—very much occupied just now, with problems of household arrangement. We have just been married, as you know, and she—ah—has not exactly approved of my own humble efforts at furniture disposal. A great strain—a great strain on a woman.”

“I had one little matter of business to discuss with you.”

“Another time. Another time, my dear fellow.”

“It will take only a minute. I want to lease your farm on the Shoo-Fly.”

Doc Shanks became interested. He needed money and they agreed without difficulty. Papers were signed and Jubal departed with Naoma. He knew speed and adroitness were necessary to secure the necessary leases before word went around of what he was doing, because if it became known that he was putting together acreage, someone would be certain to attempt extortionate ideas.

For this one evening, however, he would think of other matters. In the darkness, he placed his arm about Naoma. There was the first instinctive maidenly pressing away, then she came in to him, resting her body against his, her mouth opening to his kiss.

Judge and Mrs. McReynolds arrived on the train from Wichita, ostensibly on business, but actually to view this cattleman who suddenly had become the entire topic of Naoma's letters. To their hotel room Naoma brought Jubal, to exhibit him with pride, exulting in his brown hardness, his forceful visage, and his eyes which blazed a merry blue as he laughed and talked, knowing himself on parade, half-embarrassed, half-irritated, wholly amused by Naoma's fluttering insistence.

The visit was not such an ordeal as Jubal had feared. Mrs. McReynolds cast an eye over him as if she were a sergeant of cuirassiers viewing for the first time a not too promising recruit. The Judge, however, smiled with exceeding affability, and proffered a cigar.

"You'll have to be very good to our Naoma," Mrs. McReynolds warned Jubal. At the strident banality, Jubal smiled.

"Ma'am, I aim to make that my life job," he assured her with sincerity.

Greatly mollified, she smiled at him for the first time, and became his warm supporter after she learned from Naoma the details of the five-year quest in the mountains of New Mexico. As for the Judge, he ordered drinks, and engaged Jubal in fraternal conversation.

"Where do you plan to live?" the Judge asked.

"Confidentially, I aim to build a nice house on Shoo-Fly Creek and live there."

"Do you own the property?"

"Not yet."

The Judge considered him speculatively. "By this I am to suppose that you plan to acquire the land, not simply lease it?"

"You can suppose that."

"Have you received the agreement of Naoma yet on your plan of living in the country?"

"Why, no," said Jubal in surprise. It had never occurred to him that she might have ideas different from his.

"As a veteran, well scarred in the matrimonial wars," remarked the Judge solemnly, "let me suggest that you have an understanding with her before you put too much money in a ranch house."

He permitted Jubal to digest this for a moment, then came his final word:

“I feel that you have ambitions and perhaps audacity. You are likely to travel high, and in doing so you may become acquainted with the courts. You will understand that I have retired from active law practice. But I still keep abreast of court and legal opinion. If at any time you should like to consult me on any question of a legal nature, I should be happy to assist you to the limit of my ability—with no fee attached.”

To Jubal came the feeling that he had acquired a friend.

19

In due time Reb Haizlipp arrived with the first trainload of cattle, of which there would be five or six in all. When he climbed down from the caboose at the stock pens, Jubal met him and showed him with pride the papers which provided them with a year's lease on sixteen thousand acres, at approximately fifty cents an acre, depending on grass and water.

“Payin' spot cash was what did it,” he told his partner.

“Yes, an' it might have paid us to give more for the leases an' pay when we sold our stuff,” grumbled Reb. “Do ye know what it cost us? I had to sell five hundred head at Austin, at roination prices—thirty dollars a head.”

“But what cattle we have now will be almost clear profit,” pointed out Jubal. “We haven't done so bad, considering. Last spring we sold out at Arroyo Grande, and you hiked the six thousand we got to twenty thousand in the poker game with Pretty Sam Gooney. It cost us sixteen thousand cash an' a thousand more in expenses to get the big herd delivered by Mesa an' his lovely crew.”

He chewed a pencil and began to make figures on the white-painted stockyards fence. “That left three thousand in the bank at El Paso. You sold the five hundred head for fifteen thousand dollars. With what we had in the bank, that more than pays for our shipping an' leasing. All we got to do is get this stuff through the winter an' let the steers fatten on the blue-stem in the spring. They'll put on tallow, just as if we were feedin' 'em grain—it's the finest grass in the world, as you know—the only grass that'll finish cattle as if they was fed corn.”

Once more he turned to the fence and the pencil stub scratched busily for a moment. “When we take 'em to market, they'll fetch us not under four, prob'ly five dollars a hundred, an' these big, aged steers will average eleven hundred pounds. Say fifty-five dollars a head. We'll have better than a hundred thousand dollars to go on—ninety thousand clear after all costs are paid. Not bad for a couple of sagebrushers.”

As he talked, Reb took fire. “An’ we’ll pyramid them profits by purchasin’ white face calves a hull lot!” he exulted, his old enthusiasm returning. “I’ve allus wanted to run white faces. They’re all the go now. Every big cattle operator’s goin’ to them hustlin’, thrifty, white face Herefords. The hull West’s goin’ to be covered with ’em some day. We might as well git in on the swim right now.”

Jubal computed again. “Two thousand calves at six dollars a hundred, say they average four hundred pounds. That’s twenty-four—make it twenty-five dollars apiece for easy figurin’. Two thousand calves at twenty-five—fifty thousand iron men. We stand to make a big profit on ’em if the market keeps good—but it mightn’t keep good. It would leave us a kitty of forty thousand if anything happened to the fifty thousand we gamble.”

“Wall, what would ye do to the other fo’ty thousand?” grumbled Reb. “Bury it or carry it around?”

Jubal had been thinking. “We might get title on what land we got.”

“Hell—that’ll cost a sight more than fo’ty thousand. This land’s ten to twenty dollars an acre, an’ thar’s sixteen thousand acres in that block. A hundred an’ sixty thousand at the very least.”

“Let me tell you somethin’, Reb,” Jubal replied, his eyes still far-off, speculative. “We’re pioneerin’ in bringin’ Texas cattle to the blue-stem. After we make our clean-up, there’s goin’ to be the damnedest rush of cows to these pastures you ever saw. What’ll happen? Prices will go up. It’ll cost us plenty to lease what acreage we got. Gettin’ title will be cheap in the end.”

“But how ye goin’ to do it?”

“Get options first.”

“An’ git squeezed, an’ lose everythin’ we got when them options elapse an’ we don’t pay?”

“Listen, Reb. I haven’t been sittin’ around here doin’ nothin’. I’ve done a heap of scoutin’ an’ figurin’. There’s people just honin’ for a chance to get out of this country—sick of the life. An’ there’s others who can be dealt with. Of course, there’s a few hard-headed ones—gents we’ll have to watch close an’ play the cards next to the belly. I admit the whole thing’s a gamble—but we ain’t done nothin’ in our lives that ain’t been a gamble. Just tryin’ to start a ranch in the Arroyo Grande, with no knowledge of the country an’ no money, was the biggest gamble of all. We got our backs up against the wall. It’s do or don’t with us now. But I can see a good percentage in the

cards as they're fallin'. I'll tell you somethin'. While I was leasin' the land up here, I was scrutinizin' titles. I've got a record of every acre in the whole block. An' do you know what I've found out? Two-thirds of it is tax delinquent, an' damn near every foot is encumbered."

"I don't foller ye."

"You'll see."

Reb stared at his partner. Then he shifted his gaze in a long, keen look at the distant horizon. He scratched the shin of one bowed leg with the sharp boot heel of the opposite foot. He took a monster chew of tobacco and presently launched a cascade of brown spittle accurately at a knot in the stockyards fence.

20

Naoma and Jubal were married on Thanksgiving Day. Judge and Mrs. McReynolds came down from Wichita for the ceremony and Naoma asked Miss Hostetter to be present. The only other invited guest was Reb Haizlipp, who, very stiff and gray, stood up with Jubal at the altar.

But there was one unbidden witness in the little chapel, where the missionary clergyman came once each month to conduct divine services. Sitting in the rear of the small building, his brown eyes somber, was Webster Grattan. Naoma saw him when she entered the church and the sight distressed her. There was so much pain in his eyes. Jubal saw him too, and it vexed him. Why did this old lover of Naoma's come unasked?

The church service was Naoma's idea. Jubal first had wished to be married by a justice of the peace and "have it over with."

"I would never feel I had really been married," Naoma told him, a votive light in her eyes. "When I am married by you, dear, I want to feel that I am married . . . just as tight as I can be . . . forever."

On the way to the chapel, the Judge indulged in a few sallies, but the rest of the party was in no mood for humor. Once in the dim little church, the atmosphere of religious solemnity removed all light thoughts. It was very quiet there. The air outside was sharp with the first frost of autumn, and there was a fire in the heating stove which stood in the middle of the tiny nave. Except for the occasional muffled crackling of the burning wood, and the rustling of women's garments as they moved, almost no sound disturbed the peace. Jubal felt, rather than saw, the minister, with his white surplice

accentuated by the black cassock beneath it, and the ivory of the stole which fell down from his shoulders.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this company to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony . . .”

With a shock Jubal realized that the service had actually begun. He was being married . . . to Naoma . . . his knees felt weak as water, but when he glanced at her, she smiled at him reassuringly.

“. . . If any man can show just cause, why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or else hereafter forever hold his peace,” the droning voice of the clergyman completed the opening charge. Somebody was sniffing behind Jubal. Probably Miss Hostetter, a weakly sentimental old maid. Mrs. Judge McReynolds scarcely would be guilty of weeping.

“. . . love her, comfort her, honour, and keep her in sickness and in health; forsaking all others, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?” The question was addressed to him, the grave face of the minister was turned toward him, and Jubal realized he must answer.

“I will,” he managed to say in a choking voice.

Dimly, as if from a distance, he heard Naoma’s affirmation to a similar question, and then Judge McReynolds stepped forward to give the bride away. Once more the snuffling from behind. Finally, after a long period of solemn words in which Jubal, under prompting, sometimes took part, he heard:

“Those whom, God hath joined together, let no man put asunder.”

They were married. Two short prayers, and they walked out of the chapel, man and wife. With surprise, Jubal noticed when Mrs. McReynolds came forward to embrace Naoma that her imperious beak of a nose was red and her eyes watery. So she had been the one who was weeping after all. Jubal looked around for Webster Grattan. The lawyer was gone.

Naoma crouched in her bed in the darkness, her eyes wide as they had been that night so long before when she awaited Solomon Bain. Again she must face the ordeal . . . the ordeal which she had once escaped, but from which, she suddenly realized, there was no escape now. In spite of herself the terror of that former experience shadowed this one.

In the adjoining room of their hotel suite, she could hear Jubal moving about, undressing. Naoma did not want him to come to her room; yet she was shaken by a palpitant eagerness for him. Her soul was wracked by a typhoon of emotion. That was more than just a man in the next room. It was her *husband*. He had certain rights over her . . . he would be expecting something from her, the thing that all men expect eventually of women. She loved him, oh, she loved him . . . but how terrified she was.

The door opened and she heard him feeling his way across the dark room, a shadow sensed rather than seen, groping, reaching, a something of menace to her, sending her cowering back against the wall. He had reached the side of her bed. *Her bed*. The thought struck her like a blow. She had to put her hand over her mouth to keep from screaming.

Hot hands seized her soft body. Her mouth was stopped, but it was his lips now, not her hand, which prevented further sound. His arms swathed her to him and she could feel his clean, hard flesh against her. All at once the fear left her. This was Jubal. *Jubal*. The man she loved. The one being in all the world. Her other life. She could not be afraid of Jubal. Naoma experienced a drowsy sensation, mingled with a growing warmth of her flesh. The panic, the indecision, the wild thought of escape, were all gone.

In a mighty whirlpool of passion they lost themselves . . . a whirlpool of molten fire, which seared and refined them, body and soul; which fused them together, it seemed, once and for all eternity.

BOOK 9

My Son! My Son!

1

With shining hope in no manner justified by her own experience in life, much less that of humankind in general, Naoma began her career as a wife. The unwavering optimism of her nature set at nothing the dour precedents of history; to her the far future was bright and the near future kind and true. Nothing would happen, nothing ever could happen to mar the happiness which she gathered about her like a cloud.

The first year was filled with thrilling adventures, including the building of a new, white home in Wettick. It had been Jubal's somewhat diffidently advanced wish that they might live on the ranch, but Naoma's disappointment was so evident, and she was a bride; so the home was built in the town. When they moved into their home, things settled to a pleasant routine for Naoma—wash day, baking day, cleaning day, and all the other days, to the climax of shopping day on Saturday and the sweet leisure of Sunday.

Saturday was Naoma's particular favorite. Life took on a different meaning in Wettick on Saturdays. Naoma loved it when the farmers came to town and the ruddy streets were crowded with rigs of all sorts—buggies, carts and lumber wagons—some clustered thickly by the hitch racks where the horses stamped and switched at the flies, others ambling back and forth, weaving into tangles, yet always untangling themselves. There was a feeling of moment and excitement in the air, although nothing ever really happened, and Naoma could not have told what it was that stimulated her. The farmers, certainly, were slow and easy enough. If one of them, in a lumber wagon, blocked the street to chat with a family in a surrey, nobody grew impatient to pass the blockade thus created. There was no hurry in Wettick. When the conversation ended, everyone proceeded placidly on his way. On the board sidewalks and under the flimsy wooden awnings of the stores groups gathered, talking endlessly; sometimes they even scattered carelessly in the street, leaning against wagon wheels or hitch racks, with a horse's long head perhaps solemnly coming over the shoulder and no thought of incongruity to mar the peace of mind.

On such days Naoma loved to go “down town.” The feel of people made her tingle and for the sheer happiness of being in a crowd she sometimes walked the length of Main Street, apparently absorbed in the shop windows, but actually steeping her soul in the sensation of massed humanity . . . assuaging the thirst of loneliness which was even yet unslaked from her girlhood.

Jubal, however, was uncomfortable in crowds and when court day came or the country emptied itself into the town on market days, he took to his office which bore on its window the sign:

WETTICK CATTLE & LAND CO.

There he would sit and gaze morosely through the window. Jubal had become a cigar smoker since his cattle business had made him a man of importance. But years spent in the great solitudes are not quickly shaken off and there were many occasions when Jubal could have wished himself back in the mighty gullet of the Arroyo Grande.

Some such thought was in his mind one Saturday about a year after his marriage when Doc Shanks came into the office. The old man radiated benignant good cheer.

“Ah, Jubal my boy!” he exclaimed, his face demurely expectant. “I just dropped in—just dropped in. No—” his face lit up in spite of himself as Jubal’s hand automatically went to his desk drawer. “No, Jubal, not a drop. I have an important case which I must attend and I do not—ah—approve of drinking while on professional duty.” He hesitated. “Drinking heavily, that is,” he amended hastily as Jubal showed signs of drawing back his hand. “Of course a social nip does no harm. A gentleman always knows how to handle his liquor. You, my dear Jubal, are a gentleman, and I hope that I—ah—may claim that designation also.”

Jubal had gone through the rigmarole many times before. Always Doc Shanks was talking about an “important” case, which, somehow, never seemed to develop. Always there was the covert hint for a dram.

Jubal opened the desk drawer and placed a pint bottle of bourbon whiskey on the table. There was in him a hard contempt for the physician. Old drunk, Jubal thought, go ahead, drink yourself to death. Nobody will cry much I reckon. Whiskey soak. Last man I’d call to take care of me if I was a-dying.

Doc Shanks eagerly reached for the bottle. “*Amicus est tanquam alter idem*, Jubal. That is to say, a friend is, as it were, a second self. I consider

you, my boy, such a friend. And here is to your long-continued good health.”

The doctor tilted back his head and drank deeply, his throat making gurgling noises while the air bubbles ran up from the mouth of the bottle. Then he hastily removed the flask from his lips and slipped it into a side pocket of his linen suit as the door of the office opened.

“Why, Naoma!” he exclaimed, sweeping his hat from his head. “My dear, you are looking uncommonly handsome, if you will allow an old friend so to presume. Your husband and I—ah—were just discussing a matter of mutual interest.”

He gazed at her uneasily and Jubal surveyed them both with amusement. Naoma did look charming in a blue taffeta dress, deeply flounced, and with a wide hat tied with a broad blue ribbon under her trim little chin. Jubal knew that she disapproved of Doc Shanks’ drinking, as she disapproved of all drinking generally, and the apprehension in the physician’s eyes was what amused him. Naoma regarded the old man gravely as he sidled around her and let himself out of the door. Then she turned to her husband.

“Jubal, how could you!” she accused.

“He asked for a drink. It ain’t according to my raising to hold back on licker when a man’s craving the same.”

“But you know he shouldn’t have it. He’s likely to ruin himself, drinking the way he does. People are talking about it.”

“‘Let every man kill his own snakes,’ is a sayin’ I’ve heard in the West ever since I was a weanlin’, an’ I consider it an excellent adage.”

“Jubal—”

Her further protest was smothered with a kiss and she fought in confusion to escape.

“Why—why—” she gasped. “We’re right out here in public! People can see through that window—”

“What if they do?” he grinned. “One of the main reasons I married you, honey, was so I wouldn’t have to take you somewhere behind a bush every time I wanted to kiss you.”

“Jubal, you’re simply incorrigible!” she pouted.

“That sounds mighty bad. Would be a fightin’ word in some places I’ve been. Not bein’ just clear on what it means, though I won’t start any fracas

this time. Listen, honey. I'm glad you came. I was just fixin' to get a rig at the stable an' drive out to the ranch. Want to go along?"

She was all eagerness. "It's ages since I saw Reb."

"Listen here, young woman," he admonished. "A very little of this interest in other men is a big plenty. Doc Shanks or Reb or anybody. Hear?"

She giggled as they left the office and started for the livery barn. They were new in married life and very happy.

2

Reb met them at his cabin. It was the old place in which once had resided the shiftless Missouri tiff miner, Sile Agnew. The old cattleman's long face, with its saddle leather skin and its gray mustaches, looked more gaunt than usual.

"Howdye?" he asked, coming forward to tie their team to the fence.

Jubal said, "That Dutchman, August Yodel, left word you want to see me."

"Yep," was the reply. Jubal was assisting Naoma down from the buggy. He had grown expert in this sort of thing, carefully holding her skirts about her to prevent their brushing against a dusty wheel. Reb watched them almost sadly. "We got to ride," he said, looking uncertainly at the woman.

"I'll stay here," she replied quickly. The blue taffeta dress was not to be ruined by a saddle, particularly since she would have to ride astride. Women were riding astride these days, but Naoma disliked the custom. It seemed . . . suggestive in some way. She supposed, however, the way things were going, it would not be long until all the pert young things would have divided skirts and ride a-straddle of a horse, or die.

"Ye kin go into the cabin, ma'am," Reb suggested. "The boys are all up to the other end of the big pasture."

"No." She shook her head. "I'll sit out in the shade and embroider." Her hand raised the little fancy-work bag hanging by its handles of thread. Naoma knew about bunkhouses. "Boar's nests," the men called them. The three cowboys working under Reb on the ranch occupied Sile Agnew's cabin with him. Men left things behind them that were so shocking. Scrawled pictures. She had seen them penciled on the walls of bunkhouses . . . words . . . the obscenities of starved sex hunger. She lifted the flounces

of her skirt to keep from wrinkling them, sat down primly, and opened her bag.

Jubal and Reb were talking earnestly as they saddled horses in the barn.

“When did you notice it?” asked the farmer.

“I thought the stuff was actin’ funny a day or two ago.”

They led their mounts out of the barn and swung into the saddles. Down into the swales leading to Shoo-Fly Creek, Reb rode with Jubal.

“See that?”

Cattle. White faced cattle, each with a streak of white running up the back of its neck; white legs and belly contrasting strongly with the deep red of its body. At a distance the cattle looked absolutely uniform, as if they had been shelled out of the same pod—the Herefords, pride of Reb’s heart, with which the Shoo-Fly had been stocked after the Mexican herd was sold.

But some of the animals were standing knee deep in the long grass of the swale without grazing. Heads hung low. The eyes had a glazed, stupid look.

“If ye run a hand along the neck of one of ’em,” said Reb, “it’ll feel hot as fire.”

He dismounted by a steer which lay panting feebly. The animal made no effort to move as Reb stooped over it. He lifted a front leg, and the creature struggled weakly. From beneath the foreleg, in the armpit so to speak, he plucked a bloated, round object like a grape and turned to Jubal with it on his palm.

“The tick,” he said with finality in his voice.

“Texas cattle fever!” exclaimed Jubal.

The older man nodded solemnly and silently.

“But where did they get it?” Jubal asked. “We wintered our herd and the frost kills the tick.”

“Ye remember sayin’ that oncet we made our killin’ thar’d be plenty would see the valyoo of bringin’ cows from Texas an’ fattenin’ ’em on the blue stem? Wall, them words was a prophecy. Plenty of cows has been moved into this country. One passel—a bunch of Rail-H steers—was thrown into a pasture adjoinin’ our holdin’s, to the east. They had the tick.”

Jubal’s face was very grave. Texas cattle fever, caused by the virus from the bite of a cattle tick, is devastating once it infects a herd which has not

built up its immunity as have the animals which are native to the tick country—and he and Reb had fifty thousand dollars invested in the two thousand young steers growing on their ranch.

“What can we do?” Jubal demanded.

“Nothin’,” replied Reb, “except pray.”

In Jubal’s bowels was a cold nausea of fear as they turned back from the inspection of the herd. Scores of animals already were down. Hundreds more stood feverishly, heads drooping. This was ruin—ruin before his eyes of everything he had built through incredible labor, sacrifice and danger.

“Ain’t there nothing . . . nothing that can be done?” he asked again, desperately, of Reb.

The cattleman shook his head. “Once the tick bites a critter he’s done for. An’ our pasture is lousy with ticks.”

Jubal was stricken silent. His brain was dizzy with thinking; reeling from this impossible catastrophe.

When she saw them coming, Naoma rose from her chair by the cabin. A dainty figure in soft blue.

3

In his preoccupation Jubal was inattentive to Naoma during the drive to Wettick. His thoughts rushed in upon themselves, vainly seeking an answer to the riddle of existence. Why was there no way to fight the plague in his cattle? Why had this thing come upon him now? Jubal bitterly blamed himself. The contingency of the cattle tick, imported from the south, he should have foreseen. Texas fever was no new thing. They had been fighting it in Kansas ever since the old trail days. He knew frost killed the ticks, and somehow it had not occurred to him that the ground within his fences, purified by winter from the insects shed by the herd from Mexico, could become contaminated again. He now remembered that he had heard somewhere that a tick-infested herd was a menace to a clean herd, unless a space of twenty-five feet separated them.

Ah, there was the answer! All about the Shoo-Fly ranch, which followed in its borders the section lines, were roads—all but in one place. Like a bite into the smooth contour of his acreage extended the quarter-section farm owned by the Mennonite farmer, August Yodel. Now Jubal remembered that it was Yodel who had leased his small pasture adjoining the Shoo-Fly to the owner of the Rail-H steers. August Yodel. Within Jubal’s heart there formed

a hard, unreasoning resentment against the Mennonite. It had been like murdering his cattle—there was nothing more than the wires of a barbed wire fence to separate them from the Rail-H steers in Yodel's pasture. The beasts on opposite sides of the fence probably had touched noses many times. Others had slept close to the fence and from them ticks dropped quickly to crawl to the cattle on the Shoo-Fly side. Even one disease-laden tick in a herd was enough to start infection because of the loathsome speed of their reproduction and the celerity with which the young ticks spread from one animal to another.

These were Jubal's thoughts as he knew a growing core of anger in his heart toward August Yodel. There was another basis for the new-born hate which Jubal himself did not realize. Yodel's farmerhood. The Mennonite represented a whole way of life which the cattleman loathed and feared because of its encroachments upon him—agriculture. It was a rebirth of the old enmity between the herdsman and the husbandman which has existed always since Cain slew Abel.

As Jubal and Naoma neared Wettick she was still chattering brightly, but he did not hear her. Instead another idea burst into his mind like a sudden light.

"They dip cows for tick!" he heard himself exclaim aloud. "Lime an' sulphur—a vet told me about it once. Wonder what it costs to build a vat?"

The sound of his own voice startled him and he looked with embarrassment, for the first time, at Naoma. She was staring queerly at him.

"Is that all you have to say?" Her voice was gentle, faintly hinting at a hurt.

Now he became conscious that she had been speaking at the time his remark burst out. Desperately and futilely he groped into his subconscious mind for some clue as to what she had said. It was useless.

"I—I didn't hear, honey," he apologized at last.

She laughed, not very mirthfully. "I've been surprised sometimes, Jubal Troop, but this is the worst anticlimax I ever experienced."

"What was it? What were you saying?" he pleaded.

She shook her head. "Oh, nothing very much. I was telling you some news. Something I thought was . . . well, momentous. And you replied that they dip cows for tick. Oh, Jubal, Jubal—there never lived anyone like you for taking the vanity out of a woman."

News . . . momentous. Jubal's mind, slowly clarifying like a mirror from which the film passes, began to focus on the words. Suddenly he understood her, and was aghast.

“A—baby?”

“Yes.”

How utterly matter of fact and calm she was. But Jubal's brain whirled again. Naoma going to have a baby? It seemed incredible. He fought to control himself, to say the right thing out of the chaos of his thoughts. Men were supposed to be elated at the prospect of fatherhood . . . they went about and gave cigars to their friends when a child was born. But Jubal could feel no elation. He was stunned. This was nothing he had desired—not in the remotest degree. A baby? It was beyond any calculation. He stole a glance at Naoma. The clear sweetness of her profile smote him with a sense of his own weakness. She at least was sure about things. To her it was all right. Proper. Just. Blindly he reached for her hand.

“I . . . you scared the wadding out of me, honey,” he stammered.

“Didn't you want it?” She made a tiny effort to take away her hand.

“Yes. Oh, of course. Yes. I'm—I'm—” he gulped for words. “Oh, God Almighty, Naomy, you've forefooted me and spread me all over the landscape!”

Her laughter rose like silver, and after a time he laughed too. Naoma believed she understood her husband. Just a big, panic-stricken boy, having difficulty at first with the comprehension of the tremendous news she had brought him. She never dreamed that it could occupy a place less dominant in his mind than hers, because to her it seemed to pervade everything. Gently she began to tease him.

“Jubal,” she giped, “you take it as seriously as if it were you who were going to have the baby.”

But Jubal clucked to his team. The bay horses settled into their traces and spun the road back like a ribbon beneath their swinging hoofs. Already his harassed mind had reverted to the disaster facing him at the ranch.

Following the sale of the herd brought to them by Mesa's riders, the partners had compromised on their fiscal policy. After the two thousand calves were purchased, Jubal had set out to make the rest of the money go as

far as possible in buying up the land of the Shoo-Fly. There was a fundamental divergence in point of view of the two men in this respect. Reb thought only in terms of cattle. As long as he had a herd, the consideration of where they were to find their grass bothered him not at all. Too long had he been a part of the old free-range West. He simply could not adjust himself to a practical grasp of a new economy of land deeds and barbed wire boundaries. To Jubal, on the other hand, land meant security. He had within him a hunger for it, and the acquisition of it became his passion as Reb's passion was the ownership of great numbers of white faced steers.

Therefore it fell to Jubal to do the land dealing. The Sile Agnew place he acquired first and the indolent tiff miner went back to Missouri. This purchase gave the partners a collection of buildings which became the headquarters of Reb and his men. For to Reb had fallen the active management of the ranch while Jubal became the business agent for the firm.

Later Jubal succeeded in buying up other pieces of land which came within his financial limitations, and before he was through he discovered that he had exhausted most of his cash reserve in these transactions. A few days, therefore, after he learned of the outbreak of Texas fever at the Shoo-Fly, he sent for Reb and they spent long hours in the little office in Wettick, going over their resources.

"It'll cost a thousand dollars to build a dippin' vat an' chute," said Reb finally, after Jubal had told him of the hope in dipping the cattle. The procedure of dipping was still new in the West, and many cattlemen still denied its efficacy, so Reb's voice held little enthusiasm.

"We'll have to build a twenty-five-foot lane with an offset fence, to keep our stuff back from Yodel's fence," said Jubal.

"By the time we buy chemicals an' pay wages, we'll put four or five thousand dollars into it," added Reb gloomily.

"How many are dead now?"

"Around a hundred, my last count. I got two or three fellers skinnin' on shares. Slower than the seven-year itch. Ye ought to've seen us skin buff'lo in the old hide-huntin' days. Slit 'em up the belly an' inside the laigs with a knife, hitch a team to the aidge of the hide, an' rip 'er off. Many a skinner in them days would bet ye a stack of yaller chips as high as yore hat that he could peel a full-grown buff'lo bull in five minutes—an' let ye hold the watch. But these short horns—hell's fire, it takes 'em a day to skin one

critter. Anyway we'll salvage a couple of dollars or so on the hides, 'bout enough to pay for cartin' away an' buryin' the carcasses."

"How many are sick?" pursued Jubal.

"Hard to tell. Looks to me like everywhar I turn my eyes I kin see the fever. But of course a feller's bound to be jumpy an' see things double in times like this. I'd say three-four hundred."

"Dipping won't cure the ones that already are took with the fever," Jubal reminded him, "but it'll keep the tick from spreadin', maybe. I've got the recipe an' the schedule from the professors over at the new college at Stillwater. You dip the herd once, then again in ten days, then in ten days more, an' then for the fourth time in ten days again. That's four dippings in a month. It kills the ticks on the cows each time, an' them that's on the ground can't reproduce. They only live three weeks, so if they don't get no chance to have little ones they'll just nacherally all die off by the end of the month. That's what the professors say in this little book." He produced a leaflet and some written correspondence from the department of animal husbandry of the Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College.

"When do we start?"

"We've got to get some money first."

Reb stared. "Money? It's jest five thousand. Shorely we got that."

"Nope." Jubal shook his head. "If we get the money, we're going to have to borrow it. We can't borrow on the land, because I've mortgaged the land to buy more land. Reb, we're land an' cattle poor. The only thing we can raise money on is the herd itself."

A low whistle came from the other. "'Pears like we no sooner git ourselves out of one patch of cactus than we land squar' on the seats of our britches in another. I shore hate to borry on them cows."

"It's another gamble, Reb. This time we're gamblin' on what we've got left to keep from bein' wiped out."

At that Jubal's partner agreed.

Fish-eyed Ansell Goff was difficult. For two hours, next day, Jubal labored with him at the Wettick State Bank, and when at last the loan of five thousand dollars was obtained, the rancher was forced to sign papers giving the entire herd as security with an interest rate which made his eyes bulge.

Necessity, however, was in the saddle, and, although Jubal's eyes grew pale with anger, he signed.

And now began the long battle on the Shoo-Fly. With a crew of workmen and wagon loads of lumber, Jubal rode to the ranch and set loose feverish activity there—digging, sawing and hammering such as the place had never before witnessed. Within two or three days the work was complete—a dipping vat and trough made of neatly grooved siding and sunk deeply into the ground, with a wide-jawed chute leading to its mouth.

Reb, meantime, had augmented his crew of cowpunchers, and the slow task of working the cattle down to the chute in the lower end of the Shoo-Fly bottoms began. All day long the shrill whoops and whistles of the cowboys could be heard above the lowing of the cattle, and the dust mounted into the air as the steers were gathered for the dipping. Cattle which had been dipped must be kept separate from those not dipped and this required strenuous night guarding. It took ten days to dip the cattle the first time. As fast as they could be herded into the enclosure leading to the chute, they were forced up a short incline, whence, under prodding, they plunged into the vat, submerging completely under the warm, yellowish liquid, and coming up with a great blowing and splashing, the evil-smelling mixture of lime, sulphur and water inflaming their eyes and causing them to cough and sputter as it trickled down their throats. Each steer, as he fought his way to the surface after his immersion, saw before him a line of wet cattle, all swimming up the trough until they reached a shelving ramp with cross pieces nailed upon it to make the footing easier. Up this the dripping, blinking creatures walked gratefully, to be taken charge of by riders as soon as they emerged, and herded off by themselves to dry.

In spite of the dipping the sickness and mortality continued high. Each morning as Reb rode out across the huge pasture, he saw new prostrate red and white lumps. And each day he noted additional glaze-eyed, panting animals.

“It's goin' through us like a dose of salts,” he said to Jubal, who had never returned to town, but remained on the Shoo-Fly, working night and day, his wide, bronzed face setting in harder and ever harder lines. “At this rate we won't have a head left in a month.”

“Then Ansell Goff will never get back his money,” replied Jubal grimly.

Reb gazed at him humorously. “Ain't got much use for the banker, have ye, Jube?” he asked. “I believe ye'd almost let yore cows all die for the sake of seein' old Fish-Eye squirm.”

“Not quite. This cattle herd’s my life, Reb, an’ yours. An’ not only that, but Naomy’s. An’ I’m goin’ to fight for it. We’ve got to hang on, Reb. Hang on like grim death. Keep dippin’ them cattle. Never let up. We’ll save some of them yet.”

Sleepless nights. Killing days in the saddle. The maddening helplessness of seeing all that they possessed withering about them. The men who worked for them were worn, but Jubal and Reb were like gaunt shadows. Then at last, when they neared the limit of endurance, the break came. Steers gradually ceased to contract the deadly illness. After a few days there were no more supine red and white lumps on the blue-stem sod. Reb and Jubal looked into each other’s bloodshot eyes and knew that the plague was beaten.

But at what a loss. They took an accounting.

“Eight hundred cattle dead—that’s thirty thousand dollars. Wages, materials an’ interest—the fever cost us forty thousand all together,” Jubal said at last.

“We’ve still got better than half our herd.”

“Yes—an’ we’ve got the experience. We sure paid plenty for it.”

Their horses ambled through the slanting shadows of evening. There was something warm, almost pulsating in the smell of the sunbaked sod. Little stretches of cottonwood groves down by the creek rustled in a gentle breeze. Peace there was . . . but the peace of momentary relief, merely, with no feeling of surcease from greater crises yet to be faced beyond.

6

After late moonrise that night, Jubal placed his horse in the stable and walked to his white-painted home. It was the first time he had seen it since the plague struck the ranch, and as he strolled through the garden at the rear, the place had almost the interest of a new scene to him. Here and there in the white light of the moon, he could descry little traces of Naoma. She loved to work in her flower beds, with a trowel in her hand and a sunbonnet tied upon her head, and Jubal observed freshly turned earth among the pinks and about the roots of the cockscomb.

By moonlight these little doings were invested with a tender softness of focus, and in his mind he pictured her as she must have looked while she was working there—her cheeks flushed with her efforts, the slight dew of

perspiration perhaps on her brow, dampening the light brown curls beneath her bonnet; a shining joy in her eyes.

Jubal was very tired. His weariness was not of the body, although a long rest was what he needed more than any other thing; the most important fatigue was that of the mind and spirit. The continuous, unremitting buffeting of those days fighting the unseen enemy on the ranch had exhausted the resources within him. Yet in spite of his worn and pallid soul, Jubal was very conscious at that moment of the warm love within him for the woman who had been working here in the tiny flower garden.

Naoma met him at the door, and, having been absent from her for a month, for the first time he really saw how her body was ripening with coming motherhood. The change in her figure shocked him . . . the new awkwardness of her carriage, and the lack of spring in her step.

"Naomy!" It was a cry of bewilderment as much as anything. Her body gave him a strange feeling with its queer, hard deformity, as it came into contact with him; in spite of himself he shrank from the touch. Naoma lifted her lips for a kiss. But it was a kiss of duty which she gave him. Jubal had no conception of what was going on in her mind, had been going on in her mind these weeks. As a woman contemplating her first great ordeal of birth, Naoma could not readily forgive the fact that for more than a month Jubal had been away from her without once sending her a message—or even, so far as she knew, wondering how she was progressing.

He'll come in tomorrow, or send me a letter, she kept saying to herself the first days of his absence. Then, when no word came from him, she attempted to excuse him to her accusing self because he was so very busy. But as the weeks dragged along, the unavoidable thought obtruded that he had forgotten all about her . . . when she was in this delicate condition, too. Half-pitying looks from her next door neighbor, Mrs. Alex Brown, who, Naoma knew, spent half her time peering from behind the window curtains to see if Jubal had come home, stimulated a new feeling—anger. At the end, Naoma was on the verge of flying to the McReynoldses at Wichita.

One reason why she did not do something desperate was that she had employed a Negro woman as a cook and a housekeeper, and felt the necessity of maintaining a dignity and composure before this woman, Gracie, who was almost her only companion during the long month. It was Naoma's first experience with a servant and there were adjustments which were difficult—the adjustments of personalities which always must be given consideration in so close and complicated a relationship as a home. It was

also the first time that there had been a rift between Naoma and her husband. That required adjustments, too. . . .

7

Fall came and Jubal departed with Reb for Kansas City, where they had consigned their fattened cattle. Naoma, unhappy and with a sense of deprivation, remained at home. Jubal, she knew, went to Kansas City of necessity, because he was a far shrewder business man than Reb, and because it was necessary someone should be along to keep the old cattleman out of the clutches of sharpers and gamblers. But for all this, Naoma could not down the feeling that her husband was deserting her . . . and at a critical moment, too.

Just before he left, Naoma widened her misunderstanding with Jubal by refusing to follow his suggestion that she consult Dr. Ward, Wettick's new, smart young physician. She had deep loyalties, and her friendship for Doc Shanks was one of them. Therefore Jubal found her impossible to reason with. Her final argument was a clincher:

"I'm going to have the baby—not you! I don't want Dr. Ward. I want Doc Shanks!"

He surrendered at the near hysteria in her voice and the hint of tears in her eyes, and for the one or two consultations she found necessary before the baby came, the elder physician called upon her. Jubal, however, remained dissatisfied and skeptical. He had long since ceased giving Doc Shanks liquor, but Bill Hogan's bar was open day and night and there were plenty of other places to obtain whiskey. Doc was drunk often.

When Jubal and Reb returned from Kansas City, their faces were grim. It was the fall of 1898. The war was being fought with the Spaniards in Cuba and the Philippines. Miles and Shafter, Schley and Dewey, were the names heard everywhere, and the partners had hoped that the price of beef would be up. Instead, due to war rumors and fears the market was bad. The steers which had survived the Texas fever epidemic brought little more than the sum which had been invested in the calves the previous year, and from this sum had to be deducted the year's expenses and the payment of the note held by fat Banker Goff.

Jubal was somber on the train home.

"Our working margin has shrunk down to forty thousand," he said. "By the time we winter another herd, pay leasage, wages and other expenses, it

will cost us twenty thousand. That leaves us twenty thousand to buy cattle. What do you say, Reb?"

"Calves is cheaper. We kin git around a thousand head for that."

"That's half what we ran last year."

"But it's better than standin' still. We got a lot of money tied up in the Shoo-Fly land right now, an' we can't very well afford to give it up. The only chancet we got for our white alley is to grow beef on the ranch."

Still worrying over the year's losses, Jubal reached his home. A hysterical Gracie greeted him at the door. He found Naoma, pale and suffering, in bed.

"She was jes' took with them pains half an hour ago," sobbed Gracie. "Ah done put her to bed, but Ah was scairt to fotch the doctah. Ah didn't dast to leave her."

"I'll stay here," ordered Jubal, "go fetch Dr. Ward."

"No, Jubal!" Naoma cried, "I don't want Dr. Ward. I want—Doc—Shanks!"

The edge of anguish and frenzy in her voice brought Jubal to abrupt surrender.

"Very well," he countermanded his directions to Gracie. "Go hunt for Doc Shanks. And for God's sake, *hurry!*"

8

It was the climax to Jubal's misfortunes that at this critical moment he should be forced to send for a man whom he had sworn never to trust with an important medical case. Gracie scuttled out of the door and Jubal went to the bedroom. Her eyes half-closed, Naoma lay looking very tiny and fragile in the big white bed. Occasionally agony showed in her face and she uttered little whimpers of pain. Helpless, panic-stricken, Jubal tramped the floor, sought to comfort Naoma, and cursed blackly the doctor who did not come.

After a time he heard knocking at the door and went to admit Mrs. Alex Brown, the fat, eavesdropping Scotch woman from down the block.

"Your maid, Gracie, dropped the word that Mrs. Troop had come to her time," she said with a faint suggestion of a burr in her voice. "I stopped over in case I might be of use."

“Yes—yes—come on in,” assented Jubal with relief. “For some reason the doctor is delayed and I don’t know what to do.”

“Who is your doctor?”

“Doc Shanks.”

“Hm-m-m!” The woman looked at him. That old sot, she was thinking. With all your money, Jubal Troop, it’s a God’s pity you haven’t a fine specialist from Guthrie, or at least a decent physician from the town. Doc Shanks! God forgive you.

But without putting her thoughts into words she entered the bedroom and closed the door behind her. In a moment Jubal heard her loud and cheerful voice and the faint, almost inaudible replies of Naoma. Presently Mrs. Brown came forth purposefully.

“We must keep her quiet until the doctor comes,” she announced firmly. “I’ll go brew some tea. That’ll comfort the poor young soul.”

Another knock came at the door and two more women stood on the threshold. Mrs. Wadlow and thin, vinegary Miss Hostetter, the school teacher. Where in hell was that doctor?

“We heard,” said they significantly, “and came over to offer our services.” Jubal ushered them in and they disappeared straightway into the bedroom. Hardly had they done so when he found it necessary to answer another knock, and admitted this time old Mrs. Jackson, another neighbor, and her daughter Cornelia. Verily the women were gathering like rooks in a tree. Jubal was grateful for the attention Naoma was receiving from her own sex; but more and more he prayed that the doctor would arrive. The house was becoming filled with women—bustling here, there, determined and indefatigable. He could hear the studied cheerfulness of their voices in the bedroom; the brittle, businesslike tones in the kitchen. He caught the accusing glances they cast at him, and knew that in the minds of all of them he stood convicted as the cause of all the misery in that room from which he by now had been ejected with as much firmness as was the first man from the Garden. He was as useless in this crisis as a male cowbird—the egg of his making was apparently being laid in a nest occupied by bustling robins, jays, jackdaws and cockatoos.

Even Doc Shanks was almost welcome to Jubal in this impasse. So when the next knock came at the door, he eagerly rushed to open it. The old

physician stood upon the steps, medicine kit in hand, while behind trailed Gracie.

“God Almighty, Doc,” exclaimed Jubal with relief, “get a hurry on you, will you?” He looked with hard suspicion. Doc Shanks’ face seemed flushed and his eye exceptionally bright. “You’re not drunk, are you?” he demanded, almost with pleading. So much depended on this man.

“Assuredly not, Jubal,” Doc Shanks retorted with some indignation, but he weaved slightly as he stood. “My dear boy—kindly do not grip my shoulder quite so roughly. Please believe that I am not intoxicated. Never better able in my life to discharge my duties. Where is Naoma?”

Jubal released the shoulder and pointed to the bedroom. He watched in a daze as the bowed figure in the wrinkled suit crossed the floor and opened the door. Beyond the opening a flock of women clustered about the wide bed.

“I must have room! I must have room!” came Doc Shanks’ voice peremptorily. “Ladies, I must ask you all to leave. If I need the services of any one of you, I will inform you. Where is Gracie? Gracie, some boiling water as soon as possible.”

The indignant women were ushered forth. Jubal was stationed at the door to prevent further ingress, and Doc Shanks approached the bed. Already Naoma was far along in her ordeal. Her eyes turned toward him, impersonal, numb. In a far-off way her mind knew that the doctor had come, but it was too deeply occupied with its own intimate, acute crisis to respond to this invasion now.

Doc Shanks made a brief, expert examination. Not much to do but wait. He smiled and patted one of her pale hands.

“Everything is going along finely, my dear,” he said. “It won’t be very long now. . . .”

He settled down in a chair by the side of the bed. A kerosene lamp with a circular wick and a bulbous, opaque glass shade, threw light from the dark walnut chest of drawers upon which it stood. The room it revealed was pretty and cheerful even by lamplight, with its high-posted double bed, its chiffonier and dresser, its one or two rocking chairs, its carpet, and two large steel engravings of Biblical scenes hanging on its flowered paper walls. Daniel, very nonchalantly, confronted a crowd of cowering lions in their den. The beasts, Doc Shanks reflected, are palpably terrified by the boniness of this quarry which the Babylonian king has sent them. On the opposite

wall, Moses, in a rage at the sight of the errant children of Israel worshipping the golden calf, smashed the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments against the ground. Many others have smashed them since, thought Doc Shanks. I've broken them all myself . . . no, I never killed anybody . . . deliberately, that is.

Hunched in his chair, his long, horsey face with its stubble of gray whiskers showing a three day lack of razor, and his vague dark eyes peering into the bed, the old physician listened compassionately to the woman's whimpers when the pains came with rapidly recurring frequency. Jubal, at the door, shrank each time Naoma cried out. Blood on the sheets. He thought of blood he had seen before—Shep Horgan's dark blood on the dusty road in Teton; the blood of Mae Gooney beside the shattered adobe of the Mexican hacienda. . . . *The blood is the life*. It struck him that Naoma here faced the ultimate, basic conclusion. Life itself. He had faced the same conclusion—but with the opposite purport. He had placed his life in balance to take life. Her life was in balance to give life.

The room was stuffy and a faintly sickening sweetness of sachet powder hung on the air. Doc Shanks felt Naoma's pulse and rose as if great events impended.

"Jubal," he said, "kindly open the windows a little. Then, I believe it would be as well if you should withdraw. Nothing so distracts a doctor's attention as the sight of a husband having labor pains. Send Gracie in with the hot water, *if* you please."

The miracle was that Jubal obeyed him without question. His conviction of his own superfluity in this house of great activities sent him obediently to the parlor, where he seated himself on the sofa, his powerful hands clasped helplessly together, and round drops of sweat standing out on his forehead. One or two of the visiting women still hovered in the front room and these, Mrs. Wadlow and Miss Hostetter, attempted to speak to him, but he snarled at them so ferociously that they fled. The house became deserted except for Gracie, making hurried trips back and forth between the kitchen and the bedroom, Jubal hunched in the parlor, and the doctor and his patient.

The whimperings continued, breaking into a sharp wail once in a while. After a long time, however, they ceased. Then a thin cry found its way through the closed door. Presently the door opened and Doc Shanks shambled forth, followed by Gracie, whose black face shone with perspiration and the female instinct of rejoicing over reproduction. She carried a bundle in her arms.

“Is—is it over?” gulped Jubal in a voice which trembled.

“Yes,” said Doc Shanks. “Naoma is resting now. This is the baby. A fine boy, Jubal.”

Jubal took one glance. Little red monkey face in the blankets. Wet, dark, stringy hair. Pimplly wrinkled bump of new flesh. It opened its mouth. *N’yaa. N’yaa.* Thin grating noise of agony at being born.

Jubal looked wildly at the door beyond. “*How is she?*”

“You may go in and see her. Be quiet. Do not unnecessarily excite her.”

Naoma lay perfectly still in the bed. It was good to rest thus, her tortured body at ease, all pain gone. From outdoors a cooling breeze rustled the dotted Swiss curtains inward. The wind brought in an odor of frostbitten October leaves and grasses, and with that a sensation of repose and fresh quietude.

Yet she made room for Jubal’s head beside her and placed her white arm about his sun-reddened neck.

“Naomy, it was awful!” Almost it seemed that the strong man kneeling beside her sobbed in his revulsion.

“It’s all over now, Jubal,” she whispered. The door opened and the mother’s eyes shone as Gracie brought in the baby, washed and cared for, and tucked it in the bed beside her. “He’s a boy, Jubal,” Naoma continued. “Remember when you said, before we were married: *When our boy grows up we’ll send him to college?* You were a prophet, dear.”

Still his face was buried in the coverlet. “It was too terrible,” he groaned. “It will never happen again.”

But her thoughts were far in the future. “I’m going to name him Jerry,” she said dreamily. Her arm tightened about Jubal’s neck.

It was a moment of fulfillment. Naoma’s ordeal was over. In one arm she held her husband. In the other her son.

In that gray dawn Jubal sat before the window in the parlor and gazed out at the brightening radiance of the east. The room about him looked drawn and haggard, just as did he. Chairs stood out of the accustomed places where Naoma always put them. On the foot of the sofa was a rumpled quilt. Jubal had spent the night there, rather than going to an upstairs room to

sleep. From the rear of the house he heard Gracie's steady snore. Otherwise everything was quiet. Doc Shanks long since had gone home, the baby was in his crib, and Naoma slept peacefully.

In the half-light Jubal felt that his thoughts came with a clarity he had rarely before known. His problems were sharply vignetted, capable of being properly estimated, and his mind moved with a directness to grapple with them for a solution. He and Reb were, he knew, "spread out too thin," as the saying was. Their resources were scattered. Something must be done if he were ever to bring them out of the acute financial crisis. Another such occurrence as the tick epidemic or even a further severe break in the market would ruin them.

Jubal remembered the days he had spent at the courthouse, looking over the titles of the land he was leasing. Tax delinquent—one after another of them. The early Oklahoma settlers were neither thrifty nor very competent in many cases. Often they had come to the new country because they had found success impossible where they were brought up. On the other hand, governmental expenses in that early day were not high, and county officials had not begun to press strongly for the collection of taxes. Jubal knew the law. Tax deeds. It was one way of obtaining land cheaply.

To be sure it would not endear him to his neighbors. It took a stubborn man and a strong man to weather the storm of public indignation which rose against the speculator in tax deeds in the Oklahoma of that day. Yet Jubal, considering everything, felt willing to abide that public censure.

In his mind suddenly grew a picture of Mesa, swart, hard-fat cheeks, opaque black mustache, small shrewd eyes. *Always the courage of the mind is to be regarded above the courage of the body.* That was a saying of Mesa's. Also: *It is well always to speak the truth to one's friends, and whenever convenient to one's enemies. But no man is bound by any rule to speak truth to his enemies unless it pleases him to do so, since it is an assured fact that his enemies will not speak the truth to him. Thus it is best to speak by roundabout courses to an enemy, or to a stranger whom one does not fully trust. . . . To be remorseless with one's enemy when one has overthrown him is good. It is to be expected that one's enemy will in like manner be remorseless with him, if the advantage is the other way.* And finally: *To hold one's thought within one's self, that is good.*

Thus had Mesa spoken, and Jubal, turning over in his mind the words, felt suddenly that they answered a question for him. His back was to the wall. He must fight for Naoma . . . and little Jerry . . . and Reb. Hitherto he

had permitted other persons to make the rules by which he fought. From this time on he would make his own rules. Somewhere he had heard a phrase: The end justifies the means. . . .

11

Direct and elemental as the raw desert from which he came, it took Jubal some time to become accustomed to the realization of his fatherhood. That October night when Naoma moaned and whimpered under the ministrations of Doc Shanks, it was only for the woman that Jubal was concerned. The physician's proud display of the baby after the ordeal was ended left Jubal almost uninterested, so terribly was his mind preoccupied with what was happening to his wife.

Even in the days which followed, when Naoma at last found the strength once more to be about, and, in the first glory and pride of her motherhood, sought constantly to bring the baby to Jubal's attention, her husband did not thrill greatly to the thought of his offspring. Something of this was due to the very difference in Jubal's nature from that of his wife. As sensitive and responsive to emotion as Jubal was undemonstrative, Naoma was held to her child by a mystical bond of worship and intuitive understanding stronger even than the physical connection once between them which had been cut at Jerry's birth. As soon as she was able to leave her bed, she insisted on taking over from Gracie the full charge of the baby. Jerry seemed to bloom under her care and her pride in him grew and was a thing good to contemplate. He was a pretty baby, with blond ringlets replacing his dark birth hair and round blue eyes in his rose-white face which made him resemble a soft, good-humored little cherub. Instinctively Jerry knew when Naoma was happy or when she was depressed. They laughed much together and when the baby wept the mother almost wept also. In this close communion of souls there seemed little room for another and Jubal came to feel vaguely that he was an interloper there.

In a manner this relieved him. Shrinking as he did from any display of emotion, had he been called upon in those days to show anything so self-revelatory as a father's fatuous pride, his whole being, trained in the wild man-world from which he had come, would have been paralyzed with embarrassment. Therefore was he always stiff and uncomfortable when near the baby in the first months of Jerry's existence, even when Naoma, joyfully relaxing, played with her child on the bed, or cradled him with the Sweet Madonna look on her face, against her breast.

Jubal's awkwardness amused Naoma. She teased him continuously about it and once or twice struck him with panic by thrusting the baby into his arms.

"Here, Jubal, hold him awhile."

"No! Naomy! Hey! I don't know how to handle them. Hell's fire—be careful! I'm afraid of droppin' him!"

Thus grumbling and complaining he would hold the tiny, squirming bundle of long white clothes, surmounted with its cherubic face, his arms clutching it nervously, his face a picture of woe rather than parental affection, until Naoma relented and took the baby away.

"Oh, Jubal, you never were intended to be a father!" she would wail. His attitude toward Jerry did, in fact, trouble her.

The turning point came when Jerry grew old enough to sit in a high chair and eat. He had a bowl, cup and spoon, all of silver, given him by the McReynoldses, and he soon learned to open his mouth wide to receive the warm porridge and milk. One morning while Naoma was feeding the child, Jubal entered and stood watching, his face expressionless as usual. Suddenly she rose and held out the spoon to him.

"You feed him."

"No. I don't know how."

"Are you afraid of your own child?"

"No. I—"

"Jubal Troop, you're just as much Jerry's parent as I am. Sit right down in this chair, sir, and take this spoon!"

She was imperious, but secretly she was astonished at the meekness with which the big man obeyed her. Awkwardly between his thumb and forefinger he held the tiny silver spoon, looking ineptly from it to the bowl, to the baby.

"Go ahead, feed him. He won't bite you," directed Naoma, struggling heroically with a desire to laugh. She could not tell which looked the more helpless, the man or the baby. Yet to laugh at this juncture, she knew, would ruin everything.

After hesitating a few moments, the spoon almost swallowed in his great paw, Jubal made shift to ladle a bit of the porridge and extend it cautiously toward Jerry. Instantly the little lips opened and Jerry, as instinctively as a

bird, accepted the food. Naoma, watching mirthfully, saw profound astonishment come over her husband's face, followed by a slow grin. A few more spoonfuls were transferred to Jerry's expectant mouth. Each time, as the baby's lips opened for the spoon, the grim, stern lips of the man opened in sympathy, forming as if to receive something. Naoma, striving to throttle a giggle, froze suddenly to complete gravity as Jubal turned toward her.

"Hungry little devil, ain't he?" he grinned. She nodded, almost afraid to speak. The spectacle suddenly had a new meaning. Father and son. The woman's complete cycle of life's drama was before her. Jubal turned gravely again toward Jerry who was uttering impatient cries for sustenance.

It had taken him months fully to realize what the baby meant, but once the realization came, Jubal's pride in Jerry became a fierce, glowing thing, like the consecrated joy of the Biblical patriarchs in their first-born. Suddenly Jubal was aware that here was a continuation of himself. A little Jubal for the future. . . .

12

With a new, fierce energy he turned to business. But when he first outlined his ideas to Reb Haizlipp, the latter listened with a grave face.

"Think we ought to do that?" he asked when Jubal explained his plan to buy up delinquent tax titles and force the landholders to relinquish their deeds.

"Don't know why not," Jubal replied.

"Look hyar, Jube." Reb was very serious. "It's mighty tough on folks."

"It's the law," insisted Jubal stubbornly.

"But these folks is jest startin'. They've been havin' an awful battle, openin' up this new country, provin' their claims, breakin' the sod, tryin' to sell their first measly crops. What if we'd had to pay taxes on that there Arroyo Grande ranch?"

"We'd have went out of business," said the realistic Jubal. "But what's that got to do with it? Squatter land an' title land is two different things."

"Jubal, ye know I ain't no softhearted woman," was Reb's final appeal. "I kin squeeze down plenty when I think it's needin'. I backed that play of yourn down in Mexico to my last simoleon. Right today I don't know what happened. I was so plumb amazed when I seen ye bring them twenty-five hundred longhorns into the arroyo that I jest set around with my jaw

dropped on my boosom, a-gawkin', an' ye know I never asked many questions. I figgered this much out: them cows was rustled by one bunch of greasers from another bunch of greasers. Likely some folks got hurt; mebber killed. Wall, that's none of my business. If a greaser comes to me an' sells me cows at eight dollars a head or less, I ain't goin' to look too deep into how he got 'em, so long as I'm shore he didn't lift 'em off no white folks. The greasers an' their deevious difficulties with each other is as remote from me as is the wars between two hills of ants. But this hyar's different. It's white folks we're dealin' with now. It looks—wall—like pottin' a sittin' quail, the same bein' a thing my folks back in Platte County, Missouri, deemed next to the seven deadly sins as barrin' a man permanent from the deeligths of that home on high in the hyarafter."

Jubal gave a short laugh. It was Reb's old weakness of being unwilling to aim his game at a loser. "You talk mighty tragic about it," the younger man said uncomfortably after a time. "I ain't desirous of hurtin' nobody if I can help it, but this is a big game, Reb. It's *business*. I've been studyin' business the last few months, an' I've found out it's just the hardest thing there is—with rules all of its own. There ain't no room for sympathy in business. No room to worry about the feelin's of others. Dog eat dog—that's what business is, an' the biggest dog's the winner. Look at Jay Gould. Look at Hill. Look at Vanderbilt. Look at the Armours. Look at Rockefeller. Every one of them fellers made his pile a-climbin' over the backs of others. They climbed your back, Reb, an' mine. I aim to do a little climbin' of my own, now."

"I still don't like it," growled Reb.

Jubal's face hardened. "If you want to quit me, Reb, this is the time. I see my chance, and by Almighty God, I'm goin' to take it!"

Reb capitulated. "I won't quit ye," he muttered. "If you're set, I'll go along with ye. But, Jube . . . I shore hate like pizen to see ye turn this way."

Naoma felt happy because she was very pretty in a new dress of pale yellow batiste, and even more so because little Jerry, toddling beside her, looked so adorable, with his yellow curls brushed in a part, his eyes blue as the sky, and his dress white. An independent little fellow was Jerry. He loved to walk, sometimes stretching up a short, chubby arm to hold his mother's hand, but scornfully refusing her offer to carry him, on the general ground that a two-year-old was amply able to take care of himself.

“No,” he would say, rejecting such offers. “Jerry carry uh.”

A tall man beside the walk watched them coming, a smile on his dark face, and lifted his hat to Naoma as she approached.

“Webster Grattan!” she exclaimed, flushing slightly in spite of herself. Webster was one of Naoma’s unsolved problems. Always she looked for something in his face, hoping to find it gone. Always she found it—the patient hunger in his eyes. He had not married, although his graceful manners and growing distinction made him the pet of Wettick’s older women, some of whom still made no secret of their opinion of Naoma for having preferred the rough cattleman to the polished lawyer. To Naoma, it was unnatural that a man like Grattan should never have become interested in some other woman, and somehow he always made her feel as if she had mistreated him. This created in her a mild indignation, because examine her conscience as she might, she could find no reason to blame herself. There was also the feeling, which she never admitted even to herself, that Webster Grattan’s devotion to her, while deeply complimentary, was a vaguely perilous thing.

“I saw you coming. You make a lovely picture with the little boy,” he said.

“Oh . . . thank you. How have you been, Webster?” She wished he would pass on, but he fell in step beside her.

“As well as—could be expected.” She felt that he intended her to read something into that, but she refused to do so.

“That is nice,” she smiled. “I could expect it to be very well indeed.”

Webster was silent for a moment or two as they strolled slowly along to allow for Jerry’s short, toddling legs. Naoma remembered that she had been hearing talk of Grattan’s political prospects.

“Someone was telling me that you may be nominated by the county Republican convention to run for county attorney,” she said.

“Oh—that.” Webster half frowned. He saw that she was leading the conversation away from dangerous channels, and he was not yet ready to be led away. Still, the discussion of his ambitions was an agreeable subject, so he presently answered her:

“That’s very much on the knees of the gods. I do not know if the party would even consider me. And I do not know if I would be a suitable person for the office, even if elected.”

This was obviously a leader and Naoma took it up generously. “Why, of course you would, Webster. Everybody says there is nobody in the legal profession in Wettick with the promise that you have.” She hesitated a moment. “There is just one thing. . . .”

“Yes?” he asked. He knew what she was going to say and he wanted her to say it. Grattan, perhaps consciously, since Naoma had chosen another man, had gone in for slight dissipation. His careful nature had no room in it for any such tumbling urge for enjoyment as sometimes actuated Reb or even Jubal. Liquor had slight appeal for him and poker even less, but he had not denied the whisper that he occasionally drank too much for his own good and gambled. He rather enjoyed the reputation for genteel rakishness.

“I have no right to say this,” Naoma hurried on as if embarrassed.

“You have a right to say anything you wish to me,” he insisted.

“Very well, then. It’s this: Webster, I have heard—of your drinking. It would please your friends very much if you would not do so much of it.”

“Would it please—you?” He relentlessly pinned her down.

“Yes, of course.” Demurely. “Your future is to be thought of and I should be very proud to know that a friend of mine had accomplished the things which they say are before you.”

“But aside from my future—for me alone?”

His dark eyes searched her face and Naoma’s own eyes dropped. In spite of herself she was struck by the handsomeness of this man. And by the elegance of his attire and bearing. So different, in that respect, from some. . . .

“Yes,” she murmured, her head down.

But his head lifted with a glad jerk. “You have made me happier than you can know with those words,” he said almost fiercely. “For you I—”

“Webster, please!” she warned him sharply.

He realized where they were and the ardency faded from his aquiline features. He halted, lifting his hat again.

“Thank you, Naoma,” he whispered. “I will not forget.”

Troubled, she continued her walk with little Jerry. The baby trudged along, trailing behind as she moved faster than she realized in her

preoccupation. Presently a small voice brought her back to herself and the present.

“Murr! ’Ant up.”

“Oh, you precious!” Her conscience stabbed her. “I’ve walked your poor little legs off.”

She snatched him up, hugging him close, in an agony of love. Jerry returned the hug with fat little arms. He did not know why his mother was disturbed, but in his baby way he tried to assure her that everything was all right with him.

14

Reb Haizlipp tilted his chair against the front of the cabin and gazed across the Oklahoma landscape. He had formed the habit of sitting in this manner every evening—when the skies were pleasant. Of late the weather generally was fine; too much so to suit the farmers, he supposed. The grass on the Shoo-Fly was beginning to show the effect of the long drouth. Lucky September was near. Rain usually fell in September and the autumn pasture would pick up again. The white face steers on the ranch at present wouldn’t stand much shortage on their range. It had been a bad year for Stockers and the lot on the Shoo-Fly this year was a scrubby aggregation which had not rounded out as Reb would have liked to see.

Reb fumbled in a pocket and drew out his old black pipe. Again he searched with awkward, gnarled hands, until he found his tobacco pouch, and from this he filled the clinkered bowl, nursing the tobacco into a little funnel made by one finger curved around the lip of the bowl, taking mouth-pursing care to spill not one crumb. Then he struck a match, cherished the flame for a moment between cupped hands over the tobacco, and leaned back with the rich, creamy smoke issuing from his mouth and nostrils.

The cabin made a good place against which to tilt the chair, but it was not worth much for anything else. Reb drew a kind of sigh and shook his head. He could have had his choice of better quarters—in town. But he felt that he must live on the ranch to be near the cattle. Besides he preferred it so.

It was five years now that Jubal and Naoma had been married—and it seemed to Reb ten times that long. How he missed the old careless freedom of his companionship with Jubal. Naoma—to whom Reb always referred as “the missus”—took up Jubal’s time and interest now. Naoma and the kid. Reb still found it difficult to accustom himself to the change. He resented

Naoma, although he grudgingly admitted to himself that she had been kind and patient with him. Jubal was always trying to induce Reb to live with them, and Naoma seconded the invitations.

But Reb chose the old Agnew cabin. They had talked a dozen times about building better ranch quarters, but always the money was needed more badly for something else . . . for Jubal's land transactions. So the Agnew place had remained much the same with its ramshackle outbuildings, and its rusty, creaking windmill. Jubal joked about that windmill the last time he was out at the ranch. Sounded like a screech of pain when the wind veered it, Jubal said, and wondered if a little grease would ruin it. That was Jubal's way. Always joshing. Reb thought he would send one of the fence riders up the tower to grease the windmill, maybe tomorrow. Not that the screeching bothered him. In fact he rather liked it. Companionable, some way.

Reb did the cooking at the ranch. He preferred to do it. Jubal had sought to send out a negro cook, but Reb refused. He hadn't been chuck-wrangler for twenty outfits in his day for nothing. Besides, he was growing a little old to spend much time in the saddle, and something forced him to maintain some basis of usefulness. Most of the daytime, while the boys were out working the cattle or riding the twenty-five miles of fence, Reb was pretty much alone on the ranch. This he did not greatly mind, although he would have liked to see Jubal a little more often.

Funny how much store an old man sets by a boy. Reb had never expected to admit he was old—even to himself. But he realized that he was going hard toward seventy. That wasn't so very old, but there were other signs. It was not that his mustache and hair—gray since he was a young man—had turned snow white. Nor that he sometimes had a little difficulty recognizing people at a distance. It was more the way he lost his recuperative power. The hard years of his life were at last taking their toll, and he found himself spending more and more of his time simply relaxing as he was this evening.

Sometimes, of course, it became just a little lonely on the Shoo-Fly. A man, when he nears seventy, doesn't fit into life with strangers as he does when he is in his twenties, and Reb felt the hands on the ranch were all strangers to him. Good enough boys, but not cowhands in the sense that he had known the meaning of the word. Reb would have liked Jubal's company in the evenings sometimes. What a lot of tomfoolery they enjoyed in the old days. There were the nights, too, when they went "in to town." Reb grinned secretly to himself at the thought of those delicious nights. It took a sight of liquor to unsteady him in the old days. And a sight of women to satisfy him.

White or Mexican, he made them say enough. Or black, either, for that matter. He never took much stock about its changing one's luck, but a nigger wench somehow appealed to him on occasion. Of course that was all over now. His vital powers were dead in him and there was nothing left but the memories . . . the delicious memories.

Who would have thought that marriage would have changed Jubal so? Reb grinned again, half derisively at his own fatuity. Of course marriage was bound to change a man. Reb himself had told Jubal that often enough. After all, when Jubal took on a wife, the focus of his life was certain to shift. Women see to that. Mostly they break, with deliberate purpose, the threads of contact between their husbands and the old pre-nuptial careers. Nothing from the past is welcome because it offers a challenge to the present. *Forsaking all others*. Wasn't that what the preacher said? That meant—Reb.

Not that Naoma wasn't a fine woman. She had never been anything but kind to Reb, he honestly admitted to himself. How was she to know that those kindnesses only made him uncomfortable, and that, try as he might, he could not quite swallow his resentment of her? That, if the truth were known, was the real reason why he lived out at the ranch—he didn't want to be around the woman who had taken over the life of his partner.

His partner. That reminded Reb that Jubal was doing a lot of worrying right now. Raising cattle in Oklahoma was a different proposition from what it had been in the Big Bend. The grass, for one thing. The blue-stem killed in the winter, and you had to feed hay and cotton cake. That cost money. Jubal had worked like a giant to bring the ranch back to the financial position it was in before the Texas fever blighted the prospects.

Uncomfortably, Reb thought of some of the things that people were saying. Men, he knew, called Jubal a sharper, a money lender who didn't scruple to throttle the man who borrowed from him if the opportunity came. Reb tried to keep out of it, but there were stories which reached him in spite of himself. And he knew that Jubal, slowly, inexorably, was knitting the ranch together—knitting it by acquiring, farm by farm, the land from the men who once had owned it, but who were too weak to keep it, once he set his hard grasp upon it.

One piece Jubal had been unable to secure was the Yodel farm. The Yodels lived two miles east of Reb's cabin, over the rise; good neighbors and nice people in spite of their slow Dutch ways. August Yodel, the old father, had refused to lease or sell his farm to Jubal, although it came within the quadrangle of the acreage Jubal had laid out for the Shoo-Fly ranch.

August said he came to Oklahoma to bring up his family, and he wanted to cultivate his farm. There were some other Amish farther on, and Yodel wished to keep the land because he hoped for a good-sized colony of his people some day. He was quite a church fellow, Reb knew. They were all great on church, those Amish.

Yet Reb had reason to feel that even August Yodel would some day have to give in to Jubal. There was bad blood between them, for one thing. Jubal had never forgotten his anger at August for renting one of his small pastures to the Rail-H outfit from Texas, the first year after the partners came to the Shoo-Fly. It was the only time August ever rented the pasture—but that one time cost Reb and Jubal forty thousand dollars, for it was the ticks brought by the Rail-H steers which infected the Shoo-Fly herd. The last time Yodel and Jubal talked, they wrangled violently. Dutch were always stubborn. Funny people but good neighbors. Always doing little kindly courtesies, like sending cold buttermilk over to a lonely old man, or a bite of apple *strudel*, or even just coming over during the day for a friendly call and chat.

Overhead a soaring night hawk sounded its rasping *peet . . . peet . . .* Reb's chair legs came to the ground. The hour was later than he had thought. Already the shadows were long in the swales and down by the creek he could hear the calves bawling as they waded in the water to drink. The fence riders would be coming in pretty soon, tired and dusty and ravenous. Reb knocked his pipe out and went indoors to cook supper.

15

Nothing ever stirred Wettick so profoundly as the Bulger revival services. For weeks ahead of time it was the sole subject of discussion at the prayer meetings, and even the talk of the crowd down at Shepard's livery stable. The women who had "leadership" were busy with mysterious plans. Speculative eyes were kept on certain persons—men whom Wettick regarded tolerantly on ordinary occasions, but who now became brands to be plucked from the burning. Doc Shanks was the livery stable's candidate, but the name which was speculated and gushed over in many a ladies' aid meeting, was that of Webster Grattan, the brilliant young lawyer who was, according to rumor, a heavy drinker.

When the Rev. Selah Bulger came to town he was a soul-satisfying spectacle. Tall, cadaverous, awkward in bearing and gesture, he had a heavy black mane of hair, a great hooked nose, a lantern jaw, a burning black eye, and a voice like the bull of Bashan which thrilled his auditors more than the diapason of any organ. Of the old school of revivalists was Dr. Bulger. None

of the histrionics of a Billy Sunday were his, nor the beautiful imagery of Gypsy Smith. A nation still lived close to the recent utterances of Dwight L. Moody, and Dr. Bulger preached the awful damnation of those who failed to come to the fold of God. His thundered sermons frightened little boys and girls into fidgets, and brought to more than one adult cheek the pallor of guilt.

As the revival services opened, all streets led to the First Christian Church. Buggies lined both the long hitch racks, with numbers of saddle horses also. Waiting crowds were at the wide open church doors. Young men dawdled at places where they could ogle the girls who came past in dresses self-consciously white and pure; and the sun reflected on the street with a sense of impending drama.

Wettick was not disappointed. The organ pealed; silence fell over the multitude that filled even the chairs brought in from the Sunday School room; and Dr. Bulger rose to grip the mood of all in his outstretched hands. The revival service was off to the mounting tension of the days to come.

How many were converted last night? That was the question of the hour in Wettick, and the total climbed quickly upward. Hymns, prayer, and the conscience-stirring voice of the evangelist broke through the defense of those who came to scoff.

Naoma went to several of the afternoon services because of her deeply sincere religious feeling, and her early training among the Rawhidiers caused a strange stir in her blood at the remembered scenes of her childhood thus re-enacted. Jubal grunted and objected to going, but on the final night, impelled by curiosity which he would not admit, permitted himself to be led to the service by his wife.

It was the climax to the series of meetings. After the great, crashing sermon, during which even Jubal admitted the power of the tall, cadaverous preacher, there arrived the period of opportunity for conversion.

“Come forward. Come forward before it is too late.” Like a soft undertone came the choir’s ceaselessly repeated hymn:

“Just as I am, without one plea
But that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bidst me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.”

Forward on the very edge of the rostrum stood Dr. Bulger, his great, long arms extended. Perspiration shone upon his forehead, and his face was

almost haggard with intensity. One felt sorry for him. It was as if he were a beggar, but everyone knew that he was pleading only for souls.

“Won’t you come forward? It’s such an easy step. Just walk up here and take me by the hand. No other act of your life will be so blessed. Tomorrow it may too late. . . . Will the choir render just one more stanza of that sweet, sweet hymn? Softly now. Let us all bow our heads, and those who have made their decisions may come forward during the singing. . . .”

Insistent church members leaned over sinners and their urgent appeal came like swift little eddies from the main current that flowed from the pulpit. And then, suddenly, the dam broke. Naoma’s heart was in her throat, almost choking her with the emotion of the moment as she saw a tall figure suddenly rise in the rear of the crowded church. Webster Grattan! A stern, concentrated look was on his dark face, and an involuntary *A-a-a-h* sighed through the crowd at this climax of sensation. A moment later, between two exultant deacons, Grattan walked forward.

There were those who afterward unkindly suggested that the rear seat on the center aisle, which necessitated a parade for the full length of the church, was a masterly piece of stage managing. But at the moment no such thought obtruded in the mind of anyone. The organ burst into a thundering peal of triumph and a cheer swept to the highest seats of the balcony, as dozens of the smaller fry converts hastened forward to join this bellwether in accepting the healing of the gospel.

Naoma, excited and pretty with her flushed cheeks, waited with a mob after the meeting to press Webster’s hand.

“It was magnificent!” she whispered.

“You are responsible—you have made me happier than I can express,” he whispered back.

She was in a silent, exalted mood all the way home as she walked with Jubal through the night. Naoma’s deep natural religious instinct had been somewhat stultified in the years of her marriage. Again and again she had sought to interest him in the Episcopal church which maintained a small missionary chapel at Wettick for the few communicants the little city contained, visited one Sunday a month by the archdeacon. Jubal, however, failed to respond. Occasionally he attended services with her, as he had on the final revival night at the Christian church, but he did so as a concession, with a half-smile at her eager joy in worship. The spectacle of Webster’s public espousal of a thing which was so dear to her thrilled Naoma to her

core. Moreover it is a heady sensation to feel that you have influenced another to change the whole course of his life. Particularly is it subtly exhilarating if you are a woman, and the subject of reform is an attractive man; so much so that to keep from regarding him from that time forward with pride and perhaps a little possessiveness is something a woman would not be human if she resisted.

“I feel so—so uplifted,” she said at last, sensible that Jubal would be wondering concerning her silence.

“Webster Grattan climbin’ into the mourner’s bench?”

“Yes,” she said, swallowing her irritation at his flippant phrase.

“You don’t suppose it had anything to do with his political plans, do you?”

“Jubal!” The sneer in his words nettled Naoma. “You wouldn’t understand—”

“Understand what?” Perhaps he knew by instinct the attraction Grattan had for Naoma and an edge of jealousy crept in. Perhaps it was his general antipathy toward anything which was an emotional display. Perhaps it was his instinctive dislike for the lawyer. He regretted his next words the instant he uttered them: “Understand why you are so interested in Webster Grattan?”

The covert suggestion was like a slap in her face. Indignation, astonishment, injury, struggled with each other in her with perhaps a slight twinge of wonder if there might be something to his implied accusation. Her conscience, however, was very, very clear, and anger at last surmounted all other emotions.

“Just what do you mean by that?” she demanded, halting, quivering.

His anger caught fire from hers, particularly since he knew his implication was unjust.

“Whatever you want to read into it,” he said.

“Then I am to suppose you accuse me of—accuse me of—Oh!” she cried, her voice rising with her mounting fury. “*You*—of all people!” The words were crackling with sarcasm. “A man who deserts his wife when she is sick! Who doesn’t have—have decency enough to—recognize the decencies of life—That statement gives you away, Jubal Troop! It shows the kind of women you’re used to—that you’ve consorted with—You wouldn’t

know a decent woman if you saw one—and you *dare* to judge *me* by the rest —”

She was speaking in a confused torrent, without coherence or meaning almost, striving desperately to hurt him, to stab him, furious at her own inability to penetrate his armor, to wipe that satiric grin from his face. Suddenly, and for the first time in her life, she hated Jubal. She wanted to slap his face, to claw him. A sob broke from her, and turning, she ran down the path toward her home.

Jubal's irritation faded swiftly as he saw her figure receding in the darkness. Alarm presently replaced it. He hurried after her and caught up with her before she reached the house. At first he merely walked rapidly beside her, making no attempt to speak. He became conscious that she was crying, and this further stampeded him. He tried to lay a hand on her arm, but she furiously shook it off.

“Naomy—” he said. “Naomy—”

She turned on him like a tigress.

“Leave me be!” she screamed. “Don't you *dare* touch me, you—you—heathen beast!”

Leaving him standing on the walk leading up to the porch, she rushed into the house and slammed the door in his face.

16

That quarrel was a beginning of a different and less happy era in Jubal's home. Smarting under a sense of injustice, Naoma did not forgive quickly, and Jubal, too proud to confess that he was very much in the wrong, angry at her attitude, did nothing to better the situation. They met next morning at breakfast, for Jubal spent the night in the spare room upstairs. And for the first time since the day when he first saw her in the Rawhider camp, Naoma looked him in the face like a stranger.

He flung himself out of the house and walked to work in an ugly temper that morning. Throughout the afternoon he did little but smoke, irritably, one cigar after another. At luncheon time he ordered a buggy from the livery stable and drove out to the ranch. It was not his intention to discuss his problem, but Reb, after a keen look at him, dropped an exceedingly innocent remark.

“I sometimes wish we was back at the Arroyo Grande.”

“Me, too!” snorted Jubal explosively.

“Things wasn’t near as complicated,” continued Reb, his eyes on the distant horizon.

“No, they wasn’t!”

“Women is a complication,” suggested the old cattleman with a sidelong glance.

“Damned if they ain’t,” agreed Jubal bitterly.

“I never could understand ’em, myself.”

“Me neither.”

“They go for religion, an’ sich,” said Reb shrewdly.

“God damn it, Reb, shut up!”

Reb relapsed into silence, but he had learned what he wanted to know. Presently he tried a different tack.

“Jube, I’m yore friend.”

Once before he had used those words—long years before—and they carried Jubal back to the soft spring night when he first met Reb, and to the dim Rawhider camp, the still gurgle of the brook, the distant, muted sounds of the wagon people quieting down for the night’s rest, and his long confession to this man in the darkness. Reb *was* his friend, had proved it beyond any peradventure in the years which succeeded. Suddenly Jubal found himself telling of what had happened the night before. He told it fairly, not minimizing his own injustice. Only once Reb interrupted.

“This Webster Grattan, do ye really think—”

“Oh, hell no!” exclaimed Jubal. “Naomy’s as straight an’ aboveboard as—as you are. But *he* ain’t. He’d like to—like to—know he was crazy for her when I found her the last time, an’ he ain’t never got over it.”

“He looks like a snake to me.”

Jubal suddenly turned to his friend.

“Grattan’s got something I don’t have, Reb,” he said. “He’s got manners an’ education. He knows how to say things. He likes the same things Naomy likes. He likes to dress good, an’ I hate dressin’ up. He’s a gentleman, an’ I’ll never be nothin’ but a cowpuncher as long as I live. Oh, I ain’t blind—” He silenced Reb’s attempt to speak. “I’ve seen him when he talked to her,

an' I've seen how glad she was to meet him. He's her kind. I can't change myself to fit a place that's got lots of folks in it, like Naomy's changed herself. I—I—" he groped for words in this unaccustomed self-analysis—"I wish I could laugh like her, an' feel at home in the town with friends like she's got. I wish I could feel sure an' contented like she does, an' could accept life as it is like she does. She's—she's—it's like she's got some kind of armor that'll protect her to the end, no matter what happens. I tell you, I've tried to go along with her. We have people to the house lots, an' I go out places with her. An' never without feelin' miserable an' hatin' everybody there. It's just simply impossible for me to share her life with her."

He ceased speaking suddenly, and Reb remained silent also. He knew that if Jubal had anything more to say he would say it without prompting. His heart was sore for his friend, but any comment from him would only cause Jubal to recede within himself. Presently Jubal went on:

"Grattan should have married her. They'd have had a good life together. A society life—that's what Naomy would like, an' what she can't have with me. Actually, Reb, I get lonesome sometimes right in my own house. The little shaver—Jerry—I get a thrill every time I'm around him, but he's too little to understand. If I can't join Naomy in her life, she can't join me in mine, either. I've got a lone fight on my hands."

"You worried about Grattan?"

"God! I only wish he'd make a move that'd give me reason to do something. He's nice an' easy like a bullsnake. Never gives nobody nothin' to lay hold on, but he nearly drives me cuckoo with that superior look of his, an' now that he's got converted—"

"Jube, ye need a change. Why don't we pull in our horns? We could sell out, now. Mebbe we wouldn't git as much out of our holdings as we could oncet, but we'd have a good chunk of *pesos*—enough to live on an' have some fun, mebbe. We could go West an' hunt. Or prospect. This kind of life is wearin' ye down. The cattle market rises an' falls, day by day, an' ye rassel with it like a steer on the prod. No matter how ye try, it looks like ye cain't never win back the lost ground caused by that Texas fever. It's got so the losin' battle has become yore life in spite of the awful strain. An' it's doin' things to ye."

But Jubal shook off the suggestion. The whole meaning of existence to him had become a struggle, as Reb pointed out. He had plunged into business as a strong swimmer breasts a powerful current, and he was

resolute in his intention to fight his way through it. He sought to make up for his lack of background by his success elsewhere.

“I ain’t educated,” he said to Reb, “but I can still whip some of these educated gents when it comes to tradin’. Reb, I’ve spent whole days an’ nights studyin’ the market. I’ve memorized figures, worked out trends, gradually got to comprehend the whole big framework of the thing. At first it was vague, scarcely grasped by me, but lately it’s begun gradually to shift about, each thing failin’ into place like objects in a dark room while your eyes get used to the lack of light. I’m comin’ to the time when I can lick this, an’ I’m goin’ to hang on until I do.”

Reb, who had long since tired of the tension of their joint existence, heard this sadly, but without surprise. He knew that in his business ability Jubal had become conscious at last of a vast resource. He had tried it out in small ways at first—in little land deals. Mortgages, tax titles, and an intimate knowledge of the affairs of the persons with whom he dealt all played a part in his schemes. The criticisms of him which had become more and more insistent because of his sharp transactions, he paid no attention to because he simply did not comprehend them. One by one he succeeded in acquiring most of the individual pieces of land within the acreage block of the Shoo-Fly. Occasionally he met men with bitter words in their mouths—to these he did not reply. Business was to him a thing impersonal, cold, clean-cut. It had its own laws, as he conceived it. Why men who had lost in it should complain he did not understand, any more than that a loser at poker or faro bank should wish to welsh. He knew that if the situation were reversed and he were the one caught in the pincers, he would never caterwaul as did some of these.

So Reb said nothing, turning the whole conversation off with a jest. Jubal felt better, having cleared his own emotional atmosphere. They rode over the ranch, examining the stock, and in the evening Jubal returned to Wettick, his face once more the impassive mask to cover any turmoil which might be within him.

Jubal did not know how to bridge the misunderstanding between himself and Naoma, and so the little rift between them remained. Neither of them said anything further about it. Immersed in his affairs, Jubal took his chief joy in little Jerry, who was growing rapidly and thriving lustily. With his bright head and wide blue eyes, the little fellow trotted everywhere now on short fat legs. Jubal could see Naoma and the little boy, heads bent together,

enthralled with some concern of their own, and briefly feel a pang that he could not occupy a footing of familiarity as easy with either of them. He adopted a silence, and toward Naoma he displayed a humorous condescension whenever the talk turned upon business. This was defensive, because by now she had begun to remonstrate with him concerning some of his actions—perfectly legal expedients to which he went, but sometimes, as she pointed out, cold-blooded ones. He wondered how much of her knowledge of his business tactics she was obtaining from Grattan, because he never brought any information home to her himself. She was always talking about being kindly, and generous, and displaying her affection for different people whom he despised. A woman's attitude, he supposed.

In his assumption that Naoma discussed him with Grattan, Jubal was wrong. Her best friend was old Doc Shanks. Jubal could not comprehend what she could see in the old man. A drunkard and a failure—it made Jubal fairly shudder sometimes when he thought of the risk he had run in having the broken-down physician attend Naoma the night the baby was born. It was from Doc Shanks that she obtained some hints as to what her husband was doing.

Among Naoma's friends was a whole rag-tag and bob-tail of nonentities, according to Jubal's view—people like the old maid school teacher, Miss Hostetter, with her funny, skinny figure and the curls hanging at her temples; and Richey Benner, one of Naoma's old pupils, now a young man who worked very hard to support his mother and the family of children with which she had been left in widowhood.

In the background, of course, there was always the tall figure of Webster Grattan. Jubal had little to do with the lawyer. The dislike between them was mutual and thinly masked, yet the lawyer was always polite when they met . . . too polite, for his courtesy was mocking in a way Jubal could not define but which he subtly felt. But Naoma and Grattan had become cordial friends. Of this there was no question.

Naoma defiantly invited him to her home to dinner, and Webster smilingly accepted. His conversation was brilliant and witty—and always left Jubal tongue-tied and resentful. Moreover, a new interest surrounded the lawyer. His conversion in the Bulger revival had focused on him the attention of the town and county as it had never been focused before. Fortune—or design—had caused him to wait for his final, spectacular decision until the very climax of the meetings, bringing about him the fluttering concern of the revival workers who made him a sort of goal to be achieved, so that when he went forward that night to grasp the hand of Dr.

Bulger, he became at once a symbol of victory for the revival and a sort of public hero, since, obviously, he had fought a mighty battle with his evil nature and come off victor.

Not even Doc Shanks' somewhat satirical comment altered public opinion much.

"I don't think Webster Grattan's changed so greatly," the old man remarked. "It isn't that Webster was ever a real sot—like some I could mention. I never knew of his drinking much. He may have taken a nip now and then. But his reputation as a drinking man appears to have been a bit over-rated, and, without being cynical, it seems to me that to have a city-wide revival to cure him of the habit was a little like taking a battery of artillery to snuff a candle."

That comment, when repeated about town, only drew upon Doc Shanks the glares of dowagers like Mrs. Ansell Goff and Mrs. Alex Brown. It did not injure in the least Grattan's newly acquired position, for Doc Shanks was ticketed in Wettick as a member of the disreputable crowd, while Grattan was distinctly reputable. The county Republican caucus met and nominated Grattan for county attorney as had been predicted. Naoma received a great thrill of pride in this. But she said nothing about it to Jubal. She felt, in some manner, that he was watching her these days, as if expecting something, she knew not exactly what.

18

In the cold dawn of a November morning just two weeks after Jerry's fourth birthday, Naoma was awakened by a sharp scream of agony from the baby's room. Terror clutched at her heart as she leaped from her bed, threw about her a wrapper, and ran to the sound.

Jerry lay doubled up, his sturdy little body tense with pain, his small face twisted with fear.

"What's the matter, muvver's darling?" she cried, her voice sharp with the realization that something here was dreadfully wrong as she snatched the little fellow from his crib.

"I hurt, muvver," sobbed Jerry. His small arms seized her about the neck in a terrified spasm, as if merely to hold her would bring him surcease from the knife-like pain which stabbed him.

"Where? Show muvver."

“Down there.” Jerry pointed momentarily at his stomach, then resumed his tearful grasp about his mother’s neck.

“Where?” she insisted. “Show me just where, Jerry boy.”

The child, his terror increased by his mother’s evident terror, laid a feverish hand on his right side. Naoma looked up and saw Jubal standing by the crib, his great hands upon it, grasping it with a force which made the tendons stand out and the knuckles turn white. Upon his face was a panic and horror such as she had never seen on a human face before.

It was instinctive for her to reassure him.

“I don’t think it’s anything much,” she said, conquering her own trembling. “Only some little upset. He’s had it before. I’ll give him some castor oil.”

The big man’s face smoothed out with relief. Somehow Jubal had supreme faith in Naoma’s knowledge of these matters.

“We better get a doctor,” he suggested.

“Oh, no. I don’t think it’s necessary. Go back to bed. I’ll quiet him and put him back to sleep after I give him the medicine.”

But as morning came and the forenoon wore on, Jerry did not grow better. In that day, the summoning of a doctor was a matter of the last resort. Most persons took pride in their home remedies, and thrifty Naoma, who had nursed Jerry through many a childhood illness, belonged to this tradition. Even she, however, saw with a sinking heart that the little boy, tossing and moaning in his bed, had something more serious the matter with him than anything he had suffered heretofore. By noon she was ready for a doctor.

“Jubal, send for Doc Shanks,” she said. Her husband had been to the office and just returned.

“Why not Dr. Ward?”

“Because I want Doc Shanks!”

It was no time for argument. Jubal, with misgivings, turned to go on the errand, but a sharp cry from the baby brought him back with a sick feeling in his stomach.

“I’ll send Gracie,” he muttered. “I can’t leave here now.”

Gracie's black face was long with concern and anxiety as she put on her coat and hurried off to find the doctor.

An hour and another hour went by as Jubal and Naoma hovered by Jerry's bed, and no doctor came. At length Jubal went to Dr. Ward's house. The doctor was out of town. He returned to his own home, and found Naoma desperately soothing the baby.

"He—he just had a convulsion," she said, a sob in her voice. "I'm so—scared."

Jerry, turning over on his side, vomited. His little body was wracked by the spasm of his retching.

"He's been doing that ever since you left," whimpered Naoma. They looked into each other's eyes. A dreadful certainty was reflected there for each of them.

19

Doc Shanks long ago had sickened of his marriage with Georgia Tarton. The woman was an unfathomable enigma to him. From the beginning of their wedded life she had preempted the authority to direct him in his affairs and habits. A certain amount of this would have been all right, for Doc Shanks was a mild soul who welcomed leadership, but Georgia never was contented to go part way. Domineer him entirely she would, or know the reason. When he showed any sign of rebellion, she had such hideous fits of temper that he was frightened into submission.

With his courteous Southern upbringing and his naturally gentle nature, Doc Shanks would go to almost any length to avoid discord. His first experiences with Georgia's strange, heathen rages left him aghast. Later, however, he gradually mapped out a course of action. When the Madame, as he called his wife, embarked upon one of her tantrums, he shamelessly left her in possession of the field and retreated to any one of several havens—Tod Evans' hardware store, Bill Hogan's bar and pool room, the Odd Fellows' Hall, or Shepard's livery stable, where he had the freedom of the harness room.

Doc Shanks' chief boast was that he had the best blood of the South in his veins. His mother had been related to the Virginia Gilberts and he also had some claim to Fairfax blood in him . . . so he said, although most Wettick citizens, with the West's profound incapability of understanding such things as pride in ancestry, scoffed. Shanks was no very aristocratic name, the doctor had to admit, but he comforted himself with the knowledge

that it represented only one-fourth of him—the plebeian fourth. The other three-fourths was patrician. In his cups this knowledge came to him comfortingly. Sober, he stood in dread of his wife, but drunk he despised her. Wherefore he was often drunk these days.

When Gracie, Naoma's Negro maid, came searching down the alley to Shepard's livery barn that November afternoon, Doc had no desire to answer a professional call, being at the moment in the happy situation of possessing a quart of whiskey, and having nothing to do but drink it and think scornful thoughts of the termagant who had routed him in one of their unceasing domestic tilts. The black woman, however, lingered and whined at the door, ignoring the remarks made by the stable boors outside. Gracie was mortally afraid of Jubal Troop. Moreover, she pitied Naoma and she was fearful of what might be happening to little Jerry, whom she worshiped. So instead of leaving the stable at Doc Shanks' first tipsy refusal, she hung around and pleaded.

"Come 'long, Doc Shanks, please, suh. It won't take ve'y long. Ah've hunted fo' yo' all ovah town. Ah follered yo' f'um yo' house to Hogan's, an' f'um there to the Odd Fellies, an' ovah to the ha'dware sto', an' couldn't fine yo' no place. Finely Ah was sent heah. Ah been gone hours. Ah don' know whut's happened sence Ah lef. The baby, he's been tuk pow'ful sick, boss. Miz' Troop, she at her wit's end, suh, an' she won't have nobuddy but yo'. *Please, suh.*"

Perhaps it was because Gracie made such a nuisance of herself; perhaps it was the mention of Naoma's name. Doc Shanks at last pulled himself unsteadily to his feet, looked around the room, cursed, looked around again, finally saw his medicine kit where he had left it in plain sight on the table, picked it up and followed Gracie down the alley.

As he walked after the black woman, his brain cleared just enough to permit comprehension to come to him as to whom he was going to attend. Jerry. Little Jerry Troop. Naoma's baby. The doctor quickened his stride. He was very fond of Naoma and the child.

Jubal was on the front porch, with a look of strained agony on his face which shook the doctor out of his remaining befuddlement.

"Hurry! Oh, hurry!" he kept repeating.

Doc Shanks entered quickly. Jubal followed. He could hear the crying of the baby, broken by that horrible retching—retching long after the child had

ceased to have anything in his stomach to give up. He knew how Jerry was twisting and throwing himself about in his mother's arm.

"There, there, Naoma," came Doc Shanks' voice. "You must put him down. Right here on the bed. I will examine him. How long has he been going on this way? Hm-m-m. Since morning? High fever. Congestion. Undoubted congestion of the bowels. The appendix, perhaps. Lie still, little man. Old Doc won't hurt you. There, there."

A moment later in a sharp voice: "Get me a tumbler and spoon, Naoma. We must administer a sedative."

She hurried away, and Doc Shanks, raising his eyes, met the eyes of Jubal. The physician's face was gray, his long jaw quivered slightly, and horror and guilt combined in his expression. Jubal's stern mouth had settled in a grim line of accusation.

"Do not hold me responsible here, Jubal," said the physician in a low hurried tone. "Acute appendicitis. I—I fear—"

"What?" The words were jerked out of Jubal as he leaped forward, a hand on the doctor's throat.

"Naoma—for her sake—" gasped the old man.

His head reeling, Jubal stepped back just as Naoma entered. A heavy black cloud seemed to be settling down upon him, smothering him. With the intensity of a great, fear-stricken animal, he gazed at the writhing form of his little son.

20

Jubal lifted Jerry's still little body from the crib and held it hungrily in his arms. Naoma was in her bedroom, her sobs dying down as the effect of the medicine the doctor had given her numbed her consciousness. In the moments after the baby's death she had collapsed. Gracie was with her, and Doc Shanks.

Alone with his dead son, Jubal lifted the little body and held it to his breast. With it he walked out into the dark parlor and halted, swinging his massive head as if in torture. In the presence of Naoma's hysterical sobs and screams and tears, he had helped in his clumsy way at whatever the doctor ordered, to handle the frantic mother.

Now alone, with no one to see him, his face revealed expression . . . terrible expression of despair and stricken agony.

Over and over, as if stunned, he kept saying: “What can I do? What can I do? What can I do?”

He turned, the abysmal anguish still deeply chiseled in his face, and tenderly replaced the little figure in its bed. He sat down by the crib, nor did he move the livelong night. Dimly he realized that people came to him at intervals, and urged him to rest; he brushed them aside. Like a faithful, hopeless dog, he kept watch by the bier of his little one.

21

For a moment he stood bowed before his own doorway, the setting sun gleaming coldly across the frosty prairies into his eyes. Grief is like a thudding of hammer blows; it sears the bosom like a forge fire, and leaves a man sick and trembling in the knees. To Jubal the funeral was an ordeal which sucked the strength clean from his bones and almost took his mind with it. He seemed to be moving in the thick of night, although the sun was still high when the funeral cortege, led by the tawdry, rusty-black hearse, left the small Episcopal chapel and wound up the hill to the cemetery. Dimly in the church he had been conscious of some familiar faces—old Reb, the Judge and Mrs. McReynolds, and black Gracie who sat with the family. Otherwise all people moved remotely, scarcely seen and unrecognized, yet giving a mass sensation that multitudes were present, drawn by the morbid curiosity of mobs, and adding the close odor of humanity to the faint, waxy fragrance of the flowers about the little coffin. Then two more faces, sharply vignettted against the blurred background. Faces he knew and whose presence here he resented with aching hate. One was Webster Grattan’s, well-taught solemnity upon it and concern in the dark eyes when they turned upon Naoma’s head, bowed with weeping. The other belonged to Doc Shanks. After the service began the old man slipped into the chapel and seated himself in the rear, the same haunted, guilty look upon him that Jubal had seen before.

Jubal felt like screaming at the crowd to go away; to leave him with his dead. But the people poured out of the church and followed the hearse to the cemetery. At the crowding and jostling about the grave his eyes became oddly blank while he endured the moments during which the archdeacon droned the service of burial.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust . . .

Now he was once more at his home. Naoma already had gone inside, half carried between little Judge McReynolds and his large wife with her

rustling silks and flouncing gray curls. Jubal had resigned her to them. During the hours after Jerry's death, his inability to express himself and offer proper words of comfort to her, had seemed to push them farther than ever apart. The coming of the McReynoldses was a relief to them both.

Reb, with delicacy, had bidden farewell at the graveyard, and ridden, grieving, back to the ranch.

As Jubal paused, looking at the sad last rays of the dying sun, while he gathered will power to enter his own door, he saw a solitary figure, stooping and slow, coming up the path toward him.

Doc Shanks, by God!

Jubal descended the steps and walked heavily across the lawn. Then he stood confronting the old physician.

If Doc had been drunk the day he attended Jerry, he was very sober now. His skin was drawn in fine wrinkles across his face, his eyes were haggard and sunken, his step feeble. He shrank back as Jubal towered above him with the old, baleful white glare of fury.

"I—I hoped to see Naoma—" Doc Shanks began.

"I didn't think you would have the guts to come here," said Jubal, speaking very slowly and with an effort for control which shook his voice.

"Jubal, you are distraught!"

"Distraught, hell! Shanks, I know one thing: You get to hell out of here, and God damned quick—"

"What do you mean?"

"Listen, you! You killed my baby just as much as if you'd poisoned him—and you know it!"

"Jubal, I beg of you—"

"Get! I can't hold in much longer!" Jubal took a menacing step forward. But instead of cowering further, Doc Shanks seemed to straighten; his head lifted, and his face became stern as he spoke:

"Strike me, if it will do you any good. But I have something to say to you which you cannot drive me from saying."

An unexpected dignity invested him, and Jubal paused.

“Jubal, I wished to make a confession,” the old man went on, his voice growing more gentle. “I did not kill your baby. He was so far gone when I arrived that no mortal could have saved him. Even if I had come an hour or two sooner—I doubt.” He drew a deep breath as if gathering strength. “But the sin remains and cannot be palliated. Drunk I was when Gracie found me, and drunk I remained at the time I reached your house. A physician who is drunk has no excuse at all for existence, nor any claim to respect from anyone, inside or outside of his profession. I might have—I might have—if I could only speak to Naoma—”

In Doc Shanks’ own words Jubal heard an admission of the very accusations which he had been making. But now again, with an effort, he possessed control over himself.

“Doc Shanks,” he said, “God may forgive you. I never can, nor ever want to. You have done a thing to me—to my heart—worse than anybody ever did before or could do. As for seein’ Naomy, you cannot. I won’t hurt you, but I solemnly warn you never to come near my house again.”

For a long moment the old man looked Jubal in the eyes. Then, with a weary, quivering sigh, he turned and slowly, dejectedly, began to retrace his steps through the deepening dusk.

22

In Jubal’s household the name of Doc Shanks became a forbidden topic. Only once was it mentioned in the days following the funeral and that was before Naoma departed on her long trip with Mrs. Judge McReynolds. The entire household, including Gracie, who was to accompany her mistress, was busy packing and making preparations, for kindly Mrs. McReynolds, dragooning everyone into her way of thinking, had convinced Naoma that the best way to forget was to leave the scene of her sorrow behind. Boston was to be their destination—the Boston which Mrs. McReynolds had not seen since that day, many years ago, when as a young woman she left it for a school-teaching position in fabulous California.

It was Judge McReynolds, who quite innocently dropped Doc Shanks’ name into the conversation while he, Jubal, Naoma and Mrs. McReynolds were talking over plans, the day before the women departed.

“That son-of-a-bitch!” exclaimed Jubal at the mention.

“Jubal, how can you say that?” demanded Naoma, going instantly to the defense of her friend.

“If it wasn’t for him, Jerry would be here today!”

“It wasn’t his fault—” began Naoma.

“He was as drunk as an owl before he got here. Dr. Ward—”

“Dr. Ward was not in town, as you very well know!”

“Just the same,” growled Jubal, “any kind of a *doctor* could have saved my baby.”

They were looking angrily into each other’s eyes, unstrung both, raw with tortured emotion, ready to fly to pieces. Judge McReynolds sought to soothe them. It was Naoma who was calmest, and she it was who made the greatest effort to retain command of herself.

“Now, Jubal,” she spoke as one who reasons with a child, “I talked with Dr. Ward, later. He told me that Jerry’s case was acute appendicitis and that the appendix had burst. Nobody this side of heaven could have saved him. Doc Shanks did as much as—”

“Professional ethics!” broke in Jubal. “That’s what they call it. One doctor lies to cover up the other! Oh, I know all about it. I’ve seen it before—plenty.” Overwrought, Jubal’s voice rose to a bellow. “The fact remains that when we needed Doc Shanks, he was drunk! He was hid out in a livery barn, there’s where he was, sucking a bottle of lick-an’ my baby dying! It took Gracie three hours to find him—three precious hours. Maybe that—what-you-call-it—of Jerry’s wouldn’t have busted if the man had done his duty. But Doc Shanks—” He broke off almost in a scream. Then his voice lowered, and took on intense meaning. “*Don’t any of you ever mention that bastard’s name to me again!*”

Mrs. McReynolds, with an indignant glance, led Naoma, weeping now, to her bedroom. The Judge gazed out of a window and chewed a cigar, clearly disapproving the whole explosion. Jubal sat down heavily in a chair. For a few minutes there was complete silence. Then Jubal arose.

“I’ve got a little business to attend to. I’ll be back,” he said. He left the house and did not return for two hours. When he did, although the cold weather was beginning to set in and the November air was sharp, his forehead was wet with perspiration. His shoes were dusty also, and he breathed like a man who had walked or run for miles.

It was the last time that Jubal Troop ever showed any feeling over his son’s death. His eyes had been dry at the funeral and his face so devoid of expression as to bring upon him the spiteful comment of Mrs. Ansell Goff

and her coterie. Now he bade farewell to his wife as she departed on the train to be gone for months, with an equal calmness, so that those who curiously gaped at the parting on the railroad platform were further convinced that Jubal Troop was without ordinary human feelings.

BOOK 10

Death and the Philosopher

1

The Wettick *Weekly Courant* was not much of a newspaper, being a fitting representative of the entire ragged, dusty little town in which it was published. Of its four to six smeared pages, half were made up of articles written by the editor, Harley Robertson, or advertisements by the local stores, while the other half were filled with “boiler plate” from the Western Newspaper Union which sold to country editors pages of type already set up and cast, covering various subjects supposed to be of interest to rural communities, and ready to be locked in the forms and printed.

Yet in spite of this, Jubal usually read the *Courant* carefully each week, because from it he learned many things concerning the people who lived about him—sicknesses, deaths, and unexpected disasters, some of which he was able to turn to his advantage. At present the reading was a matter of habit rather than purpose, for not since the death of his son, the previous fall, had Jubal taken any interest in his own existence. After Naoma left for the East with Mrs. Judge McReynolds, he closed the house and took up residence in the Commercial Hotel, which offered its shabby hospitality to drummers and chance visitors down near the railroad station.

Men spoke strangely of Jubal. In those last months he had gone to his office regularly, transacted business, counseled with Reb, yet there was about him a queer detachment. Those who knew him casually and those who hated him said that the death of little Jerry had made small difference to him; that the child was soon forgotten and Jubal Troop, like an animal, had returned thoughtlessly to his old way of life as soon as the first shock was over.

These, however, were wrong. The savor of existence, for Jubal, had departed with all its interest. His plans for finishing the task of putting together the Shoo-Fly acreage, which long had been his dominating ambition, were all in abeyance. For hours together he sat alone in his hotel room, a dazed look upon his face, perhaps a bottle of whiskey before him. Occasionally he took long walks or rides by himself.

Far back, it seemed, in the distant cavern of his mind, was a point of light, like the remote mouth of a cave seen from deep within the black bowels of a mountain. Upon that pin-point of brightness, so unreachable, his despairing concentration fixed itself even when to all appearances he carried on his normal activities. He knew as in a dream that the distant shining light was a face . . . a little, smiling boy's face. He could never touch it or see it closely again. Yet he cherished even this dim inner seeming, hugging himself, figuratively, at the knowledge that it was his.

Sometimes, when he could not conjure up the tiny cherub's face with the golden hair and wide blue eyes, he would stalk in black depression through the town, so that his abstraction was wondered at and spoken of by the people. Wettick had long since ticketed Jubal Troop as a skinflint and a sharper, and his friends were so few that he was not spared the malice of many splenetic tongues.

When Naoma returned from her six months' visit to Boston, things seemed better, in a way. Jubal, meeting her at the station, marveled within himself at the change in her. She was still slender and youthful, and her face was unlined by her grief. The sweetness and kindness of her nature had helped her to throw off the blackness of the tragedy, and she was able to face life again with a smile which was incomprehensible to her husband.

Life was resumed at the house which had been closed all spring. It was now early fall, as Jubal sat reading the *Weekly Courant*. Naoma was placidly rocking in the porch swing near him and things were again assuming their normal tone.

He frowned slightly as he glanced through the paper. Plenty of politics in it, but usually that was about all. Oklahoma certainly was hell on politics. Tom Ferguson, the governor, and Dennis Flynn, in Congress, always were bursting out with new appeals in favor of statehood, and the *Courant* was always printing what they said. Jubal was not interested in what they had to say.

Suddenly, however, something on the page before him caught and kindled his eye. He glanced up to the top of the page. Yes, this was today's *Courant*—September 3, 1903, it said. He read again the little item, close to the bottom of the page, which suddenly assumed a meaning beyond all the rest of the articles put together:

The oil excitement in the Bartlesville area continues to mount. There has been a substantial expansion of the proven field, our

informant says, and with many large companies coming in from the East to operate, the Oklahoma territory seems destined for a real boom in petroleum. There are those who are so sanguine as to aver a belief that this entire territory may be underlaid with large deposits of the precious liquid which is making millionaires in Pennsylvania and elsewhere.

“Naomy,” Jubal said, “listen to this.” He read aloud the piece from the paper. “Do you understand that? That’s something this part of the country’s never thought about.”

“Yes, dear. It would be wonderful,” said Naoma absently.

Jubal leaned toward her. “Honey, I’ve got a hunch. I’ve a good notion to take the rattler over to Bartlesville and look this oil thing over.”

She nodded, scarcely hearing him. Rarely was Naoma able to comprehend Jubal’s business inspirations, and she long since had given up the attempt to do so. Beside, her mind was very full of something else right now. The long months with Mrs. Judge McReynolds had given her a new interest. When she returned to Wettick she threw herself with enthusiasm into the organization of a woman’s club, a carefully chosen group which had elected her, over her own protests, its first president. This, the Library Club, was to meet at her home the next day.

Naoma, therefore, had many things to see to. Gracie must be instructed about the serving. Gertrude Maxwell, the music teacher, had promised to bring her harp and play some selections. A harp thrilled Naoma . . . most other women, too. She wondered, irrelevantly: Is it because of the music from the instrument, or because of the graceful picture the musician makes when her arms and fingers wander over the strings?

A cynical thought, and one slightly disloyal to her own sex. Naoma shook it off.

Anyway, she would have to plan where Miss Maxwell would sit. The business session must be arranged, also. There was the nominating committee . . . and the committee on the library . . . and the suffrage committee. . . . All had important reports. This was the last session of the club to be held before the annual convention of the Oklahoma Women’s Federated Clubs was scheduled next month at Enid. Some of her friends even whispered that there might be a movement to elect her federation president. She smiled, a little deprecatingly, at the thought. Silly even to suggest it. . . .

Jubal, receiving no reply to his remark, stared at her, half provoked, then settled back in his chair and lit a cigar, moodily silent.

2

In forestlike multiplicity, wherever Jubal looked, thick, ugly derricks thrust their blunt heads skyward. Some of them shone yellow with new lumber. Most were weather-beaten into a dull brown. But among them he noticed some which were greasily black. These were where gushers had spouted, the oil drenching and staining the wooden towers forever.

A pungent, sharp taint hung in the air, reeking of the bowels of the earth—a combination of petroleum and sulphur and acids and chemicals, so that the lungs fought for a fresh, clean breath. Sounds rose in a confused uproar. Here and there sullen, measured coughs told where crude gasoline engines worked the pumps. A stertorous series of puffs indicated the position of a donkey engine. Roustabouts in oily overalls and jumpers walked or sometimes ran among the well-houses. Here and there groups of three or four men, in laced boots and wide hats, gathered, stabbing at blueprints with grimy fingers.

As Jubal walked up the road which was flanked on both sides by marching rows of derricks, his boots slipped in the oil which seemed to be smeared everywhere. On all sides the ground appeared blasted and black, the grass long dead and soaked with the killing petroleum which exuded the peculiar, all-pervasive, penetrating stink, which once smelled can never be forgotten. Beside each derrick lay its sludge pool—a miniature lake of foul, tarry sediment, scummed over and reeking.

With deepest curiosity sharpened by a growing inspiration, Jubal stopped for a moment and watched a drilling well. The driller, a fat, elderly man, stained from head to foot with a baptism of crude oil, stood with a hand on the “bull rope” which jerked slowly up and down in the throat of the hole in the ground. High in the top of the wooden tower which straddled the well, bulged the crown block where crouched the “derrick monkey,” looking small and grotesque on his perch, with iron piping protruding from the top of the derrick, ready to be let down to form a part of the casing in the well. A tool dresser, naked to the waist, his muscles rippling over his magnificent back, hammered like an ancient armorer with a sledge at a huge bit which he had heated dull red in his forge.

Everywhere was action; mighty, pulsating action. Jubal’s imagination leaped at the realization that unthinkable riches lay beneath his feet and that

these giant activities were wresting them from their locked hiding place.

An alert, broad-shouldered youth, with a hewn brown face, hurried by. He stopped at Jubal's sign.

"Who's the boss here?" Jubal raised his voice to be heard above the roar.

"Hoke Garnett's nipple chaser in this block," replied the youth. Later Jubal was to learn that in the queer argot of the oil fields a "nipple chaser" is a foreman in charge of drilling operations. At present he was bewildered by the word but pursued his questioning.

"Where is he?"

"Hoke? Went to town," the hurrying roustabout said. With an impatient wave of his hand, already moving away, he indicated a cluster of small shacks which sprawled over the landscape a quarter of a mile up the road. The directions were far from explicit, but Jubal decided the small cabins must be homes of oil field workers. Rapidly he strode in that direction, his mind continually alert to the strong impressions of the scene about him.

"Hoke Garnett?" an unshaven giant replied to Jubal's question when the shabby buildings were reached. "Just saw him making for the rock hound's."

"Rock hound's?"

"Sure. The geologist's. Simpson Rhodes, up there at the end in the green shanty. He's prospector for Vampire. Likely you'll find Garnett there."

The drilling foreman Jubal sought proved to be a squat, red-faced man with a stiff mustache and an appallingly odorous meerschaum pipe colored mahogany brown. Jubal introduced himself and said:

"I want to get some dope about oil drilling."

"This field?"

"No." It began to dawn on the cattleman that he was proposing to ask a preposterous thing. "Over near Wettick. No oil development there—yet."

Garnett stared. "Humph! Save your time, friend. As rank a wildcat proposition as that won't get a flutter from nobody."

"Are you in charge of drilling in this field?"

"Nope. I just boss this block. Spencer Wright's the field manager. But I tell you, friend, you're just wastin' energy. Spence Wright ain't got no time for wildcattin'."

“If it’s all the same, I want to talk with him anyway,” said Jubal.

Garnett surveyed him up and down. “How’d you come here?” he asked suddenly.

“By hack, from Bartlesville.”

“Come ’long. I’m headed there now. Spence’s office is there an’ I’ll take you right to him.”

Not even in booming gold-mining camps had Jubal encountered anything like Bartlesville. What had been an Indian cowtown was changed utterly and completely. Sombreros, high-heeled boots and jingling spurs were gone. So were the livestock pens once filled with longhorns, and the ubiquitous cowboys’ ponies. Buggies, carriages, wagons and huge delivery wains crowded the streets. Everyone seemed to move at a trot, in a fever of hysterical excitement.

The town was packed with men—roughly clad men, elegantly dressed men, men in queer hybrid costumes; some smoked fifty-cent cigars and flourished large diamonds, others were unshaved and in tatters. Hardly, it seemed, was there room in the streets for women, yet women were present, many of them with roving eyes untrammelled by modesty, smiling with insinuation from painted faces at any stranger, sure sooner or later to lead off a male quarry to some cubicle.

Jubal followed Garnett as the latter unceremoniously elbowed a narrow tunnel through the mob on the board sidewalks. Store fronts boasted glass windows but what they displayed scarcely could be discerned because of the loiterers who leaned again the panes. Nowhere did Jubal escape the blatant suggestion of oil. Oil offices were everywhere, some of them little larger than pigeonholes, all crowded with men who worked with strained faces, as if against time. Buildings originally no more than twenty-five feet wide were sometimes divided by partitions down the middle to create additional offices. Into one of these structures Garnett led the way, squeezed through a mere thread of space, and passed down a line of railings and desks, signs and oil maps, among men huddled in tense conference, or shouting orders and information at each other. After traversing nearly the length of the building, the drilling foreman plucked at the elbow of a spindling, baldish man with a pair of steel blue eyes in vivid contrast to his sunburned skin. The man wore a hickory shirt, riding pants and muddy boots, but he bore the air of authority.

“Spence, this gent wants to see you,” said Garnett, drawing Jubal forward. “Mr. Troop, this here’s Mr. Wright—field superintendent for the Vampire Oil Company,” and Garnett, his introduction performed, disappeared without further ceremony into the crowd.

“What can I do for you?” asked Wright in a dry, rasping voice.

“All these your offices?” asked Jubal.

“Hell, no. You can’t get more’n enough room to swing a cat anywhere in Bartlesville. This here little alcove’s oun. All them down there are lease brokers’ an’ stock sellin’ companies’ offices. The upper rooms are reserved for bookkeepers an’ the like. The brokers are on the ground floor. Broker’s business is like a cigar store’s. He has to be where the crowds pass.”

Jubal, fascinated, stared about. Through an open window he observed that even the adjoining alley was faced with offices, many mere shacks. Everything summed up evidence of unbelievable money madness. Blackboards on lease sellers’ walls offered properties:

One acre in block 74, \$20,000. For quick sale.

Buy shares in Potato Hill Syndicate here.

He remembered hearing of the sale of a single acre for fifty thousand dollars in this very field. But Wright, at his elbow, was disillusioning him.

“The good acreage is all gone,” said the superintendent, who was not in the lease-selling business and could therefore afford to tell the truth. “Nothing for sale now but wind oil,” he added contemptuously. “Oil creek humbug’s all you’d get buying any of that stuff.”

This recalled Jubal to his immediate errand.

“I want to ask you a question, Mr. Wright,” he said. “How do I go about getting somebody to drill for oil on my land?”

“Any oil indications?” asked the other with a quick blaze of interest.

“Not yet. The land lays like this but no test’s ever been made,” said Jubal uncomfortably. He began to appreciate his own immense ignorance.

“Sorry,” snapped Wright. “I’m busy. Can’t talk today.”

Jubal understood. The oil man had lost all interest in his proposition as soon as its purely speculative nature was revealed. Such indifference diminished the cattleman and angered him.

“Mr. Wright,” he said levelly, “I ain’t askin’ charity from you or nobody. I’m only askin’ for information. Where I come from, a civil question is generally worth a civil answer. Where you got your breedin’ I don’t know, but anyway you can go straight to hell!”

He turned and started away, his massive shoulders defiant.

In astonishment, changing to something else, Wright stared after him. Suddenly he called out: “Hold on a minute!”

Jubal halted and half-turned toward him. The oil man was grinning.

“Damn me, are all you cattle guys as full of brimstone an’ fire as that? No offense, Mr. Troop. See here, I’m damned if I don’t like the cut of your jib. Don’t wander off sore-headed. A lot of silly bastards come in here with questions, an’ I thought for a minute—but never mind that. Say, sit down, will you? Sit down. You want to know a little about oil? Well, I’m the guy that’s goin’ to tell you.”

Not entirely mollified, Jubal took the proffered chair.

“Now listen to me, friend,” Wright began, his blue eyes snapping with interest as he talked, “this oil game ain’t jest as simple as it looks. There’s lots of things to know. You think you’ve got oil? Well, maybe you have. But the chances are strong against it. It’s fifty miles from the nearest production. We call a well drilled a couple of miles away from proved territory a wildcat. What would we call a weird proposition like yours?”

“Call it nothin’,” growled Jubal, still defiant. “An’ don’t make a mistake—I ain’t never said I’ve got oil. I just have a hunch, an’ a hunch has always been worth a gamble to me.”

“Yeah? Well, I’m afraid, Mr. Troop, you don’t know what a gamble this would be. There’s a million details to drillin’ oil. Take oil leases, f’rinstance. That’s a field in itself. On a wildcat like that, you ought to lease up all the acreage you can get hold of, on account of the risk. Then there’s questions of transportation if you do get oil, an’ problems of geology an’ survey. An’ titles to be examined. The bare gettin’ of a rig crew an’ a drillin’ crew out that far from production is a problem in itself. An’ drillin’ a well is about the most expensive little pastime that’s been invented yet. I’m tellin’ you, it’ll set you back not less than fifty thousand, maybe seventy-five or a hundred thousand—just to drill that first well. Even if you hit, you’ll have to hit big to make it pay. A small well won’t do you much good. It’s a God-awful big chance you’re takin’, an’ that’s why a legitimate company won’t be interested.”

“Mr. Wright,” said Jubal, his stubborn fighting spirit rising, “I reckon I ain’t afraid to gamble. I’ll take the long shots—so long as it looks like I’ve got a gambler’s chance to cash in. All I want is to find somebody who’ll take enough time to explain some of the things I’ve got to know.”

“Mr. Troop, I admire your guts. Draw up to this desk, and take this pencil and sheet of paper.”

3

To Naoma, the most pleasant part of the day was the breakfast hour. This had been true ever since she and Jubal were married. They still rose at an hour not too luxurious and the morning, when both of them were fresh, and the air was cool and life seemed fair, was the goodliest time to her. Jubal never had lost his enjoyment of breakfast, even though for years the strenuous saddle had been replaced in his life by the sedentary chair.

Naoma used to love to see his relish for the fried ham and eggs and coffee, their standard morning repast. Even now since she had returned from the East and was growing back into life at Wettick, her zest for the hour returned. Coffee was Jubal’s special delight, and he always drank it richened with condensed milk—a habit remaining from the old ranch days.

It was at breakfast that Jubal and Naoma usually discussed their day’s programs and compared notes on the previous day. The Bartlesville trip was now an event two or three weeks old and Naoma had almost forgotten it, although she observed how his existence seemed to take on a new meaning for Jubal since his return from the oil town. Naoma, however, was very busy with her own concerns. The Wettick Library Club actually had started a boom for her candidacy as president of the federation. Naoma thought diffidently of the possibility that such an honor might come to her, yet she felt that she could not well refuse it if it did come.

Having finished his coffee, Jubal leaned back in his chair and gazed at her. “I’ve been doing a heap of thinking,” he said.

“I know you have,” she assented.

“When the Vampire turned me down on a drilling contract for the Shoo-Fly, I had a long talk with the field superintendent, Spencer Wright. He gave me a lot of pointers. I sent up to Kansas University an’ got a professor. He went over the ranch last week. Know what he says? There’s a big anticline right across the Shoo-Fly. An anticline is a kind of dome of rock underground. You don’t see it on the surface, but it’s there just the same. Under that dome there’s likely to be a hollow, an’ in the hollow there’s

sometimes oil. *Oil*, Naomy! I got a great big hunch the Shoo-Fly's sittin' right over a big oil pool. It may be only a hunch, but I've about decided to play it. If I have a well put down on my lands'll have to pay for it myself, an' it's a whoppin' big risk. It may cost better than fifty thousand dollars—an' if oil ain't struck, it'll wind up a dead loss. Even at that, it's a chance. But if I drill, I've got to finish gettin' my block of acreage. No use givin' other folks a chance to make a big profit on my risk. So I've decided to go ahead an' take over that Shanks place on the Shoo-Fly, an' the Yodel place, too."

Naoma's mind had wandered far away. Business was beyond her and she followed it with difficulty at best, but just now she was greatly preoccupied. It was not that she craved the honor of the presidency of the Oklahoma Women's Federated Clubs . . . no, looking at it dispassionately, she felt that she would be willing to step aside for another . . . if it were for the good of the club movement. There was Mrs. Cather of Blackwell, now. A fine, sweet, Christian woman. Naoma would gladly retire in favor of such a woman . . . only, of course, Mrs. Cather had no more chance of being even nominated than had Naoma's Negro maid, Gracie. On the other hand, Mrs. Preston Emery, of Woodward, did have a chance of election. And she it was who put on such annoying airs, with her butler, and her maid, and her phaeton, and her constant talk about finishing schools and Washington. . . .

Naoma suddenly became aware of what her husband was saying: ". . . so I've decided to go ahead and take over that Shanks place on the Shoo-Fly . . ."

"I didn't quite hear," she said quickly, all thoughts of the federation convention fading instantly from her mind. "You said something about the Shanks land?"

"I said I was going to take it over."

That sounded ominous. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"Simply this: I've never told you, Naomy, but I've been carrying the tax receipts on that place for years. Never said anything about payment to Doc, because—well, because he was a friend of yours."

"You mean that you would foreclose on Doc Shanks' property?"

"Now, Naomy," he began indulgently, "he's been keepin' that land, gettin' a good round rental off of it, too, an' never offering to pay a nickel's worth of taxes. If I hadn't paid 'em, his land would've sold at auction years ago. Do you think I ought to hand him charity forever?"

“But, Jubal, you know why! He’s so impractical, and his wife . . . Georgia. That woman has humiliated him until it broke his heart! And he’s not well.”

“What makes you think that?” His implacability was beginning to be borne in upon her.

“Well, he’s stopped drinking—” she said defensively, and instantly realized how the statement arraigned her friend.

“If sickness can make that old fish quit drinkin’, it’ll be doing the town a favor,” snapped Jubal with a note of triumph in his voice.

“Surely you’ll give him time to pay you back?”

“I don’t have to.” He was sourly making a concession. “But I will—I’ll give him a month to raise the money before I take legal action.”

Naoma was very grave. A fundamental thing was this difference between them. “What does he owe?”

“Let’s see. Ten years’ back taxes—you see he’s never paid a cent—that’s about seven hundred dollars, including interest.”

“He can’t pay seven hundred dollars.” It was an appeal.

“That’s his affair.”

Deeper, more intense became Naoma’s seriousness. She knew what was at the bottom of all this. Not merely Jubal’s growing hardness which had distressed and worried her and from which she had attempted vainly to turn him. It was the old, unforgiving hatred due to the blame Jubal placed on Doc Shanks for Jerry’s death, and Jubal, she knew, once his powerful will was set upon anything, was almost impossible to turn from his purpose. In spite of this, she made one more desperate effort. With a pang she remembered how frail the old man seemed, and how gallantly he maintained his cheery cynicism. To lose his little land—all he had in the world—might kill him.

“Jubal,” she said with a still quality in her voice, “haven’t we money enough?”

He stared. “What’s that got to do with it?” he asked crossly, returning to his paper. It was one of the discouraging things about him; once he arrived at a decision, he never discussed it.

“Please, Jubal, don’t do this thing to Doc Shanks,” begged Naoma.

“Don’t do what?” He raised his eyes from the paper with displeasure.

“He’s my friend, Jubal, and he’s had such a beastly time. . . .”

“Why? Just why? Because he’s a shiftless old sot, if the truth’s told. Sentiment has no place in business.” It was his credo.

“He brought Jerry into the world!” She played her trump card.

“And then killed him!” Jubal’s voice rose to a harsh snarl. She should have known not to take that tack. It only aroused him, and when his anger was stirred, she knew nothing could influence him from his purpose.

“Tell me one thing,” she said after a moment. “How long have you been accumulating these tax receipts on his land?”

“Ever since I’ve leased it.”

“Then you—you’ve planned, for seven years or more—to do just what you’re doing now?”

He looked at her with amusement. “That’s what is known, honey, as business,” he said.

She stared at him as if for the first time seeing in him something which heretofore she had overlooked. To argue further would accomplish nothing. She left the table.

4

Before dawn the buggies were coming down the lane to August Yodel’s farm above the Shoo-Fly, revealing in the half light the round-crowned, wide-brimmed black hats of the men and the little black bonnets tied on the back of the women’s heads. The Amish were gathering.

August, a big, slow man with clumsy hands and a dull yellow beard, greeted them all at the gate. His sons, Henry and Bernhard, round-cheeked and great-thewed, conducted the male guests to the barn where buggies were left, horses unharnessed and fed, and the men offered an opportunity to relieve themselves after the long ride. When the barn was filled with horses, rigs which arrived later would be tied around the barnyard fence, each animal with its dry-goods box for oats, and its generous forkload of hay. In the meantime the feminine visitors together with the younger children—who were dressed in almost comical duplicate of their elders—were ushered into the house by August’s wife and made privy to the mysteries there.

Throughout this pleasant bustle, August’s daughter, Kathy, made no appearance. It was for her the Amish were gathering. She was to be married that day to young Jacob Friesen from the Horse Creek neighborhood.

Not until the thrifty Amish saw the last of their wheat in bins, did they pause to indulge the lighter side of their lives. August had given little thought to the impending wedding while he reaped his grain. It was a favorable year, following several not so generous. *Ach, ja.* August could well remember when this entire country was one great, open waste, with scarcely a friendly fence or a cottage in it. Now everywhere one could see the farms and the broad acres where the sod had been turned deeply under by the plow—all except to the west of August's place where the nodding grasses of the big Shoo-Fly ranch extended for miles, reminding of that *dumkopf*, Jubal Troop.

August was angered within himself at the very thought of the proposal Jubal Troop had made—to buy his farm, and turn it back to grass. After the work put into the breaking of the sod and planting it! Not for any price would August commit such a sacrilege. He well knew that Troop blamed him for the infection of his cattle with the Texas tick years before, and he had heard that the ranch owner had threatened to repay the injury—although it had been in perfect innocence and good faith that August rented the pasture to the Rail-H people, the tick never having been heard of by him before that time. It mattered not. August had no fear of Jubal Troop.

The laughable part of it, in view of Troop's offer to buy, was that August was prospering on the farm. Some of the *Amerikaners*, it is true, were complaining that the year was dry, but they should remember the country as it was when August first came into it. The Amish were no complainers. August estimated he had sufficient grain binned to carry his family through the year, with seed for the next planting laid aside, and a substantial sum to be paid on the note held by Ansell Goff, the banker. So now that the harvest moon had paled, the Amish turned their thoughts to the nearest thing to frivolity their lives knew—putting a bridegroom “over the fence.”

August was busy greeting his guests. There came old Peter Koehn, with his spring wagon loaded with little Koehns—ranging like stairsteps from Otto, sixteen, to little Amelia, just one, and Mrs. Koehn already with child again. A fine woman, Mrs. Koehn, a great worker and bearer of children.

“*Ach, good day, Peter. Good day, Otto.*” Punctiliously August greeted the male members of the family first before speaking to Mrs. Koehn and the younger children. Brief instructions were given, Bernhard came waving an arm toward the stable. August turned to newer arrivals—two buggies bearing the Unruhs, from further up the Shoo-Fly Valley. Four clans of Amish lived in the district, and the last to arrive would be old Henry Friesen—and Jacob.

Ach, here they came—with strangers. *Ach, ja*, August recognized them now! Some of the Amish from over in the Newkirk country. He was flattered that they should drive so far. In German they shouted that they had spent the night with the Friesens and come on with them. *Ach*, it would be a big wedding after all, Kathy's. August shook hands with old Henry, whose bushel or more of roan beard cascaded down from under his flat hat; and patted the young, fresh-faced Jacob on the back. Such a little while ago, Jacob had been only a boy. *Ach, die Kinderlein*, how they grew up!

Watching Jacob drive away toward the barn in the Friesen buggy, August was not dissatisfied with the coming nuptials. He was fond, in his heavy way, of his daughter Kathy, but after all she was a thought too slow-moving and thick to make for grace or beauty. To be sure the Amish were not supposed to set great store by beauty in a woman. Certainly not by any frivolity. A strong, willing woman, a good worker and child-bearer—that was what a man needed. Still, August had noticed, a winsome smile and a well-turned figure did not injure a girl's chances for marriage. All the better that Kathy should have made a match with one of the Friesen breed.

Old Henry, who owned more land than any of the other Amish, had visited August as early as last spring, to sit with him down by the barn and talk over things. They two really had made the wedding arrangement, but later, when it was broached to her, Kathy made no objections that August noticed; and Jacob seemed willing enough. For the present, it was settled, the young couple should live with the Friesens, where Kathy would help Mrs. Friesen and perhaps have her first baby. After that the fathers hoped to buy a quarter section of land and establish upon it the new family.

There was plenty of land in Oklahoma territory. A good place for an Amish settlement. August remembered how crowded were things back in Pennsylvania, where every foot of the Conestoga Valley and even the little patches of arable soil on the hills above, were cultivated. Things were too full there. That was why he and other Amish had come to Oklahoma—not as preemptors of claims, but as buyers of claims already preempted.

One thing only worried August—that note of his held by fat, bald Ansell Goff. To the Amish, debt was a reproach. August hoped with deep fervor that Henry Friesen never would learn about the transaction. Moreover, the farmer disliked Goff, with his broad face and expressionless eyes which never changed, even when his mouth smiled. Yodel, perhaps slightly more progressive than some of his kind, had borrowed to build his home and buy needed farm equipment. It was a demand note he signed, with no time limit,

and Goff assured him that so long as he paid promptly the semi-annual interest, it might run as long as August cared to let it.

“The bank hopes you never pay it off—we wish all our investments were as sound as this loan,” said the banker with the peculiar smile in which the lower half of his face beamed cordially while the upper half remained cold as glass.

In the past, August had always scraped up sufficient money somehow to meet the interest payments. This year he planned more. Sixteen hundred bushels of wheat were in his bins and he hoped for a dollar a bushel. Then there would be corn—if the drouth did not kill it. A rain was always a possibility. August felt that with good luck he might, October first, pay the bank five hundred dollars on principal. All in all, a big bite.

A woman was calling from the house, and the Amish men, in their black garb, with beards, some yellow, some black, some red, and others gray, trooped up from the stable yard. It was time for the wedding ceremony by Jeremiah Koehn, who, in the Amish fashion, was a preacher as well as a farmer. When the men entered the house, the women already were in their places. The two sexes sat apart in solemn silence, on backless wooden benches. Old Henry Friesen’s wheezing could be heard clearly, and the harsh sound of the coarse-spun woolen garments of the women came in a whisper whenever they stirred.

A German hymn was sung, followed by a lengthy sermon preached in the same tongue by Jeremiah Koehn, with a bristling text from the Old Testament. Then another hymn or two. The second sermon—from the New Testament. It was nearly noon when the preaching ended and the young couple, red-faced and sheepish, walked laggingly forward to be wed according to the Amish ritual which dates back to the seventeenth century.

At the last words of the ceremony, the men tramped out of the house. Even to the Amish, with their religious bent, the service had been long, and the relief at its ending was spontaneous. Men shouted to one another. From the house rose a prodigious clatter of dishes and voices where women prepared the meal and gossiped. Some of the youngsters tossed a ball in the barnyard. All eyes, however, seemed fixed on the door of August’s home.

“War ist Jacob?”

Jacob had failed to emerge with the rest of the men. Knowing his fate was sure, the bridegroom lingered bashfully indoors.

Of a sudden, a roar of greeting, and a rush from the barnyard. Pink as a boiled shrimp, the groom was being pushed out through the door by a mob of laughing women. Expostulating in vain, he was seized by the unmarried men, up-ended, and carried, struggling, to the fence.

“Now comes it! Over!”

On the other side of the fence gathered the shouting, laughing married men. Backward and forward the hapless Jacob was swung in the hands of the husky bachelors, until, with a final surge, he was catapulted into the sky. For a moment he seemed to hang there, awkward body all a-spraddle. Then he descended on the other side of the fence, to be caught by the ready arms of the benedicts. On his feet he was promptly set, his clothes arranged, the straw brushed from him. Blushing and grinning, the target of a storm of witticisms, he took forever his place among the wedded men.

Another high-pitched call from the house. *Fressen* time. Eager answer there to that summons. On tables were piled high the *Wienerschnitzeln*, scrapple and roast pork. Of *Schnitz* and *Knepp* there was a bountiful sufficiency. The feasting would last until sundown, when Jacob would bear away his bride amid the gleeful good-bys and well wishes of his friends.

In the happy clatter within the Yodel home, a knock at the door scarcely was noticed. Wondering, August answered the summons. A man on the doorstep silently handed an envelope to the farmer. As the messenger rode away, August, in slow puzzlement, turned the white paper over and over in his big awkward hands.

At last he opened it. The envelope contained a notice from Banker Goff that the note was due and immediate payment was demanded.

5

As he reached the street with its lines of half-grown elms and straggling lawns—the new part of Wettick—Doc Shanks paused as if to regain control of his dazed senses. The house from which he had just emerged bore a shingle:

J. AINSWORTH WARD, M.D.

It had been as a last resort that Doc Shanks visited his young professional colleague—and rival. Certain indications . . .

“How long, doctor, have you been feeling this way?” asked the younger physician with punctilious professional formality which was at the same time faintly patronizing.

“About six months.”

“You suspected your condition?”

“Yes,” replied Doc Shanks. “In fact I was sure of it. I came to you for consultation, as it were, to confirm my own diagnosis.”

“That is the reason why you have given up liquor?”

“Yes. I have given it up except for a taste now and then.”

“I should suggest,” said Dr. Ward with stiff disapproval, “that you give it up entirely. In my judgment that heart will go to pieces if you put any strain upon it. I know that you wish professional candor. It is myocarditis. How long the heart will last, I would not venture to say.”

The death sentence. Doc Shanks must cease drinking entirely if he wished to prolong his life even for a few months; and without liquor the cumulative annoyance of Georgia would become unbearable. Seven years of married life . . . seven years of hell. Doc Shanks smiled satirically as he thought of his first romantic notions when he briefly courted Georgia. As a man of the world he should have known that a woman never marries a man thirty years her senior—for love. He should have been able to detect the danger signal in the mere fact that anyone less bemused than he could clearly have seen that her days of attractiveness—and consequent hopefulness—were well past. He winced as he pictured himself in those days, posturing and smirking, in a ridiculous travesty of youthful gallantry—at his age. Fawning on the woman. Reason completely overthrown. Uttering cheap, banal compliments. Feeling that he was undergoing, in winning her, a recrudescence of life.

Well, Georgia brought him to his senses quickly enough. For a time after he married her, he attempted to carry on the poor fiction of romance, but a series of cruel lessons changed his warmed-over masculine self-hypnosis into a defensive barricade. In their continual marital contest, Georgia possessed all the advantages. Doc Shanks’ thought and energy were, perforce, spread over his professional practice. Only a small part of him could he devote to defense against his wife. She, on the other hand, was free to focus upon him her entire attention. Her method was not to crush but to corrode. No single thing did she say which, in itself, could be made the basis for a violent outburst, but the steady drip of her acid, day after day, culminated in the end into a justification of the most radical consequences, Doc Shanks sometimes passionately believed.

Thinking of the barren prospect of his life, Doc Shanks moved feebly down the street, his old shoulders bowed in utter dejection. A red setter bitch came trotting after, her feet pad-padding on the ground, her noisy panting audible. As she passed him and forged ahead on the path, Doc Shanks observed her with distaste. She was Rosy, Georgia's dog. Georgia had purchased her as a puppy, but for reasons of Rosy's own, she preferred the gentle, ineffectual old physician to his wife. Why did the dog persist in following him around? Doc Shanks disliked it. If there had been any way to rid himself of her without incurring additional unpleasantness at home, he would gladly have done so.

6

A sensation of achievement was a mounting exhilaration to Jubal Troop as he sat in his office. It was not a pretentious office—a roll-top desk, two or three hair-cloth chairs, a table, a couple of brass spittoons, and a Seth Thomas clock on the wall together with a calendar which gave, almanac style, a weather prediction for each day of the year. That was all within the room, but the man who occupied the office was seeing a vision as wide as the horizon. A new, vast interest had come to Jubal since his visit to Bartlesville. Like a clogging cloak he had shaken from him the inertia of the months which had followed Jerry's death, and he was as keen and eager as a hound these days.

The great thought in Jubal's mind just now was oil. When, a month before, he walked through Bartlesville and drove out through the mephitic oil fields with their ugly derricks bristling, a new ambition had been born in him. Today he was tying up the loose ends of his affairs, preparing for the biggest gamble of his career. One such matter of unfinished business depended upon a conversation the previous day with Ansell Goff, the banker, a recollection of which still brought a hard smile to Jubal's lips.

"I want you to do something for me, Ansell," he had said.

"Glad to. Name it," replied the banker. Jubal was the bank's most important customer.

"You hold a note for two thousand dollars, signed by August Yodel and secured by his farm?"

"Why—as a matter of fact I do—but how did you know—?"

"Never mind. It's a demand note, callable without notice?"

"Yes, it is."

“I want you to call that note and demand immediate payment.”

Goff smiled benignly. “Have your little joke, Jubal.”

“This is no joke. Will you call that note?”

Astonishment succeeded the banker’s smile and Ansell stared. “Are you crazy? This is most irregular. Why should I call the note? Yodel’s always paid his interest. He’s planning a substantial payment on principal this year. He’s a good farmer and a good customer.”

“We sometimes have to do things—in a business way—which are a little unusual.”

“But I can see no earthly reason, Jubal, for calling this note.”

“Good.” Jubal drew from his pocket his check book. “What is my balance with you?”

“Why, you just deposited last week—that cattle check—fifty-three thousand, I believe—” The banker was goggling. “What are you doing? The full amount of your account? My God, Jubal, is anything wrong?”

“Just want a little cash for a deal I’m figurin’ on,” replied Jubal, extending the check he had written for the full amount of his balance.

Goff’s fat face showed panic. “Great heavens, man!” he squealed, “we can’t do this! Don’t you realize you’re asking the impossible?”

“Is it?” asked Jubal carelessly. “This bank’s supposed to redeem at any minute a properly written and signed check on any one of its open checking accounts, isn’t it?”

“Yes . . . yes . . . that is, that’s the *theory*.” The banker was desperate, his fleshy cheeks quivering. “But in actuality—listen here, Jubal—I mean, Mr. Troop—we haven’t fifty thousand dollars in the bank. We haven’t ten thousand as a matter of fact. I *can’t* pay that check on instant demand!”

“Why not?”

“I—that is, no bank is prepared to pay instantly in cash so large a proportion of its deposits. Banking isn’t—isn’t run that way. Look here, Mr. Troop. We have to invest our money, keep it busy. To let fifty thousand, or twenty-five thousand for that matter, lie around idle, would close our doors. Can’t you see that? If you’ll just give me time—a week, or ten days—”

“And you wouldn’t relish seeing the bank examiners here just now, would you, Ansell?” broke in Jubal remorselessly.

“I’ve been hearing about . . . shall we say the *loans* in the Bartlesville oil country?”

“Oh, my God, Jubal, keep still! This’ll mean my ruin. Right now would be fatal. I only made a few investments . . . plenty of other financial houses have done the same—”

“With the depositors’ money?”

“God in heaven, Jubal, isn’t there *anything* I can do to make you see the critical situation? It isn’t only me. If you ruin this bank, you’ll ruin half the people in Wettick. Mr. Troop—surely you wouldn’t do a thing like that?” Goff’s voice trailed off in a quavering wail.

Jubal considered. “I might withhold my check—if you’d call that Yodel note.”

Comprehension dawned in Goff’s eyes, and with it new respect—the respect of an unscrupulous man for one more unscrupulous even than himself.

Jubal was expecting the sequel to the conversation now. Even as this thought entered his mind, he saw August Yodel’s amber beard up the street. The farmer must just have received his bad news—and instructions—from Goff, and was headed for Jubal’s office.

“Mr. Goff, he say I should see you.” August’s deep, slow voice was apprehensive and he appeared shaken as he let himself slowly down into the chair across the table from Jubal.

“Is that so?” A note of cold hostility in the words.

“*Ach*, I got to pay on my note up. He say you might help . . .” The sentence ended without being completed. August, remembering the quarrel he had with this man, could not conceive how he could obtain assistance from Jubal.

“What’s the matter, can’t you pay the note?”

“*Nein, nein!*” cried the farmer despairingly.

“How much is it?”

“Two thousand dollar mit interest.”

“The only thing I’d do would be buy your farm—take it off your hands.”

August shook his head sorrowfully. “So! Neffer I thought it, dot I my farm would haff to sell. *Ach*, now iss it sad. How much—”

“I’ll give you four thousand dollars.”

“*Vas!*” The question was sharp with surprise. “Eight thousand, dot farm iss worth!”

“All right, Yodel. I don’t need your land. After the way you’ve talked with me, I oughtn’t help you with a cent. As a matter of fact, if you made a free deed for the whole piece of property over to me, it wouldn’t begin to pay me for the damage you’ve done me. I’ll give you four thousand. Not a dime more. That’s letting you pay your note with money left over. It’s my last offer and if you don’t take it, you’ll lose everything.”

August raised his head. Into his slow brain began to penetrate a realization of the trap he was in. Anger came into his face.

“*Nein! Ach*—somebody else will pay more—Henry Friesen—”

Jubal stared coldly. “I don’t think you’ll find that even Henry Friesen, my friend, will buck Jubal Troop and the Wettick State Bank.”

The truth of this was apparent. Tears started in August’s mild blue eyes.

“*Ach*, it wass *mein Kinder* dot farm I wanted for. *Mein Kinder*. Now it iss no goot. *Ach*, mamma! Henry! Bernhard! Your old man, now he iss schpoilt!”

Quietly, unaffectedly, August began to weep. Jubal watched him curiously. He was shamed at the sight of a man crying like a woman.

“Come, Yodel,” he said at last, “this won’t do. Will you sell?”

“I sell. *Ja*, I sell! What else can I do?”

For long after August departed, his back bent as if forever broken by life, Jubal sat motionless. On the office wall ticked the Seth Thomas clock with disconcerting loudness. Tiny motes of dust rose and fell in the beam of light which stretched a golden arm from the setting sun almost horizontally across the desk. In vain Jubal tried to shift his thoughts from August. Why had the old fool taken on so? He might at least have grown angry and cursed. Or threatened. Or have done anything that might be expected from a man. Instead he sat there and wept. Drying spots of dampness were on the floor—August Yodel’s tears.

He was unable to express it, but for the first time a doubt grew in Jubal Troop’s mind. A doubt which threatened the basic foundation of his settled life policy. He wrestled with it all the way home from the office and it oppressed him through the night. By morning, however, his mind was clear

again and his purpose sure. There still was no room for sentiment in business.

7

Gauntly determined, Reb Haizlipp stood and once more shook his head.

“I don’t want no part of it, Jubal.”

“But this may make you a millionaire!”

“Not me,” repeated the old man doggedly. “I’ve got enough—more than enough. I don’t want a nickel more. An’ if I did, I wouldn’t want it bad enough to strangle a pore, hard-workin’ feller like Yodel to git it. Oil fever, ye say? I don’t give a damn for it, compared to the feelin’s of an old codger like August. That’s why I druv up into town to talk to ye. From here on out ye go along without me.”

“Why, Reb,” remonstrated Jubal, shocked and hurt. “You mean you’re quittin’ as my partner?”

“Yep. Ye go jest a leetle further than I kin stomach, Jube Troop. I’ve seen this hard, cussed streak developin’ in ye for years now. I done what I could to argy ye out of it, but thar ain’t nothin’ kin change ye. So we come to the dividin’ of our trails. I want to split our winnin’s an’ take what’s mine. Don’t think I’ll work much more. Aim to have a little place, an’ keep a gentle hoss, an’ mebbe run a few cows for fun an’ to keep busy—if thar’s any land left fit to run cows on when this oil craze ye talk about gits goin’. I been over to the oil country, too, an’ smelt the stink of it which is wusser’n any polecat to my notion. Mebbe if it gits too crowded I’ll head back for Texas. They tell me thar’s still land down thar which is fit for critters to walk on without slippin’ an’ fallin’ down in the grease from the guts of the earth.”

And such remained Reb’s stubborn position until Jubal, angered and with a deep feeling of injustice, agreed. Why his old friend should espouse the cause of an Amish farmer against him was beyond Jubal’s comprehension. Unable to understand, totally incapable in his present mental state, of grasping Reb’s viewpoint, Jubal attributed it to disloyalty. Sharp words flared between them . . . bitter words which, long afterward, Jubal regretted. In the end, their accounts were settled as Reb insisted. Nor would the old man accept any of the money from the land “speculations.” He did take the old Agnew cabin and with it three hundred acres stretching westward over the hill, and enough cattle to stock this small ranch, together with a few thousand dollars from the sale of their livestock. Everything else he rejected, forcing Jubal to retain it.

Thus, with angry words and the shattering of a friendship and partnership which had been deeper than either friendship or partnership as ordinarily known to men, Reb retired to his small farm. Occasionally in the months and years which followed, someone would see him riding easily along with his "gentle hoss" at a lope. Once in a while, as he sat smoking, his chair tilted back against the cabin in his favorite position, a passerby might stop and exchange gossip with the old man. But the name of Jubal Troop was not mentioned in such conversations.

8

"Since you ask me, and in a manner so kindly, I will be fully candid with you, Naoma," old Doc Shanks was saying. "I am, to use a slangy phrase, 'dead broke.' I have not a sou beyond the small pittance which Madame Shanks has—ah—commandeered. The residue of the money paid me by your husband for the lease of my farm is that to which I refer."

Naoma surveyed him uncomfortably. For the first time in her married life she was interfering with Jubal's business. Only the conviction that a fearful injustice to Doc Shanks must be prevented, kept firm her determination to carry out the plan upon which she had decided; and even so she found it impossible to escape a traitorous feeling, such is lifelong habit. As Naoma gazed at the thin, sensitive face of the old man, however, her resolution strengthened. Doc Shanks was failing with age; it could be clearly marked. The skin, stretched tightly over his cheekbones, was transparent so that the veins on his temples shone bluely through. So thin was his silvery hair that his head was almost bald on top, and in his eyes was the mystified, hurt look of a child. At his feet sat Rosy, the red setter.

"That's what I wanted to know," Naoma said. "Have you tried selling the farm?"

"To tell the truth, yes. But without success. You see, Madame Shanks is sometimes a little—ah—difficult. She has opposed my disposing of the place." He chuckled mirthlessly. "I assume it would not be doing the lady an injustice to suggest that she hopes before long—after my expected demise—to have the property solely for herself. *Acta exteriora interiora secreta*, as the Romans had it. Then, in addition, the title is—ah—slightly clouded. A matter which a lady could hardly be expected to understand, my dear Naoma. Your husband—ah—Jubal, has very kindly advanced the back taxes on the land for a matter of several years. Naturally, no other buyer would be greatly interested in it, under the circumstances, and Jubal has no wish, apparently, to purchase it himself, preferring our lease agreement."

“Doctor Shanks . . . I want to tell you something—important,” said Naoma very seriously. “Before I do so, I want you to promise that this conversation will remain a secret with you as long as you live.”

“But such a request is superfluous,” protested the doctor gallantly. “A gentleman of honor—”

“Very well. Then follow me closely. Do you know anything about the oil boom to the east of here?”

“Why, yes. I have heard—”

“Jubal believes there will be an oil stampede here. For this reason he wants title to that piece of land of yours.”

“There should be no trouble about that. I will gladly sell.”

“You don’t understand. This is very difficult for me to say, Doctor Shanks, but—well, Jubal intends to foreclose on you by means of tax titles!”

The old man paled slightly. “But, Naoma, that land is worth not less than six thousand dollars. The back taxes, plus interest, cannot amount to more than seven hundred. This would work a very grave injustice on me.”

“Yes!” Naoma was almost breathless. “It is an injustice! That is why I have made Jubal promise he will give you a month to repay him.”

“I fear that will do me little good.” Doc Shanks shook his silvery head. “*Homo homini lupus*, as the saying goes. A month—or a year for that matter—would avail me little in raising money. As I told you, I am bankrupt.”

“I feared that.” Naoma spoke decisively. “Now, Doctor Shanks, I am going to make a very delicate proposition to you, and I wish, before you come to a decision upon it, one way or the other, that you will consider our long friendship and the very deep regard in which I hold you.”

“What is this proposition?” His voice was gentle.

“It is this: I have saved up one thousand dollars of my own money. Rather than see Jubal—who, I hope and pray, will eventually recognize his mistake—do you this injustice, I want you to accept this money from me—as a loan, if you wish. Go to my husband and insist upon paying him what you owe him. Then—for he is in very great need of acquiring the land—he will purchase it from you at whatever fair figure you name. When you have sold it and received the cash, still keeping the matter a secret, you may return my money to me.”

The old white head shook in negation. "I scarcely think it worth the trouble," Doc Shanks said.

"Why?" She was surprised.

"I am not making this a matter of general information, but I will tell you now, that I do not have long to live. Almost any day this old pump which I call my heart will cease to work, and your friend Doc Shanks will be no more—in his corporeal form at least."

"Your heart . . .?"

"Yes."

"How long have you known this?"

"I have suspected it for some time but definite knowledge is a matter of a few days only."

"Does Mrs. Shanks know?"

"Yes." He smiled dryly. "She is convinced that I am malingering."

"Oh!" The cruelty of that woman's attitude toward this gentle, helpless old man pained Naoma like a stabbing knife. But another thought came: "At least you can enjoy what is left of your life! Here, take this money and do as I have told you!"

She thrust into his hands a heavy manila envelope, then turned and hurried away, almost blinded with tears.

9

Old Doc Shanks walked slowly downtown. His mind was in confusion. To have Jubal Troop concoct this intrigue against him was one more proof that life was not worth the living. To be sure, he knew the reason behind Jubal's action, and there, was no blame in his heart. Often in the past months, Doc Shanks had wrung his own soul with the thought: If I hadn't been drunk . . . perhaps I could have reached the child soon enough. . . .

Past Holloway's drugstore he slowly plodded, and down the street of small business buildings, each with its false front which deceived nobody into thinking it was other than a single story in height. At one open door Doc Shanks visibly hesitated. It was Bill Hogan's bar and pool hall. Doc could see the estimable Bill, without trade at the moment, his portly figure and sweeping mustache wearing a look of deep concentration which extended even to the toothpick projecting between his teeth as he practiced billiard

shots at one of the broad, green tables. Hogan was a sort of public institution in Wettick, and Doc Shanks was on terms of excellent familiarity with him; a circumstance which was due to the fact that he had been one of Hogan's best customers for years.

But Doc hesitated only long enough before the saloon to inhale deeply the sour smell of spilled beer and whiskey which rose from the sawdust on the floor. Seeming to gather his will power, he crossed the street, followed by Rosy the dog, and seated himself on the raised loading platform at Evans' hardware store, the red setter curling herself up at his feet.

Almost fretfully, the old physician gazed down at the indolent form of Rosy, snoozing there in the dust. She was his shadow. In his waking hours she tagged him relentlessly. When he slept, Rosy slept also—beneath the back porch steps of Doc's home, and this was her peculiar province and her refuge in times of terror. If some urchin heaved a clod at her, or a strange dog showed its teeth, one could be sure, after her yelp of fright, to find Rosy cowering under the steps. She never failed to go there.

Not even Georgia ever disturbed Rosy in this sanctuary. That was a major concession from Georgia, who otherwise disturbed everybody, everywhere. A tide of resentment rose in Doc Shanks once more at the thought of his wife. Her technique of torment was so unsporting. Always Georgia could maintain an ascendancy over him, because she dared to go on where he balked at going. She never failed to defeat him in an emotional crisis, simply because she possessed the audacity to create situations which had no answer except tragedy—knowing that each time he would draw back, not necessarily for himself, but to protect her from the very extremes to which she had gone.

Doc recognized his own weakness in this respect. He had permitted the woman to hector him into complete subservience. The constant badgering as much as anything else, had ruined his practice, he thought in self-justification. Then he was forced to admit, in fairness, that his drinking had something to do with it. Georgia and liquor. They had destroyed him. Opposite extremes of his life. The wife he hated and dreaded and the drink he loved.

Well, liquor was forbidden him now. Smart young Dr. Ward, who had succeeded to most of the medical practice in town, was the man who finally issued the ban on drinking. Without liquor, Doc Shanks did not see how he could endure Georgia much longer. She was driving him desperate. Of late she had taken to harrying him over the town. Formerly it had been possible

for Doc to escape her temporarily by seeking refuge in one of several loafing places, but recently the telephone company had been active in Wettick and now there was a telephone in almost every business establishment. As a result, when Georgia went on a rampage, she had only to telephone Doc's usual rendezvous, one after another, until she found where he was. . . .

A telephone was ringing now in Evans' store. Some prescience told Doc Shanks the call was for him. Sure enough, Tod Evans came to the door.

"Doc, the missus wants you on the phone."

With an inward groan the old man hoisted himself to his feet and Rosy followed him into the store. Georgia's shrill voice created blasting sounds in the receiver, so that it was difficult to understand her. Doc Shanks made out that she wanted him to bring home a dishpan, but Georgia never said anything simply—not to him. At last the receiver clattered down.

Doc Shanks turned wanly from the telephone. As he did so, his eyes fell on Rosy, who lay placidly panting at his feet. He stared at the dog as if for the first time he saw in her a significance. His hand went to the pocket where he could feel the bulge of the envelope which Naoma had given him. Then his eyes searched for Evans, the proprietor of the store.

"Tod, do you happen to have any blank warranty deeds?"

"Why, yes." Tod, a bald, red-faced man, with heavy glasses through which he peered distrustfully, shuffled to a desk and brought out a blank.

"I shall want you to put your notary seal on this," said Doc Shanks. "And you might get out a dishpan. Madame Shanks desires it. I will—ah—pay cash."

Seating himself at the desk the old man wrote for some minutes, painstakingly filling out the dotted lines on the blank. At one point he stopped. He had started to write "Naoma Troop" there. That would not do, he reasoned. One desire was dominant in him—that Georgia should receive no part of his land, especially now that it contained prospect of wealth. It was Naoma who always had befriended him, and he would have liked to make the deed to her, but he knew her too well. Soft-hearted. She would be likely to make the deed right back to Georgia.

Jubal—now he was different. No softheartedness there, Doc said to himself with satisfaction. In Jubal Troop's hands, everything would be settled and safe. Doc pictured Georgia's malignant face when she discovered what he had arranged for her, and the thought of Jubal's inflexible hardness afforded him double gratification.

After a while Doc Shanks finished his writing and requested Tod Evans to place a notary's seal on the paper. Next the old man scratched a brief note, sealed it with the deed in an envelope, and addressed it to Jubal Troop. Now he opened the envelope given him by Naoma. One hundred dollar bills—ten of them, richly golden. He fished out one.

“How much do I owe you, Tod?”

“Well, the dishpan's four bits. Your whole bill runs to three dollars.”

“I wish to pay the entire bill.”

After Tod had run to the bank to change the hundred dollar note, the money was carefully counted out to Doc Shanks on the counter. Methodically the old man picked it up.

“Ninety dollars in tens,” he said as if to himself. “That leaves six and a half dollars in change. It ought to do me.” He added the ninety dollars to the nine hundred remaining in his package. Then he enclosed the sum, with a second note, in an envelope which he addressed to Mrs. Naoma Troop.

When all this was accomplished, Doc Shanks took the two envelopes to the postoffice and mailed them. Returning to Evans' store, he picked up his dishpan and, followed by Rosy, crossed the street to Bill Hogan's bar.

“Bill,” said the doctor, “what varieties of good whiskey have you?”

“I got Old Crow,” began Hogan woodenly, “Sam Thompson, Golden Wedding, Sunnybrook—”

“Ah, Sunnybrook. Always Sunnybrook. My dear Hogan, it has become the official drink of Oklahoma. Still, it is excellent,” said Doc with the assured air of a connoisseur. “Pour out six drinks of different brands. Place them upon that little table yonder. And now about brandies, have you a worthy selection?”

As the wondering joint keeper named several brands, the old man smiled happily. “I have always loved good brandy,” he remarked. “Set me out four brandies, straight, with those six whiskeys.”

Hogan obeyed, with frequent ox-like stares at his customer.

“A rather pretty sight those ten little glasses make, do they not, my good Bill?” observed Doc Shanks. “Ah, my dear fellow, they are more than merely beautiful. Do you realize, Bill, what a wonderful thing whiskey is?” His eyes grew dreamy and his face thoughtful. “One by one, as age advances, my friend, the great and beautiful sensations of life fade. The

stimulation of love departs and woman loses all her charm. The dreams go—the great, splendid dreams of youth. A man’s stomach fails him and his food loses its pristine savor. His ear grows dull and the sweet sounds of nature are forgotten; his eye dims and the beautiful sights likewise depart him. Tobacco begins to lack some of the ancient delights it once afforded. Poesy becomes shallow and even the usages of philosophy are meaningless at last. But, Bill—a drink of whiskey tastes just as good at ninety as it does at nineteen!”

“Sure, Doc,” agreed Bill uncomfortably.

“Here, my excellent Hogan,” said Doc, “is the money for your liquor. May I use your telephone?”

“Sure, Doc.”

“One moment, then.” He glanced about. “Would you be so good as to give me a piece of string? Any kind of a strong cord will do.”

Hogan produced the twine and Doc Shanks took Rosy and the dishpan outside. “I hate to do this to you, Rosy,” he said, “but there comes a time in a man’s life when the whimsicalities seem the only things worth while.”

He tied the dishpan securely to the dog’s tail. “Get!” he shouted, suddenly rising.

The astonished Rosy jumped. Behind her the dishpan clattered. Again Rosy leaped. The clatter was joined by the dog’s piercing yelps of terror. Down the street they went together, Rosy shrieking at the top of her lungs, the dishpan banging at every bump.

Doc Shanks re-entered the saloon and rang his wife on the telephone.

“Georgia, my pet, is this you?” he asked. “If you will look under the back steps you will find the new dishpan.”

He hung up the receiver and seated himself before the ten little glasses of amber liquid.

10

White faced, Jubal entered his sitting room the following day, carrying a letter. He found Naoma weeping over a note in the same handwriting as that on the message he held.

“Look,” she sobbed, pushing the paper toward him.

MY DEAR NAOMA [Jubal read]: By the time this reaches you, one who has ever accounted it chief among his boasts that you were his friend, will be well upon his way to “that bourne from which no traveler e’er returns.” I am enclosing herewith all but ten dollars of the one thousand which you were so gracious as to lend me. In considering many things, including a humorous glance at life, it seemed to me that no true philosopher should demean himself by displaying unbecoming anxiety toward a future which, under the best of circumstances, is so devoid of promise as mine. I have, therefore, taken the most pleasant way of avoiding that future, which I could conceive. I die tonight, dead drunk—and therefore happy. My dear lady, for your many gracious kindnesses of the past, I thank you. As one already upon the other side of the grave, I salute you.

Your ever-faithful servant,
MARCUS AURELIUS SHANKS, M.D.

“I have just been over to the undertaker’s . . . to see him,” said Jubal. He was stunned by the denouement of his plans. What he did next he might never have done, had he been less stricken. He handed Naoma his own letter.

MY DEAR JUBAL [it read]: Once, in a moment of weakness, I so far forgot my Hippocratic oath as to neglect my professional duty. As a result perhaps, a patient died. That patient, my dear boy, was your son. In the months intervening since that day, I have longed frequently for some way in which I could, if only slightly, recompense you for the irreparable injury I did to you. That way, it appears, will never come while I live. But it has occurred to me that since I am choosing a means of disappearing from the earth—a means which, I am sure, you as a man of sense and penetration will endorse as being delightful and yet efficacious—I could at least leave some slight guerdon with you. I have, therefore, made out to you, duly signed and sealed, a deed to my property on Shoo-Fly Creek. The farm, as you know, is of slight value, but as it forms a portion of the natural area of your ranch, it may be prized by you. The date on this instrument, as well as on the notary’s seal, will defend you from any legal actions which my wife may bring against you. It is my wish that she obtain none of this property. I can no better express to you the terms of my

loathing for that woman who has made my life a hell, than by using a phrase which I have never, up to this moment, applied to a woman—she is an unqualified bitch. She, more than any other one thing, has driven me to the condition in which I now find myself. But perhaps I owe her a debt of gratitude after all. At least she has hastened my recognition of the fallacy of a continued existence. For the pleasant method of my demise—by drinking myself to death, which is an easy matter in view of the condition of my heart—I claim full credit for originality. My dear boy, remember me always as

Your deeply sincere friend,
MARCUS AURELIUS SHANKS, M.D.

“Oh, Jubal, Jubal,” sobbed Naoma when she had finished reading. “He was so fine—so good. I—I tried to save him from you, Jubal. I loaned him that thousand dollars to—pay his debt to you, so that he could ask a decent price for his farm. You have so—so much. There was no reason to—to crush that poor old man. Your b-business—your pitiless business madness has killed him. I—I should have gone to his help sooner. I can nev-nev-never forgive myself—*or you!*”

Jubal sat expressionless, shaken deeply within. As he had regretted the extremity of the forces he set into motion when he sent Mesa on the cattle raid in Mexico, he now regretted the depths of anguish he had engendered here in Wettick. The recollection of August Yodel’s haggard blue eyes, misty with tears; of Doc Shanks’ transparent features; of other faces, came to his mind.

After a time Naoma rose from her seat. He did not turn his head. There seemed a roaring in his ears and through it he dimly heard Naoma close the door and leave him alone in the room.

11

In those days Jubal came to perceive that a thing which has been years in the upbuilding can by one single mistake be irreparably destroyed. It is so with a structure from which the keystone is removed. It is also, and indescribably, so with a human relationship. Not even so durable a thing as years of habit can save it when the basis for confidence, respect and understanding is taken away.

For a time Jubal groped vainly for a return to the old footing with Naoma. She did not rebuff him. About the house she conducted her affairs

much as usual, and she even increased her interests outside, although as a result of Doc Shanks' death she did not permit herself to be spoken of for the federation presidency. She even, at times, gave the appearance of being as sunny as ever in her outlook. But although Jubal was not subtle he knew that an irrevocable mutation had occurred in her.

Nor would Naoma discuss it with him. She was like a stranger woman in his house.

Once, lamely, he sought to explain himself.

“Naomy, I know what’s the matter,” he blundered after they had been sitting in the same room in silence for a long time one evening. “You think I’m just a selfish brute. Really, I ain’t. You just don’t understand things. I never intended to close out Doc Shanks—”

She abruptly left the room and that was the last time he attempted to explain himself.

Jubal had his pride, too, and after a while he even ceased to make friendly overtures. A new law of life came into being, not tried out merely, but already in effect: That Naoma asked him nothing of his affairs, and that she expected him to give her equal freedom in hers. He discovered one day that she had paid over to Georgia, Doc Shanks' widow, the thousand dollars she had saved. Jubal made no comment on this and Georgia, still reviling him, departed from Wettick to live with relatives in Bloomington, Illinois. Naoma made a practice of frequent visits to Wichita to see the McReynoldses; and these trips she never discussed with him.

Gradually life settled itself in the new channels. Naoma went with Judge and Mrs. McReynolds to Manitou in the Colorado Rockies that summer. Her going was almost a relief to Jubal because it removed from him a tension which was beginning terribly to wear. He turned desperately to grapple with a great new problem which now confronted him.

BOOK 11

Baptism in Oil

1

While the late summer heat still lingered, before the first cooling rains of autumn fell, a crew of workmen became busy on the hill back of the August Yodel place, now deserted for a year since Jubal Troop had acquired it. Straightway an electric rumor ran through the town of Wettick. Inquiry had elicited the gruff information that the men were “spudding in.” What did this mean? The village wiseacres had an answer for even this esotericism. It meant that an oil well was to be drilled on the old Yodel farm.

Oil? The thought at first seemed incongruous to Wettick. How could there be oil under those familiar low hills and shallow valleys? Yet soon indubitable proof was provided that a well actually was to be drilled. The harsh, clubbed lines of a heavy timbered derrick rose rapidly, its bulging crown block and its portentous walking beam and bull wheel all complete. Men with horse scoops began to dig out and dam up a small lake in a ravine—a lake which, it presently became known, was to hold not water, but oil. A lake full of oil? Wettick found its corporate credulity strained at the idea. Yet the drilling crew went about its work with competent precision. Onlookers presently could observe, from a safe distance, the tool pushers busy on the floor of the derrick house, while the engine puffed heavily, the walking beam rose and fell in elephantine rhythm, and the huge steel bit chewed deeper and deeper into the earth.

In a short period the population of Wettick began to increase. Strangers appeared on the streets, especially after the mysterious information went around that a “rainbow” had shown in the water brought up from the steadily deepening hole. Geologists—known as “rock hounds” to Wettick, self-consciously beginning to lay its tongue to the salty argot of the oil fields—swarmed all over the country. Talk of “anticlines” and “synclines,” of “horizons” and “doodlebugs,” went on wherever men met. Oil scouts and “lease hounds” descended upon the farmers about Wettick like a swarm of voracious Kansas grasshoppers, seeking to secure drilling rights on every available piece of land.

Wettick’s vocabulary rapidly grew more extensive, although it is to be doubted that the growth enriched the community’s knowledge. Words like

“mud hog,” “whiskey jack,” “headache post,” “B.S.” and “casing hound,” were tossed about with abandon and small comprehension. Everyone wished to be accounted an authority on oil, and to be accepted as such seemed to require fluency with the oil language. So Wettick talked the jargon volubly and with a specious attempt at profundity.

Farmers fortunate enough to own land in the region where the “lease play” was “hot” suddenly had money to spend, paid old debts and purchased luxuries which they had not for years been able to afford. Hotels became crowded and new shacks sprang up in which rooms and board were purveyed to increasing numbers of transients at outrageous prices. Construction gangs commenced the erection of new dwellings all over town and real estate prices soared. Viewing the new tide of population and prosperity, merchants agreed that the oil boom was the “biggest thing that ever happened to Wettick.”

And who was responsible for it all? Everyone knew the answer: Jubal Troop. It was interesting to observe how the public attitude toward him changed. A year ago he was the most hated man in Wettick. Now suddenly he was regarded as a public benefactor. The ugly story which had been whispered concerning Doc Shanks’ death was forgotten. Indeed the very land transactions which once were held to be so sharp and ruthless, suddenly were found actually to redound to his credit. Anyone could see, said Wettick, why Jube Troop simply had to acquire the land about which those stories were circulated; and why he had traveled over the country buying oil rights from owners who at the time considered him crazy and were gleeful over their own acumen in cozening him out of a dollar an acre for the leases. Now those same owners were bitter in the discovery that other lease buyers would have paid them five times as much; but they received scant sympathy from Wettick. Overnight, almost, Jubal Troop became a civic institution. A big man. What if he did cut a few corners in a business way? A man doing things like Jube Troop couldn’t be judged by ordinary standards. Too bad some fellows were hurt, but they shouldn’t stand in Jube Troop’s way. Some said it was costing him a hundred thousand dollars to secure the oil leases and put down the well. When a man was willing to gamble that much money on a hole in the ground, farmers showed mighty poor spirit grumbling over penny-ante bargains in which they may not have come off quite best. Wettick shrugged its collective shoulders at complaints concerning the dealings of Jubal Troop.

Day after day the drilling continued. In the first weeks the public interest was such that a crowd hung almost continuously about the well, watching the greasy driller in his baggy overalls and cap—just like a locomotive engineer—standing with his hand on the cable as the walking beam lifted and dropped the heavy tools deep down in the hole. *Thud . . . thud . . . thud.* That was the way it went, day after day, night after night, with measured rhythm. The crew, when it was not busy, loafed on the lazy bench in the derrick house, haughtily aloof from the general public—a caliban fraternity, devotees at the altar of a strange god, the drill.

Then on a sultry morning late in September, when the air was still and heat seemed to dance on the horizon, exciting news trickled up and down Wettick's dusty streets. Another "rainbow" was reported at the Troop oil test. As soon as they could leave their various occupations, the citizens flocked to the drilling sight. A "rainbow" was old news to them. The veriest child knew now that it was the prismatic gleam in the muddy water brought up from the earth, resembling the luster on a pigeon's neck, and indicating a small quantity of oil. But this was no ordinary "rainbow." Talk around the well, where men stood in groups striking knowing attitudes and rendering expert opinions between many jets of tobacco juice, was that this was a real "show"—that there was oil standing in the casing, nobody knew how much, but oil certainly. Drilling was suspended. The following day strangers dropped off trains from far places like Kansas City, Denver and Fort Worth. It was understood that these were oil scouts, come to observe the Troop test. Wettick's corporate bosom swelled at being thus placed in the spotlight. In a front page editorial in its issue of September 25, 1904, the *Weekly Courant* stated unequivocally that the well was destined to be a large producer. This strong journalistic position won wide approval from the citizens of the town, who knew as little about the matter as did the editor himself and were correspondingly positive in all their assertions.

Next evening word was circulated that the Troop well would be "brought in," on the morrow. A tense crowd of excited onlookers gathered. Throughout the night husky roustabouts, armed with clubs, kept the curious from crowding past the limits of a two hundred foot area roped off around the derrick. Speculation passed all bounds and the suspense heightened every hour.

"Will it sure enough be a gusher?" asked one of the crowd as the first light began to dawn.

"More likely a duster," sneered a know-it-all.

“Shows how little you know,” broke in a third. “They got enough oil in the casing right now to put the well on the pump. They’re holdin’ off, hopin’ to bring in a big producer.”

“Aw, what do you know about it?”

“I know plenty.” Another voice joined in the argument, quickly taking up the cudgels for Wettick’s oil well, exactly as it would have done for Wettick’s baseball team, or band, or any other civic affair. “You know George Webb, the chief driller? He told my cousin yesterday he thought the bit was atop of the Bartlesville sand. That’s the horizon all those wells in the eastern area are coming from. If they hit that, it’s a cinch this well won’t be no ordinary pumper, but a bearcat. Might blow the crown block off the derrick!” This last was pure exaggeration but it was pardonable in view of the extravagant talk which had been heard all day.

“Who’s Webb?” said the unabashed skeptic with scorn. “Nothin’ but a ‘tooley’ like the rest. One of them mud-smellers from up Independence way says the structure—anticline an’ syncline—at this location is all wrong for oil.”

“There goes Jubal Troop!”

The argument, couched in all its pseudo-expert phraseology, was instantly dropped, and all necks craned.

“I bet he’s worried.”

“He don’t look it.”

“If I had a hundred thousand iron men tied up in a hole, I wouldn’t be worried—I’d be crazy.”

“Hell! What does a hundred thousand mean to Jube Troop?”

3

If the crowd had only known, a hundred thousand dollars meant everything to Jubal—everything he could muster in cash in all the world. His land, cattle and credit were pledged to the ultimate penny, to buy leasage and defray expenses for this wildcat test. Not even on the night when he saw Reb Haizlipp put everything they both possessed on the turn of the cards in El Paso, had Jubal faced fiercer odds or stood so deeply in the shadow of disaster—because his stake now was immeasurably greater. It was all or nothing; wiped out or a millionaire.

In that hour Jubal Troop knew the bitterness of the great moment of loneliness. Around him were faces—smiling, pleasant toward the man who might tomorrow be rich. But he knew how quickly the smiles would disappear if he failed. More than ever before he realized how like a spider web was the frail fabric of life. It might bear him to success, and so long as it did these men would acclaim him. If it broke, none would mourn his fall.

Jubal glanced over the crowd. Even to himself he did not admit it, but he was searching for a face—one friendly face which wished him well unselfishly. Naoma was in Wichita on one of her frequent visits. How mightily it would have heartened him to see her this day! Under these circumstances, of course, he had not expected her. The rift between them was steadily widening instead of healing. He partly understood the terrible wound he had given her. Jubal still sincerely believed that business should be clean-cut, impersonal, conducted with the inflexible logic of mathematics, but he had never intended for a thing to occur like the death of Doc Shanks. As a matter of fact, he tried to tell himself, he had only half meant what he said to Naoma about taking over the old physician's property—and she had taken it at face value. Yet even as he argued thus with himself, his honest soul told him the argument was false. He had intended to possess Doc Shanks' land all right enough; the trouble was that he had failed—how utterly he was only beginning to realize—in understanding the human equations involved.

Well, what was done was done. Naoma was not present on this day, nor was Reb. Once Jubal almost had humbled himself enough to write Naoma begging her to come to him. But a sudden, swift stiffening of pride put out the thought as soon as conceived. He would not beg. Later when the wish returned his mind was settled. Jubal did not ask Naoma to return from her visit; nor did he ask Reb to come and be with him. Today he stood alone, talking inconsequentialities with oil men, bankers and newspaper reporters, strangers all. And not one of that varied group understood that the bronzed man with the great barrel chest and the granite features was lacerated and bleeding in his heart . . . groping for something . . . some vital need which he felt but which, inarticulate as always, he could not express even to himself.

To shake off the mood Jubal turned to thoughts of the well. His mind here wrestled again with doubts—even, at this crisis, with actual fear. Why should this particular wildcat be a producer? There were hundreds of arguments against it. True, there was a showing of oil in the casing down in the earth's black interior; but Jubal had learned a vast deal about oil in the past few months. The words of Spencer Wright, the field superintendent,

came to him: *Even if you hit, you'll have to hit big to make it pay. A small well wont do you much good.* At the moment Jubal's faith was weak; his heart was weak. Those about him, too busy with their own interests to notice that his face was gray with agony, chattered on as is the fashion of people. Jubal knew as he had never known in his life before, how alone he was in the world . . . utterly, irrevocably alone. One against the universe. The massed impact of the realization struck him like a blow on the skull.

Then came the instant when his strength returned to him. Within his brain the white hot coal of his will fused again. From his knees the weakness passed; on his face came the old, stern lines. Jubal fixed his eyes upon the men about him, upon the hillside, upon the ugly derrick, now weather-stained and gray, and it was as if he saw them all clearly for the first time. His great chest filled with air and through his boot soles his toes seemed to grip anew the resilient sod. If he lost this climactic throw of the dice . . . well, he lost, and that was all. Not again would Jubal's grip on his courage loosen.

4

Part of the crowd remained at the well all night. By morning reinforcements of curious people arrived until the entire hillside, yesterday yellow with sun-cured grass, was black with densely packed humanity.

"There's geologists, oil scouts, and lease hounds here from all over the United States, not to mention bankers, producers and editors. Maybe there's a thousand of such here," was the information which passed eagerly about.

"Two hundred feet of oil standing in the hole," was another report. "If they'd put her on the pump now, she'd be good for a hundred barrels or more a day. But they want to bring her in big. They ain't satisfied with a hundred barrel pumper. What they're after is a gusher."

Nobody knew whether any of these things was true, but the gossip added fuel to the mounting excitement. At nine o'clock a sensation was created by the first definite announcement of the day.

"They're going to shoot the well," a man told a knot of listeners. "I just got it straight from one of the scouts. The tools are thirty foot in saturated sand, but the drillers can't get the flow they want, so they'll use nitroglycerin. I hear the shooter's here now—an expert from Chanute. It's him they've been waiting on."

An hour later arrived blood-curdling confirmation of the report. Driving slowly up the hill, with great care to avoid excessive joltings, came a spring

wagon drawn by a team of horses. Mounted upon its delicate springs was an enclosed, box-like body, painted a sinister black, but with a legend on its sides lettered angrily in red:

UNITED TORPEDO CO.
NITROGLYCERIN
DANGER—KEEP OFF!

“There’s enough explosive in there to wipe out everybody within half a mile,” yelled somebody in the gawking crowd. The shout caused a scattering, almost a stampede, and a wide space rapidly cleared about the baleful vehicle. The nitro wagon came to a stop near the well. Gradually, in the succeeding hours, people became accustomed to its menacing presence, until they grew indifferent to it, and in the end guards had to be posted to keep the public from jostling the torpedo box—even scratching matches on it.

“That’s him!” cried a voice. “That’s Lafe Colby of Chanute. The shooter!”

A small, gnome-like man, much stooped in the shoulders, with a great black hat drawn low over his face as if to hide the peculiar twisted scar which was all that remained of his upper lip, began prodding and peering into the interior of the torpedo box. He was assisted in removing some dark cylinders, three or four feet long and two or three inches thick, by a lean, dour youth, with protruding teeth and a pointed chin, apparently the shooter’s lieutenant.

Through the crowd went a murmur. Those tubes were the cartridges containing the terrible oily yellow liquid, with a power for destruction almost incredible. Of its own volition the mob pressed back and again a respectful area of cleared space was left around the ominous equipage. One by one the required number of cartridges was taken to the derrick house. In his teeth the shooter held a gleaming object—the cap. That explained his shattered lip. Like most old shooters, Colby at some time in the past had bitten too hard on a cap, and lost his teeth together with part of his face.

When the transfer of the explosive was completed, the fox-faced assistant drove the wagon a mile or more away, into a vacant field, and there mounted guard over it.

About noon a little knot of men marched across the cleared space to the well. From a distance the members of the group looked small, but the crowd quickly recognized Jubal Troop’s strong figure, with the wide cowboy hat he

always wore. He stood out clearly among his companions. At the well the walking beam and bull wheel were idle, almost for the first time in months; and the tools had been withdrawn from the hole and lay piled outside the engine house. Along the ropes which restrained the crowd guards moved, warning everyone to stand away. "Keep back of the rope," was the admonition repeated over and over. "Explosive is being used here. Watch out for yourself!"

After a consultation and inspection the knot of men with Jubal left the derrick and only one small, bowed figure remained. Watchers could see him, flitting back and forth inside the derrick house, and knew Lafe Colby was gingerly lowering, one by one, those nitroglycerin cartridges into the depths nearly three thousand feet below. Presently the small, gnome-like man departed from the derrick, and walked to where an electric plunger box stood just inside the ropes on the upper side of the hill.

"Ah-h-h!" Like a moan the murmur came from the crowd.

"Let 'er go!" Sharp and peremptory, like a pistol shot, Jubal's voice rang out. With all his strength the shooter forced the plunger down. A slight shock beneath the feet and the faintest rumor of a distant thud in the ears—and that was all. A great groan of disappointment came from the spectators. They had heard the deep explosion and nothing had happened.

"Hell! Is that all there is to it?"

"I expected to see something!"

"Stung again!"

"Sold!"

From the massed circle against the ropes the irritated comments rose. But scarcely was there time for the utterance of the exclamations when a sudden hell's bellow seemed to shake the earth—a roaring, whistling shriek which rose to an appalling crescendo. Almost at the same moment a great, black mushroom rose in the derrick, higher and higher, throwing rocks, debris and mud as it mounted, until it over-topped the wooden structure.

"Oil!" an incredulous voice shouted.

"Oil! It's oil!" echoed a few others above the roar.

Then the entire crowd, at last connecting the throaty voice of the gusher with the tumultuous surge of its spouting, gave a tremendous yell of amazement and delight. The wind whipped the pillar of black liquid and splashed it across an acre of ground. Shouts, cries of warning, orders and

simple shrieks of excitement added to the confusion. In the derrick house men worked crazily, trying to cap the well. At this rate the artificial pool created in the ravine would overflow in no time.

The Troop well was a producer! Wettick had a gusher. A regular bearcat. Ten thousand barrels a day, some said. No question but that it opened up a new, great oil pool. Frenzied activity already was in evidence. Within an hour locations were being staked out for the second and third offset wells on the Troop property. An Independence company and two from Bartlesville started digging “cellars” for derricks on locations adjoining Troop’s. The drilling race was under way. Oil leases—even in places far distant from “proved” territory—went to fabulous prices. Men paid a hundred dollars an acre miles off the “structure,” provided it was anywhere near the “line.” A great day for Wettick. A great day for Jubal Troop.

5

Returning to his home late that evening, Jubal, tired from the day’s great strain, saw with a leap of the heart that the house was lighted. Naoma must be home. He hurried forward.

But before he reached the steps to the porch his pace slackened. It wouldn’t make any difference. Naoma would not care whether he came home or not. He must be careful not to show how much *he* cared.

The door opened and his shadow sprang blackly behind him down the walk as the light streamed out. He entered. In the dining room sounded Naoma’s quick step. He hung his hat on the hanger and went in. She turned toward him with a glad light in her eyes, but he did not see it. His own eyes were fixed on the kitchen floor. Indifferent. Aloof. The light faded.

“Oh, you here?” said Jubal casually, looking at her for the first time.

“Yes.”

“Good trip? How’s the old place look to the wanderer?”

He sounded heavily sarcastic, but she did not deign to reply.

“I shot the well,” he announced. “Big gusher.”

“Oh.”

“Gracie come with you?”

“Yes. She’s upstairs.”

“Wonder if you’d have her fix me a sandwich. I ain’t had a bite since morning.”

“Why, I’ll fix it for you.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to bother *you*.”

Thus they sparred . . . neither understanding. . . .

6

The first Troop well was joined by others on the hills. As the weeks lengthened into months and the months into years, a forest of derricks sprouted north, south and east; the ground about them assumed the familiar blighted appearance of oil fields because of the petroleum which killed the grass; and sludge pools sent up their stinking effluvia, sometimes adding to the clouds in the sky crooked pillars of inky smoke as they were burned out.

Almost breathlessly at first, then becoming comfortably accustomed to it, Wettick witnessed its population double and treble again and again. Merchants raised prices and still the demand for goods was greater than the supply. Barbers charged a dollar for a hair cut, a dollar for a shave. “Flop tents” sprang up, where men slept in shifts on canvas cots rented in eight hour periods, each sleeper routed out as soon as his allotted time was up.

After a while, however, the tempo of the city’s life changed. The population assumed a more stable form. Strangers ceased to flock in so rapidly. On a low hill west of the city, new, imposing residences arose. Fortunes were being made in oil now and Wettick boasted of its “millionaire row.” Improvements appeared. Main Street was paved, followed by other streets. Stores added façades in keeping with the new greatness. Automobiles grew numerous, already disputing the highways with horse-drawn vehicles.

In 1907 came the panic, but Wettick in the heat of its oil boom, did not even notice the financial crisis which gripped the rest of the nation. That same year Tom Ferguson and Dennis Flynn won their long fight and Oklahoma achieved statehood. As did all other cities, Wettick celebrated the occasion with flags, band playing, and speechmaking. The speaker was Webster Grattan, serving his second term as county prosecutor, and now Wettick’s best-known lawyer, said to have senatorial ambitions. On the same day the Wettick *Weekly Courant* announced that henceforth it would be the *Daily Courant*. This was a matter of great civic pride at first, but Wettick soon became used to the thought of having a daily paper of its own; all the

more so when a second newspaper, the *Daily Transcript*, opened offices and launched at once a furious editorial war against its rival.

Small mushroom towns sprang up among the derricks—towns whose residents were oil workers, bootleggers, gamblers, harlots, and a shifty, sinister element which was none of these. Oilton was the name of one such scrofulous hamlet and Sand Hill was another. In their shacks were hatched more sin and deviltry than that portion of Oklahoma had ever known.

On the afternoon of October 1, 1910, the *Daily Courant* scored what the newspaper fraternity called a “scoop” by announcing the city’s first oil refinery. It was to be built by Jubal Troop, who had incorporated under the name “The Troop Oil & Refining Co.” The *Daily Transcript*, which ignominiously saw its journalistic foe thus trumpet exclusively a news story so important, never forgave Jubal for permitting it, and abided its time, as newspapers will, to even the score with him.

True to the *Daily Courant’s* announcement, the refinery grew south of the city, and all men expressed gratification once more over the benefactions Wettick had received at the hands of Jubal Troop. A chamber of commerce was a natural outgrowth of the new importance and prosperity of the city. At the first meeting of that body, a slogan was suggested and adopted, and money voted to hang a large electric sign across Main Street, right where occupants of passing trains might see it, with the legend:

WETTICK, THE PEERLESS PRINCESS OF THE PLAINS

Thereafter other cities jeered Wettick, but the Wettick newspapers and citizens continued vehemently to refer to their town as the “Peerless Princess” without regard to the fact that a stranger, facing the pronunciation of that alliterative title, was almost always in need of an umbrella, due to the fine spray of saliva engendered by the superabundance of “p’s.”

And Jubal Troop, who was responsible for all this, but was not of it, threw himself into his work with a relentless fury. Naoma traveled much now, spending her winters in California and the hot summers in the mountains. They had a new home, in keeping with Jubal’s importance in the community—a rambling brick-and-stucco English type structure on “Quality Hill,” but Jubal was there little of the time.

His business occupied him. He fought battles with banks, with “Big Oil,” with smaller competitors, with labor, with the railroads—a furious, unending struggle, in which he won and won again. Gradually as his business empire grew and he expanded his energies unceasingly, his name

became known in places far from Wettick. On a certain street in distant New York, where tall structures overlooked a small, cross-surmounted church, sleekly dressed and fishy-eyed gentlemen discussed seriously the new oil power in the West.

7

The afternoon of September 14, 1913, Pretty Sam Gooney found himself standing before the offices of the Troop Oil & Refining Co. He was there for a definite purpose, but he cudged his mind for something to tell the receptionist, because he hardly expected that his true purpose would be received with favor.

The new, solid brick office building stood near the refinery which was on the outskirts of the hustling young city. A tank farm, studded with its regular rows of huge, round oil tanks, stretched away to the south. North of the offices stood the cluttered smokestacks, pipes and curiously shaped bubble towers of the refinery. On a railroad siding extended a long row of tank cars, each with its little conning tower, oddly like submarines on wheels; each lettered hugely on the side T R O O P, while on either end was a smaller legend, T O & P X, the cabalistic insignia which the railroads had given Troop's company. Men moved busily back and forth through the refinery. Other men and women were equally engaged in the neat four-story structure before which Pretty Sam stood.

There must be hundreds of people working for Jube Troop, thought Gooney. Yes, Jube's doing all right for himself. Why, some of his men draw thousands of dollars a year. Thousands a year . . . and I'm starving.

The thought evoked a stab of self-pity. And with it a flash of anger. Pretty Sam felt he had a very personal interest in Jubal Troop's prosperity. Resentment burned dully in his breast as he entered the building.

A pert young woman at a telephone switchboard, her look plainly disapproving, asked if he had an appointment with Mr. Troop.

"Nope," answered Gooney. "Just tell him an old friend's here to see him—Sam Gooney."

In a moment she turned from the telephone, her expression swiftly altering to a show of cordiality. "Mr. Troop says to come on up. His office is on the third floor, fourth door down the hall to your left."

Easily Gooney found the door with its gold-lettered sign:

JUBAL TROOP, PRESIDENT

Another young woman sat at a desk in the reception office. Pretty Sam noticed that she was handsome, with amazing green eyes, thick reddish hair, and skin as clear as rose-quartz. A shape, too. He stood looking down at her, his lizard eyes caressing the soft swell of her bust, her slender waist, the curve of her hips. Jubal certainly was a picker. Gooney would like to have a secretary like that. He bet he knew what a part of her duties were . . . at least what they would be if she worked for *him* in the intimacy of an office like this. A good shape like that shouldn't be wasted.

The girl noticed his gaze and her chin went up. She conducted him coldly to Jubal's private office.

"Well, Gooney, what can I do for you?"

Pretty Sam was surprised by the sound of Jubal's voice . . . it was *tired*. That was how the man looked, too. He was growing heavy. Face broader, cheeks softer, lines of the grim chin somewhat marred by flesh. The great, thick torso was taking on fat, too. But the broad forehead was unsullied by wrinkles, save a deep cleft between the eyebrows; and the mouth, a cigar clamped in its corner, was like a steel trap. Jubal, well tailored, well barbered, had the appearance of success. But Pretty Sam could see he was weary to the soul.

"Just thought I'd drop in," said the gambler.

"Oh, you did." There was suspicion in Jubal's eyes, and a frown appeared between them as he tapped his desk. "What are you doing here?"

"Happened to be in Wettick. Thought you'd like to see an old friend."

No cordiality appeared in Jubal's face. Not since the El Paso days, seventeen years before, had he seen the gambler, nor did he want to see Gooney now. Pretty Sam meant two things to Jubal—two episodes in his life which he wished desperately to forget. Already problems were gathering so thickly about him that he scarcely knew how to muster strength to meet them. To add to these heaped worries the question of what Gooney might do, seemed an unnecessary cruelty of fate. The man was speaking again.

"Nice place you have here, Jube. It must have set you back plenty. By the way, maybe you'd help an old friend. I need a little money—want to start a tavern over at Oilton. Always was good as a host, you remember."

Jubal's eyes fixed on Pretty Sam's face. "Why should I let you have any money, Gooney?"

“Well, for one reason, have you ever thought that the Horgan killing ain’t never been cleared up at Teton?”

In the office the silence grew so complete that the small clock on the desk sounded loud in its ticking as the two men stared across it into each other’s eyes. Jubal broke the quiet at last.

“I see . . . you want me to pay you off to keep you still.”

Pretty Sam cleared his throat and smiled. He had changed greatly in eighteen years. Once heavy set, his flesh had fallen away and the skin hung like a pelican’s pouch under his chin; in flat, leathery bags under his eyes. A shell of a man, thought Jubal. Gooney was still garish in his dress, affecting wide checks and fancy cravats, but the clothes he was wearing were cheap as was apparent even to a casual glance.

“I thought it might be worth your while to keep me as a friend . . . not as an enemy,” said Pretty Sam.

“And if I refuse to pay?”

Like summer lightning a flash of passion flickered across the gambler’s face. “Listen to me, Jubal Troop. I’ve waited to tell you this for near twenty years. That night you and Reb Haizlipp skinned me in that poker game, my wife disappeared. Where did she go? I never found a trace of her—never. But I’ll tell you what I think happened to her. Do you want to hear? Well, it don’t make no difference whether you want to or not—you’re going to! *You took her down into Mexico.* Oh, that hits you, does it? That shot went home, like I thought it would! You *did* take her to Mexico, then! And she never came back. Never, never came back! What happened to her? Mebbe you can answer me that. What did you do with her? If you won’t answer me, how would you like to answer the prosecutor? You killed Mae’s husband. You knew she had the evidence on you. You thought to silence her forever, *and you did.* But you forgot there was somebody else whose tongue wasn’t silenced! You forgot old Sam Gooney! You forgot that even if Reb Haizlipp did break him and send him out of El Paso lookin’ for something to do to fill his belly, old Sam Gooney *didn’t* forget!”

The last words were almost a scream, and Pretty Sam’s jaws seemed to champ in his passion. “I’ve hunted you for seventeen years, Jube Troop,” he rasped on. “I’ve dealt faro, an’ tended bar all over the country—me that once owned his own gamblin’ layout an’ bar! *Why, I even pimped for crib houses in New Orl’ns.* I’ve done everything—anything—to get on your trail. An’ then I got it. It was through a newspaper. I read about how you were on

top of the pile here in Oklahoma, livin' fat, with the dollars rollin' in so fast you couldn't count 'em. An' so I came here—I had a few hundred dollars. Never mind how I got 'em. An' now I'm here, I've got a proposition for you. I ought to call the sheriff right now. That's what I *ought* to do! But I need money worse than I need revenge. You can get out of this, Jube Troop, but it's goin' to cost you. It's goin' to cost you plenty!"

After the one brief change in expression which Gooney had noticed and pounced upon, Jubal's face had not again altered.

"What do you expect me to pay for your silence?" he asked coldly.

"Ten thousand dollars—now. Mebbe more later. You can afford to pay. It's worth the money to you. 'Jubal Troop, the first citizen of Wettick'—ten thousand dollars is mighty little to pay for the right to keep a title like that, ain't it? Especially when by keeping it, you also keep out of prison—mebbe hanging! I guess they still hang in the Dakotas. I was an eyewitness to the shootin' of Shep Horgan. There's others still livin' up in Teton who saw it too. Jube Troop, your goose is cooked forever if you don't pay me now! Write that check an' no monkey business. I'm gettin' mighty tired of waitin'!"

Jubal felt a sickness, but it was not fear—it was anger. A spasm of rage passed over him which shook him with its violence, and yet he held his control. When Pretty Sam concluded, Jubal spoke, his voice low and even at the start, but gradually rising:

"Gooney, get out of this office. You can't blackmail me. Ten thousand dollars? I wouldn't pay a slimy polecat like you ten cents. Go ahead! Crack your whip! Tell the prosecutor. Tell the newspapers. *I'll bet you ten thousand dollars you won't tell them anything I won't admit.* Do anything you want to—but get out of this office! An' keep out of my way! I won't be responsible if ever I meet you again. You son-of-a-bitch, I'm likely to kill you on sight!"

He had come slowly from around his desk and started across the room, his eyes blazing white with his wrath. Hunched forward like a great animal about to spring, his massive head sunk low between his shoulders, his hands opening and shutting, it was a savage beast, instinct with menace, which Pretty Sam saw approaching. The blackmailer sprang to his feet with a shriek.

"Get away! Stay off me, Troop! Help, help! Keep him off me!"

His fumbling hand found the knob of the door; he flung it open and plunged through, almost running over the wide-eyed secretary who had

come hurrying at his cries.

Jubal turned his back so that the girl should not see his face. “Shut the door, Miss Reeves,” he told her. “I guess I won’t need you any more this afternoon.”

He sat down at his desk. For a long time he made no move. The anger had shaken him until he still could feel his hands tremble. Gradually the tension passed; now he saw his situation clearly. His body sagged—his body whose increasing grossness he loathed but seemed not able to mend. Yet even had the body been as young and hard as it once was, it would have sagged with the accumulation of discouragement he carried on this day.

The final showdown with “Big Oil,” long anticipated, was at hand. The independents in the Midcontinent field certainly were going to catch it this time, and Jubal could not see how the occasion could be worse for him. Price cutting, transportation trickery, pressure on financial sources, tampering with labor—every devious, sinister trick of which “Big Oil” was capable, would be used. And, due to some necessary refinancing, Jubal was in a position fatally vulnerable.

Building the refinery had involved him with the eastern bankers. He had been forced to construct the plant to provide himself with a better way of marketing the crude oil spewed forth by his wells. The vast growth of the automobile industry paralleled the history of the Troop Oil & Refining Co. Gasoline was at a premium and producing and refining methods were being revised daily. The old, simpler techniques were giving away before complicated chemistry and mechanics which required whole new investments in equipment. Improving automobile motors were demanding improved gasoline. To remain in business, Troop Oil found constant modernization necessary. Therefore Jubal had been forced to secure a series of loans in New York and Chicago.

As it stood today, the refinery was by no means the largest in the world, but it was as complete as any, and Jubal was proud of the new bubble tower and the entire galaxy of additions. Given a fair chance the plant would repay many times over the investment. But would it receive a fair chance? Jubal gazed out of the window at the complicated maze of towers, furnaces, pipes and tanks. When he secured the loans, he believed that he had accomplished a brilliant feat of financing. Now he began to feel it was a colossal mistake. He was “spread out too thin” to be able to absorb much punishment. His oil-producing properties, his refinery, and his equipment were involved in such a way that to attempt to borrow any more money on them would be

embarrassing. If anything should happen at any of the weak bastions of his financial fortress . . . he turned away from the thought. Yet how was he to have anticipated the gathering of the business pirates just at this time?

Jubal's jaw squared. This was business as he understood it, but this time he himself was beneath the hammer. He would feel the full power of the battering, yet he did not condemn the men who were bringing him to the anvil. One of Mesa's sayings came back to him: *Therefore one should take the utmost care to make no complaint if the war falls against him. Then is the time to exchange the courage of the mind for the courage of the body, and to suffer any kind of consequences, no matter how incredible, with no feeling revealed.*

This was good. Jubal appreciated to his inmost being the fatalistic, stoical philosophy it expressed. Business was conducted that way. The strong made the rules and the weak abided by them.

But a worry apart from these matters oppressed him. He stood within the shadow of the one thing he really feared. His past was coming back to face him. You cannot shake off your life. Nothing ever is wholly lost. From the old sin with Mae Horgan in his distant youth had stemmed the great misfortunes of his existence. Almost he was glad the showdown at last was coming. Not since the day when he stood, smoking gun in hand, above the prostrate body of Shep Horgan, his friend, had he ever been wholly free of the picture. It would be a relief to have the entire matter threshed out. Yes, on the whole, he would welcome it when Pretty Sam Gooney would tell his tale.

Another thought entered like a cold spatter of water. What would Naoma do when the revelation came? Through all the recent years when they had been almost like strangers in the home together, no community of interest to their lives, the hope had persisted that some day, possibly through a great atonement, he might recover the old, happy footing with his wife. Perhaps this would end finally any hope of that kind.

His office door opened and he heard the sharp stab of a woman's high heels.

"Mr. Troop—"

It was Judith Reeves, the secretary. She had not gone after all.

"Yes, Miss Reeves."

"I waited . . . I thought perhaps there might be something . . ."

This was loyalty which touched him. She had lingered in the outer office, on the off-chance that he might need her. In his moment of despair the friendship she thus displayed seemed a substantial thing to lean upon. His eyes, which at first barely had noticed her, now brought her sharply into focus. Rich masses of auburn hair. Wide green eyes. A trimly insinuating figure. Why, the girl was pretty—beautiful. Why had he not noticed it before? He smiled.

“It was good of you, Miss Reeves. As a matter of fact I find that I do have a good deal to do. If you would be so kind, make a memo to the production chief, refinery superintendent, distribution head and sales manager for a conference first thing in the morning. I also have some letters to write. . . .”

She came forward lithely, her notebook in her hand, her eyes fixed on his face.

“We have a big fight coming,” he continued, warmed somehow by her nearness.

She nodded her head. “With Big Oil?” She pulled her chair a little nearer. As she seated herself her silken knee brushed his, a bare touch, but it left upon him an impression clear as a bee sting.

It was seven o’clock that evening before they finished the dictation.

8

Riding in an automobile was still an exciting adventure to Naoma, who, even in this year of 1913, was not quite sure whether or not she enjoyed the sensation of such rushing across the country. To be sure motor cars were more comfortable than they had been. The one Naoma was in now, for example, possessed a windshield and a top, and could, if the weather made it necessary, be completely enclosed by side curtains to keep out the cold and wet. On a stretch of smooth road, she had been assured, the automobile was capable of forty miles an hour. The very thought caused Naoma to glance apprehensively at the man at the wheel, but then she smiled with a sensation of security. As long as Webster Grattan was driving, she was comforted with the knowledge that the car would never dash along as recklessly as that. Beside, the road by which they were traveling was rough and full of ruts, and Webster was much occupied in trying to keep the car’s wheels on the smoother places between the yawning dry chasms of old wheel tracks, a legacy of the last rain which had made a morass of the highway.

“There’s a team ahead,” warned Naoma.

Grattan slowed the car. "Lean over when we pass and hold up a finger," he directed. "That attracts the attention of the horses and they're less likely to bolt."

He turned off the beaten track into a bumping wilderness of weeds and Naoma, clinging to her seat, obediently bent forward, holding up a finger. The farmer who was driving was having difficulty with his team. As the car approached, the animals stopped and began a nervous alternate backing and plunging in their traces. The taut lines kept them straight in the road, but their ears pricked forward alarmingly and their eyeballs showed white with terror. The automobile swept by. Both horses shied far off to one side, then leaped forward at a gallop, the farmer sawing the reins to quell the incipient runaway.

"There ought to be roads for automobiles and other roads for horses," said Grattan. "The two kinds of traffic will never mix." He was a little impatient about it.

Naoma glanced at him with a smile. The years had been good to her. A gray thread or two was among her light brown hair, scarcely to be noticed, but her spirit's serenity had prevented the formation of unsightly lines on her face. Sorrow had not blighted her. In her eyes the violet was as deep as ever; her skin was still fine and sweet, her mouth a curve of kindness. At forty, Naoma was a little deeper bosomed, a thought less slender waisted than when she was a girl. But the old, baffling look of immaturity was still hers, a childish trust and innocence perhaps.

Naoma smiled at Webster Grattan because there came to her a little thrill of pride in this handsome man, for years her best friend. They had seen much of each other, a friendship which, Naoma felt, was thoroughly wholesome, thoroughly aboveboard. In his early forties, Grattan fulfilled the promise of his youth's good looks. Well groomed always, his dark, aquiline face now clean-shaved, the gray which sprinkled his temples only added to the distinction of his appearance as he sat beside Naoma, the same devoted admirer he had always been since that night, years before, when he had proposed to her—too late.

"Naoma," Grattan said to her, catching the smile, "I want to ask you a question as man to man."

She laughed at the weak attempt at humor. "What is this question as man to man?"

“Do you think it right, or just, or fair, for a woman to maintain herself in such a state that she can neither share her life with one man, nor free herself so she can make happy another, who would give his life for her?”

The lawyer’s voice was light, but she could detect the great seriousness beneath the words. Her eyes shadowed; the question was an old one between them and Naoma’s fairness of mind never failed to reveal to her the weakness of her position.

“Why don’t you divorce Troop?” he pursued.

She fenced. “I—I don’t want to.” The thought terrified her.

“You don’t love him. I’m sure of it.” The man’s eyes were compelling.

“Even if I didn’t,” she said weakly, “I wouldn’t have any grounds.”

“You do have legal grounds. Cruelty, or incompatibility, or any one of a half-dozen technical grounds would serve before the law.”

“But, Webster, I don’t want even to discuss it! I’m not thinking of a divorce. Jubal is my husband. There is no great community of interest between us any more, I will admit. But my church says ‘*till death do them part.*’ Even if I hated him, I don’t think, somehow, that I would ever feel clean again if I were divorced . . . and remarried.”

Grattan groaned within. Her church! How well he knew the invincibility of that terrible argument. Desperately he asked her one more question:

“Naoma, dear, if I should present you with indubitable evidence . . . evidence which would satisfy even your requirements . . .?”

“Oh, Webster! Please let’s not talk about it any more?” Her voice was half a plea, half a question. He fell silent, but he was saying to himself: She did not say no. Then she will do it. A new and mighty resolve formed in his heart.

“We turn off this way,” she said a little later. To their left was the forest of oil derricks, which, however, did not come down into the creek valley. Grattan swerved to the right, crossed a wooden bridge and swished up a lane along a narrow wheel-track, with the sunflowers slapping the fenders and the grasshoppers glinting in the sun as they sailed to right or left, or flattened themselves in star-shaped spatters on the wind shield. Half a mile down the sunflowered lane, and they drove into a yard surrounding a small, one-story house. A tall figure came from the cabin.

“’Light an’ rest,” grinned Reb Haizlipp cavernously. He gazed at Naoma with great content. Her visits to him had become the chief events in his life. The long decade since he broke with Jubal had taken its toll of Reb, physically and in other ways. He moved with a noticeable feebleness and no longer rode his “gentle hoss.”

Reverses had come to him financially. His old weakness for gambling had sent him in the past years too often to the shady dice, roulette and card games at Oilton, Sand Hill and Slapbang, the shanty towns; and he had suffered bad luck with his cattle through the fact that he lacked Jubal’s razor-sharp trading instincts in the market. The summed-up result of all this was that most of the money which was his when he severed partnership with Jubal now was gone. Of late he had become more and more a hermit, living alone, rarely venturing forth.

Through it all, Naoma had seen him three or four times each year. Long ago his old resentment toward her had departed. Instead there grew up between them a deep understanding. So they sat and chatted on this evening, in the sun before Reb’s cabin, with Grattan taking only a small part in the conversation.

“I brought you some cake,” Naoma said at last, “and a supply of smoking tobacco. And here’s something Judge McReynolds sent down.” She pulled out of the car a quart bottle of bourbon whiskey—a prize in the prohibitionist Oklahoma of these days. “Reb,” she continued, “why don’t you quit this old ranch and come to live in town? You can get a house in the same block with me and I’ll come over every day and take care of you.”

It was an old plea and always heretofore the old man had received it with humorous raillery. But this time he was serious as he answered her.

“I suppose ye think I’m an old galoot that don’t know his own mind,” Reb said gently. “It ain’t so. I set hyar of evenin’s, an’ look out over them hills. By goin’ on the other side of the cabin, I kin see the oil derricks, but I don’t go thar. Thank goodness they found thar was no oil down in this Shoo-Fly bottom, or over in this direction. Oil derricks—that’s the new, the thing that’s took the joy out of livin’ in this old West of mine. That an’ the towns, an’ the bob-wire fences.

“But lookin’ this way, I kin see jest a big stretch of grass-covered hill. Once in a while a jackrabbit or a coyote ambles acrost it. That’s the old. It reminds me of the open range days, when I cooked for big outfits all over these plains an’ thar wasn’t a fence as far as ye could ride. Sometimes a beef

critter wanders acrost that stretch of hill yonder. That's all right, too, because it belongs to the old West.

"I set hyar an' my mind goes back over a long an' crooked trail. It's pleasant in my thoughts, because I'm with old friends then—old friends, an' good friends. I talk to fellers I ain't seen for forty years, an' won't see, neither, until I go over the Great Divide, because they've gone thar before me. I go back over things I done when I was a keerless an' keerfree young buck on the plains—the happiest days I ever spent, an' the happiest days a man *could* spend, Naomy. That's what I do. I'm jest a-waitin' for the time to come when I go over that Big Crossin' at last, an' meet them friends again . . . an' live over again, younger an' stronger, them days that is all gone, never to return this side of heaven."

9

Judith Reeves gazed out of the window and Jubal watched her clear profile. Her nose was her best feature, but everything about her seemed potent, like strong wine. It was late and the summer dusk was setting in outside. Inside the office they had not yet turned on a light.

Within the past few weeks, Judith had come to occupy a large place in Jubal's life. It had started out as business—extra hours of dictation in the crisis, which she willingly undertook. Then it had come to be a pleasure to both of them. Judith had attended the state university and belonged to one of the sororities, the name of which Jubal, being unacquainted with Greek in any form, could never remember. He called it the Moo Cow Moo, and she humored him by laughing at it. Judith's stories of her life at college were often funny, sometimes shocking to Jubal's ideas of propriety, but always very entertaining.

She was of the newer, more venturesome generation of women. Although common opinion in Wettick was still against women who "painted," Judith used rouge and powder skillfully, and Jubal marveled at the way she made it counterfeit the reality of nature—so much so that she escaped criticism to a large extent from members of her own sex. Not that she would have cared about the criticism. There was about her a remarkable frankness which sometimes appalled him. She spoke of sex with as little concern as she talked of the weather. Men were an old story to her, and she frequently related adventures with them—adventures which sometimes made him gasp.

His loneliness, his constant association with her, her youth and gayety, all attracted him to her. On this evening when she had worked two hours after quitting time he felt grateful to her, and with that some other kind of emotion which he found difficult to explain to himself.

“I guess it’s time to quit,” he said, arising from his desk. She rose too.

Jubal walked across the room and, quite naturally, put his arms about her. The action was almost without volition, so much so that he felt mildly surprised when he found her in his embrace, and more than mildly surprised when she remained there unresisting, accepting his kiss and returning it as if it were a matter of course. Her lips were sweet and fire seemed to surge through him when he felt their soft pressure. But presently she disengaged herself with a little gasp, laughing.

“You’re too—too impetuous,” she exclaimed.

He felt his own breath coming fast.

“You’re so—ferocious. It took my breath away.” She was still laughing, a little uncertainly, and dabbing at her hair which he had disarranged. He seized her wrist and drew her toward him.

“No,” she said desperately. “No!”

But he crushed his face against hers for a long, intoxicating minute before she again tore loose.

“You’re a cave man, aren’t you?” she said, and the suggestion of discomfiture excited him.

“No,” she said again, firmly. She pushed him away. “You’ve had enough.”

Jubal’s head was whirling. He had never seen a woman like this before. A kiss, to him, meant passion, but this girl kissed passionately, yet ended everything there. After a time his blood cooled a little and he seated himself. She still remained standing.

“It’s time for me to go.” She said it significantly.

“Oh, no,” he pleaded. “Stay a little longer.”

She made a little pout with her mouth, which he could barely distinguish in the growing dusk.

“But you paw me.”

“I won’t any more.” His throat seemed to swell so that he could not speak, only gulp. “I just want to talk,” he managed to say after a moment.

She seated herself on the edge of her chair.

“I shouldn’t have done . . . that,” he began, his ears pounding.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said, surprisingly.

“I took advantage—”

“I wouldn’t have let you kiss me if I hadn’t wanted you to.”

“I—you—” he gurgled.

She nodded her brilliant curls. “When I like a man I see no harm in kissing him. Why make a fuss over it? ‘A kiss never left a scar.’”

He pondered her words. There was something wrong here—something which did not fit with his old sense of values.

“In college—did you often—” he hesitated.

“Kiss men?” she finished for him calmly. “Well, not as often as they wanted! After you go with fellows for a while they rather expect it. It’s called spooning. I used to amuse myself seeing how long they would kiss me without my kissing back.”

This was incomprehensible to Jubal; yet in some manner tremendously thrilling. He wanted to talk more with Judith. A bold suggestion came to him:

“It’s late. What if I had some supper sent up here?”

But she stared at him. “Here? In this office?”

“Yes.”

“No.” She shook her head. “That wouldn’t do. Too many come up here into this building. It wouldn’t take long for the story to go around that the boss was having a late supper in his office with his secretary.” She gave him a sidelong smile which said that she knew also exactly what else the gossips would be saying. “I’ve got a better idea,” she said after thinking a moment. “Why not come over to my apartment and have supper with me?”

“Alone?” He was stunned.

“Certainly. You won’t eat me, will you?”

“No, but what if—”

“Somebody should see us? Well, we’ll go over there as if nothing was wrong—which nothing is. If you act perfectly naturally about things, people aren’t likely to talk about you, I’ve found. Come on! Nothing wrong about friends eating together, is there?”

It was a challenge. Jubal, who had never had any experience with a woman like this modern young creature, was charmed. In the back of his mind instinct warned him not to go, but the intoxication of the adventure and the thrill of the intimacy with Judith overcame his misgivings. This is the way girls and men do things nowadays, he said to himself. He took his hat and opened the door for her.

“You must let me pay for the supper,” he said.

Again that frank, straight look. “Listen to the man! Did you hear me suggesting anything else? No, Mr. Troop,” with mock demureness, “when a gentleman dines with a lady at his request, she is usually his guest I believe.”

Jubal laughed at her foolishness. He suddenly realized that for the first time in months he had a feeling of complete relaxation.

Supper at Judith’s apartment was a gay occasion. The girl whisked on an apron and her quick steps clicked pleasantly in his ears as she laid the table. All the atmosphere of employer and employee had mysteriously vanished. She was twenty-five and he more than forty, but she bridged the gap of the years, too. They laughed much, and talked on many subjects.

At the end, with his wide cowboy hat in his hand, he put his free arm about her shoulders. For a moment they stood thus, smiling into each other’s eyes.

“Do I kiss you good night?” he almost whispered at last.

“Why not?” she answered.

The clock on the courthouse tower was striking eleven as he descended the steps from Judith’s apartment house. Great heavens, where had the time flown?

For years the *Wettick Daily Transcript* had awaited the chance to pay off its grudge against Jubal Troop for permitting the rival *Daily Courant* to print exclusively the first announcement of his refinery. But it had never, in its wildest dreams, imagined how full and glorious would be that revenge.

Wherefore the editor and owner, Max Waldstein, crowed with delight as the first afternoon edition rolled off and the office boy brought him a copy. With the fervor of an artist he scanned the black line of type which screamed across the top of the page:

MURDER CASE AGAINST JUBAL TROOP

Below ran other headlines:

WETTICK OIL MAN HELD ON
\$25,000 BOND FOR SLAYING

Charges Based on Crime Allegedly Committed
Thirty Years Ago—Authorities in Dakotas
Said to Want Industrial Leader

Accused Man Is Silent

It was Judith, her face white, who brought the paper into Jubal's office. The morning had been hectic. First Richey Benner, the new sheriff, came for Jubal. Then reporters swarmed over the office asking her a thousand impertinent questions. When Jubal returned, she loyally stood guard outside his door and kept scores of curious acquaintances from seeing him. Now came this newspaper with its brutal headlines.

Jubal merely nodded when he saw it. "I expected Max would do something like that. He's been waiting a long time." His eyes shifted to her face. "What do you think of your boss now, Judith?"

Her wide eyes flashed. "I think the same of you that I did—last night."

"And that is?"

"That you're swell!"

Jubal's heart leaped with gratitude and there was a little lump in his throat. This girl, so much younger than he, had in some strange way a real feeling for him. He grinned almost boyishly at her.

"That's a thing that I don't deserve from you, Judith. But since you've said it, I'll come right back at you—I think you're mighty swell, too."

"Here are some telephone calls," she said, her eyes dropping as she handed him a slip of paper.

"What are they?"

“Oh, a lot of miscellaneous calls, none of importance except the ones I relayed to you.”

“None from—?”

“Mrs. Troop? I’m sorry. No.”

In this crisis, thought Jubal, it is Judith who is standing by me. Naoma has forgotten all about me—or perhaps she has decided to get rid of me. It would be a perfect time for her to do it.

11

Had he known it, Naoma at that moment was making a decision.

Webster Grattan stood on her porch, the *Daily Transcript* in his hand. He had come to her as soon as the news was out, and they had been talking earnestly.

“Webster,” Naoma was saying, “try to understand. I couldn’t leave him now of all times. It would be the worst kind of kicking a man when he was down. I know that Jubal has lost all interest in me, but I—I might be able to help him just now. And anyway . . . I don’t believe that story.”

Grattan’s features were bitter with disappointment. A strong hope had been in him that when Naoma realized what kind of a past Jubal had, she would end her resistance to the divorce, a subject he had been discussing with her for months now.

“What is it going to take to convince you, darling woman?” he whispered fiercely.

She took no notice of the endearment. “Misfortune is no excuse to break a marriage.”

He went slowly down the steps and Naoma turned indoors. She went directly to the telephone. It was her first chance to call Jubal since the paper had been issued.

“Mr. Troop?” came the telephone’s ghostly voice. “No, he has gone out.”

Out? Where? Slowly Naoma returned the receiver to its hook. Wherever he was going in this hour of emergency, she was fairly certain—and the thought gave her a pang—that it would not be home.

Nothing travels so fast as ill news, and the report of Jubal's arrest went fast and far to complicate his financial situation. He sent for Judge McReynolds, and that astute lawyer, after spending most of a morning with him, departed on a mysterious errand, with a satchel full of papers. Jubal turned his attention to an even more pressing problem than the charge against him in court. "Big Oil's" raid was in full swing at last, and he was receiving dozens of telegrams and letters daily which required answer. More and more Judith became an essential and integral part of his existence.

Several times in the next week or two he dined with her in her rooms, and the gay, irresponsible atmosphere she threw about these occasions delighted him. Usage made them overlook some of the caution with which at first they had surrounded these slightly clandestine trysts, and he now came and went quite freely, almost indifferent to the possibility of gossip should anyone recognize him at her apartment.

A curious relationship had sprung up between them. Judith's attitude was frank and affectionate. She called him "Dear" and "Pet" with a carefree abandon which convinced him that it was only her manner of speaking, without any real emotional foundation, yet pleasurable for all that. Occasionally he would take her into his arms. She submitted to this, even returned his kisses with fire. But always at a certain point, when his blood temperature had gone too high for safety, she would coolly disengage herself and bring them back to the realities by turning the conversation on Jubal's business.

That she probably took an impish delight in experimenting with him, Jubal realized, and he was a trifle provoked with himself that he permitted himself to react to her leads. Yet, although he sometimes wondered just how much she secretly laughed at him, she so entranced him with her youth, her airy modernity and her mirth that he continued to play the game between them according to her rules, so that gradually the friendship on terms fixed by her became more intimate and closely bound than he had ever known with any woman under similar circumstances.

In the office, Judith was all cool efficiency and capability. Occasionally young men came to see her there, but she discouraged this, although her telephone messages from admirers were many. She was a graceful and tireless dancer, and as pretty as any girl in Wettick, so it was natural that she should be popular among the young men of her own age. One thing which relieved the jealous pang which Jubal sometimes felt at the sight of these office callers was the fact that they were rarely the same man twice in succession. Concerning them Judith talked gleefully. She called them her

“Lotharios” and told Jubal with an intimacy that almost made his head swim of funny things they said and did.

“Why don’t you get married?” he inquired once as she sat in his office after dictation recounting an experience of the previous evening.

“All the good men are already married,” she instantly replied.

“What about those boys that you go out with?”

“Huh! There isn’t one of them that can earn a living for himself, let alone for a family. Besides, I guess I’m different from most girls. I like older men.”

Jubal knew this was arrant flattery, but he was pleased by it.

“I’m not going to marry,” she went on positively, “until I find somebody like Jubal Troop.” She made bright eyes at him and sparkled with laughter.

It was a remark she often made, and he knew she had no intention that he take it at face value; yet it vaguely warmed him. Always, however, it caused him to think of things which he would rather not consider, and which he never discussed, not even with her. It was his growing loneliness which appalled him. Naoma was becoming so preoccupied with her own interests . . . why should he continue for the rest of his life in an existence so unsatisfactory? By now he and his wife had grown so far apart that neither of them ever thought of making an overture toward intimacy. They had lost the habit. Except for his hours with Judith he knew almost no sort of close companionship. At times he even thought . . . Judith’s beauty and youth did not dim the undoubted fact that she was very fond of him . . . fifteen years was no such difference. . . .

A lifetime of loyalty, however, is not quickly contravened. Whenever his thoughts reached the bald question of divorce, they sheered sharply away from it. The certitude in his own mind that Judith gave her lips not only to him, but as unreservedly, if she liked them, to young men with whom she chanced to dance at night, helped him in this attitude. But the old, dull ache when he thought of Naoma, his wife yet not his wife, sharing his home but not his life, was the real deterrent.

One evening, shortly after Gooney’s revelation of the Teton episode, Judith lingered late, although her dictation was not large that day. Working over his papers, Jubal heard the door open and glanced up to see her enter.

“H’lo,” she said with a small smile. It was her little way of greeting him.

“Why, Judith—I thought you’d gone home.”

“What are you going to be doing this evening?”

He considered. “Not anything much, I guess.” Naoma had left that morning on one of her frequent visits to the McReynoldses in Wichita.

“Why can’t we have supper together?” she suggested.

“I’d like to very much,” he agreed. “Only I’ve got a few letters to sign yet—”

“I know. I want you to come over—later. This time I’m inviting you to *my* supper.”

“Ah, ha!” he said, looking keenly at her. “The well-known Reeves hospitality is unlocking at last, is it?”

“Yes,” she pouted. “You needn’t be sarcastic. Will you come over—about six?”

Judith’s apartment was on the ground floor of a brick building. At six Jubal knocked at her door and was admitted. Her table already was spread with a gleaming white cloth and set with pretty silver and china. Some things in the room he had given her—a pair of candles cast a soft, bright light from his candlesticks of hammered silver; on the dresser in her bedroom was his toilet set of ivory and gold; his photograph was on her bookshelf. He had delighted in making her presents, and she had accepted them as he gave them—without attaching to them undue meaning, merely as an expression of their odd but pleasant friendship.

That evening they dined sumptuously, Judith gaily admitting that she had bought most of the food at the delicatessen. At the end she brought forward a bottle. Champagne. Well iced and sparkling. They drank to each other with mutual warm regard, pledging again and again. Then a silence seemed to settle over them.

“Jubal, dear,” said Judith at last, “I asked you here because I want to tell you something.”

“What is it?”

“I’m married!”

For a moment he sat stock still, stunned by the words.

“Well, congratulations,” he managed to say at last. He toyed with his glass. A flood of thoughts rushed into his mind. Judith married? He acknowledged a jolting sense of deprivation. So this was the end of all the joy and happiness they had known together. The free and easy comradeship was a thing of the past. Jubal felt suddenly a great emptiness as if a huge bite had been taken out of his life, but he kept his face expressionless, his eyes on his glass.

“Aren’t you even going to ask me when it happened?” she asked at last in a small voice.

“I thought that if you wanted to tell me—”

“Don’t be stupid!” She was almost sharp. “Of course I wish to tell you. I’m bubbling over to tell you. That’s why I brought you over to supper. I was married last night. You don’t know him. Evan Thomas. We went together at the university and he’s been working in his father’s store at Ardmore. He’s big and blond, and a wonderful boy, Jubal. I know you’ll like him. We were married secretly by the probate judge, and it isn’t to be known because Evan wants to get away from Ardmore. He’s trying for a job at Oklahoma City. Maybe he can be a coach at the high school there. You know he was a star football player at the university. Until he gets another job, we thought we’d keep the wedding secret.”

“Well, this is a big compliment all right. I suppose I’m the only one you took into your confidence—”

“Jubal Troop, I could wring your neck! Don’t you dare keep on sitting there with that glass. Aren’t you even going to kiss the bride?”

He rose and crushed her in his arms. “Do you really love him?” he asked chokingly at last into the curls on top of her head.

“Yes,” she nodded.

“Are you sure?”

“Ye-e-s.”

He found her lips open to him again, and a sudden mad thought surged through him. This was the last time . . . the last time. There would be no more intimacies between them. He had lost her—irretrievably lost her. All right. He would make her his for all time in one way at least. His arm slipped down about her thighs and he lifted her, his mouth still clinging to hers. She struggled and freed her lips.

“What are you going to do?” she whimpered. The champagne was buzzing in his head. Carefully, he started across the room with her in his arms. Across the room . . . toward her bedroom. It was like the last long miles to water over the desert, those four or five strides to the door. She had ceased struggling and now she begged him.

“Don’t! Oh, don’t, Jubal!” He laid her roughly on the bed. “Don’t do this to me, Jubal. You will be sorry. Sorry all your life. If you do this, nothing will ever be . . . the same again.”

Revulsion swept shiveringly over him. He released her body and sat up on the edge of the bed. Bed all rumped. His collar awry and a wisp of hair twisting across his damp forehead over his eye. Coat askew. Never the same again. Nothing would ever be the same again. He was a sucker. Judith was gone from him and he wanted to cry. What did she mean in his life? Did he love her? No. Yes. But it wasn’t the same kind of love some way that he had known for Naoma. Never the same again. She was right.

He rose, straightened his coat, and brushed back the wisp of hair. Then he started out of the room. Judith came behind him, a queer, contrite expression on her face. Her hair was mussed and her dress wrinkled, but she was thinking of him. She laid a hand on his arm.

“Jubal . . . I’m so sorry.”

He picked up his hat. “Thank you, Mrs.—Thomas, isn’t it? It’s been a very pleasant evening.”

“Oh, Jubal!” she cried, seizing his arm. “You must not leave this way! You aren’t going out of my life, Jubal . . . and I’m not going out of yours.” It was a breathless question more than an assertion.

“No.” Jubal was regaining his perspective. “No.”

He considered her it seemed from a new angle. Was able to smile at her kindly. “You say your—husband is looking for a job. Why don’t you have him try the Troop Oil Company?”

“Oh!” She hugged his arm. “That would be wonderful!”

“We’ll remember each other. I’ll be the dark man on your horizon the fortune teller will always be warning you about.”

“Oh, yes! That will be nice.”

One more kiss. A kiss of renunciation, tender not passionate, and he tore himself away. As the door closed behind him and he descended the steps, a

shadow seemed to flit momentarily ahead, then up an alley. He hurried forward and glanced down the narrow byway. Had he seen someone? A certainty took possession of him. It was a man, and the gait was one he would never forget. Pretty Sam Gooney.

The street cars ran from the Santa Fe station in Wichita to North Market Street, within a block of where Judge McReynolds lived, but Webster Grattan and Pretty Sam Gooney boarded a cab instead. It was a mile drive, but neither man spoke as they rode. Grattan's mind was too filled with what he was going to say to Naoma Troop. This was to be the end to years of patient effort—the exposure to her of Jubal Troop. Too kind, too trusting, too generous, she had never quite believed the things told of her husband. But Grattan knew the information he was bringing would shatter any lingering loyalty she might retain. At the thought of it, his own desire for her made the blood pound in the lawyer's ears. Eighteen years of waiting . . .

Gooney's thoughts also were full. He was vastly disappointed that Jubal refused to pay for his silence. What good would it be to prosecute the oil man? The satisfaction of personal retribution, of course. But Gooney would far rather have the ten thousand dollars. If Troop had been more tractable it might have meant more than ten thousand even—maybe twenty, or thirty or fifty thousand dollars before Pretty Sam was finished. No telling where such a thing might end with a rich man like Jubal Troop. Instead, Gooney was traveling with this lawyer, Grattan, who was paying him a paltry five hundred dollars for his information, on some kind of an errand connected in no way with Gooney's own affairs. The gambler thought hard. There must be some way to squeeze money out of Troop. The thought of Reb Haizlipp suddenly came. Pretty Sam remembered hearing that Jubal and Reb had parted company, and that the old man lived out in the country somewhere. Probably well heeled, too. Gooney remembered he had a score to settle there . . . there were men at Oilton. Dopey Dan Howell, for instance. Ex-convict and snowbird. He would be ripe for almost anything. . . .

Before a tall white frame house with thin porch posts which looked too flimsy to support the massive roof, Grattan and Pretty Sam alighted from the cab. Bridal wreath bushes hid the foundations of the residence, tying the structure to its wide, smooth lawn. Above stretched the protecting canopy branches of tall elms.

“Lawrence Avenue,” said Grattan. He glanced at a number painted on the hitching post—an imitation log of cast iron, with knotty, cast iron

branches, set upright in a concrete base. "Yes, this is the place."

Naoma was expecting them, and Grattan's longing for her leaped into his eyes as she met them at the door, very serious in a starched white dress. Sweet woman . . . she still looked like a girl, with that childlike expression from which, however, any appearance of triviality was removed by the depths of her eyes and the broad white forehead beneath the wave of brown hair which was curved across one side. Naoma's hair naturally was luxuriant so that she dispensed with the "rats" which most women of the day used to build up the little puffs on the sides of the head. Her back was straight, her waist supple. Grattan's expression paid tribute.

Behind Naoma appeared the formidable visage of Mrs. Judge McReynolds. She had read Webster's letter to Naoma and she was present like an old lioness to see that nothing befell this daughter of her heart. Into the ear of the Judge's wife Naoma had poured all the anguish and bewilderment occasioned by the information which Grattan had sent before him; on Mrs. McReynolds' wide bosom had been shed many tears. Now the old woman, with her harsh face, stood guard as though over a child, grimly determined no more sorrow should come to Naoma if it could be prevented.

In the McReynolds sitting room, Webster plunged into the matter which had brought him.

"This is hard, Naoma," he began, "but in justice to you, and as one who has given you a not inconsiderable amount of devotion, I felt it my duty to make you acquainted with indubitable facts which lately have come to light."

"I know," she said. "Please tell your story."

"I have brought this gentleman, Mr. Gooney, to tell you what he personally saw. I felt the first-hand account of this witness was due you."

Naoma turned her gaze on Pretty Sam. It was the first time she had observed him closely and instinctively she disliked him. Yet she listened.

"It's a short story, Mrs. Troop," the man began. "I been watchin' Jubal Troop for—for reasons. He owes me money. An' I've seen him more'n once leave his office an' go somewheres with that redheaded girl of his. On the night in question, I followed them an' found they went to her rooms. Wishin' to see what they was doing, I went around the place in search of a window."

He shot a guilty look at her and Naoma's lips compressed. This type of spying disgusted her. Gooney hurried on:

“They was eatin’ together. She had a big meal on the table an’ they was eatin’ an’ laughing. Finally they got through eatin’ an’ they sat an’ talked for quite a while. Then, of a sudden, he begun huggin’ an’ kissin’ her an’ pretty soon he—he carried her into the bedroom.”

“Carried her?” cried Naoma.

“Yes. But she wasn’t resistin’ none. After a while they come out again. He come first an’ she followed. They looked pretty badly rumped.”

Naoma felt numbed. Beside her sat Mrs. Judge McReynolds, her beak held high and her thin lips compressed above her fat chin, her eyes bright and intent. Webster Grattan, on the opposite side of the circle, watched Naoma’s face closely, an expression of sympathy and concern on his own dark features. Gooney still stared as if mesmerized at the Brussels carpet.

“This isn’t all Mr. Gooney was to tell you,” came Grattan’s voice presently. “Do you feel strong enough to hear the rest?”

Naoma nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

“Well, ma’am,” Pretty Sam began at Webster’s nod. “You know about the murder charges. But the newspapers ain’t printed the full story. There’s more to it, an’ here it is:

“I was living at Teton when Jubal Troop first come there. He’d been a sheep herder over in Montana. A rancher named Shep Horgan give him a job—as nice a feller as ever branded a calf. I knew him well. One day, in spite of the favors Horgan had done him, Jubal Troop took advantage of the time when Shep was away from the ranch, an’—well, he got Mrs. Horgan alone in the house, ma’am, an’ she was jest a weak woman, an’—”

“I think Mrs. Troop understands,” interposed Grattan. He had been watching Naoma intently while Gooney floundered.

“Well, that’s what he done,” said Pretty Sam, brightening as the ordeal of the explanation was removed. “Then he rode to Teton, thinkin’ to be safe there. But Shep Horgan followed him. Troop hid behind a corner of a building an’ shot Horgan dead right there in the street.”

Naoma caught her breath. “How do you know this?” she asked.

“I seen it myself. The building Troop hid behind was my own saloon. Others seen it too—most of the town, in fact.”

“But I mean—I mean—the—what happened to Horgan’s wife.”

“I had it from the woman’s own lips. You see—I married her later.”

“Oh.” It must be true, Naoma thought. He wouldn’t have married her if she had—if it had happened between her and Jubal any other way. But Gooney was speaking again.

“That ain’t all, ma’am.” He assumed an expression of sadness. “Later on, me an’ Mae—Mae was Horgan’s widow that I married—we moved down to El Paso, where I opened up a little *cantina*. One night who should come in but Troop an’ another feller. We played poker. I ain’t sayin’ nothing about the ways of playin’, ma’am, but I lost fifteen thousand dollars that night—every dime I had. An’ in the morning I’d lost something else that I valued more. My wife.”

“What do you mean?” Naoma was shocked and startled.

“She disappeared. I never saw her again. Later I found out that very morning Troop had gone south into Mexico. Just what he done there ain’t never been really explained, ma’am. But he come back with a whole lot of cows. He come back from Mexico alone, ma’am, but I have every good reason to believe that my wife, Mae Horgan Gooney, *went down into Mexico with him!*”

“Oh, no! It couldn’t be!” Her cry was poignant with protest. Apparently this disclosure was more painful to her than the evidence of Jubal’s infidelity. After a time, more quietly, “Why do you think this?”

“He admitted it to me. You ask him yourself!”

Naoma turned to Grattan. Solemnly he nodded. The floor seemed reeling beneath her.

“I must have time to think,” she said chokingly. “Won’t you leave me alone for a little while? Come back—later. I will talk it over with you then.”

When Grattan returned after supper there were no signs to have told him that Naoma had spent the intervening hours weeping and wrestling with her soul. She was with Mrs. Judge McReynolds, and she held that lady’s strong fingers throughout the brief interview.

“I have decided,” Naoma told Grattan. “You may—you may go ahead with the divorce.”

The divorce hearing came more quickly than Naoma had anticipated. After he obtained her consent to it, Grattan pushed the case with headlong energy. Naoma could not conceal from herself the reason behind this. Poor

Webster. He had been so utterly faithful all these years. A half-pitying tenderness for him welled up in her heart. Perhaps he deserved . . . his reward.

In spite of her sympathetic understanding of Grattan, Naoma could have wished that he had permitted things to accomplish themselves in a fashion more leisurely. It seemed almost indecent, the way he rushed matters. Webster, as former county prosecutor, had been closely associated with Judge Fewell, who sat on the district court bench at Wettick. Both were members of the Republican organization in their county and were on familiar terms professionally and socially. It was therefore a favorable circumstance for Naoma's case that Grattan was her attorney.

Through his influence with Judge Fewell, Grattan succeeded in having the case advanced on the court calendar until it was tried almost immediately after being filed. Naoma was, of course, notified to be present at the hearing. At this point she almost collapsed and would have dropped the entire case.

"It seems terrible—I c-can't do it!" she sobbed in Mrs. McReynolds' grenadierlike but motherly arms.

"There, there, dear," soothed the loyal old martinet. "This is no time for tears or hesitation. You have the case in court. I didn't think at first it was wise, but since you have gone so far, you might as well go through with it. I'll be with you through it all."

Neither of the Episcopal McReynoldses had at first approved the divorce action. Somehow Naoma did not approve it herself. She seemed swept along without volition on a stream of events over which she had no control. And so she was in a nervous flutter, verging on hysteria, when, accompanied by her faithful old friend, the Judge's wife, she returned to Wettick.

Grattan met her at the station.

"How are you feeling, my lady?" He was confident, laughing. Already in his manner of saying "my lady" there was something warmly possessive.

"A little shaky," she confessed. "I'm afraid to see . . . meet . . ."

"Oh, Troop?" He reassured her. "Don't worry about that. This case will never be contested—I've seen to that. As soon as I notified him of Gooney's testimony, he lost all tendency to balk. Seems that he feels he should protect that—girl. Anyway, Troop won't be in the court room. He can't afford to have brought out against him some of the things I am prepared to show, if he should dare to appear, and he knows it. The hearing will be in chambers, so

there won't be any crowd to gawk. Judge Fewell arranged it." He smiled at her grateful face. "We'll take our decree and property judgment, and you'll be free as the air, with enough to take care of you, as you deserve, for the rest of your sweet life."

"That's another thing, Webster, that I don't like—"

"Nonsense, Naoma. Leave this to me. After all, you don't know very much about law, do you? I'm going to ask for all the law allows, expecting half. We'll probably be cut down a great deal on our asking."

"How much are you going to ask?"

"A half of the property. It's our legal right."

"But that would cripple the business—"

"Don't worry," Grattan laughed, "we won't begin to get it. Although I'd like to well enough," he added savagely to himself.

He led the two women into the court house, up an echoing hall with musty offices on either side, the doors of which stood open to reveal counters and tarnished wickets, within which men with black sleeve-protectors worked languidly. On the transom of each door was a painted sign. "County Clerk," "Assessor," "County Treasurer," some of them ran. One door boasted the initials "G.A.R." to show that the old soldiers of the Civil War were using their political solidarity in this county as elsewhere.

Near the entrance to the court room, Naoma passed the sheriff's office. A tall young man with a rugged face stepped out.

"Mrs. Troop!"

"Richey Benner! I'm glad to see you. This is the first time I've seen you since you were elected sheriff and I'm so proud of you." She gave him a smile. Richey was one of her pupils of the school-teaching days. Vividly she remembered how he used to diagram the human heart on the blackboard, with a technique of which he was very proud, whereby he made his chalk jump across the surface to create beautiful dotted lines indicating the course of the blood stream.

Richey Benner was embarrassed. He almost worshiped Naoma, remembering her as she was when she was his teacher. On the other hand, he could not forget Naoma's husband. Jubal Troop had befriended him, had aided him in his campaign for office. Miserably he wished the two could be reconciled, but there was nothing he could do about it. Naoma passed on down the hall.

Into the court room Grattan ushered the women—a high-ceilinged auditorium with rows of plain seats like church pews. A low, heavy wooden rail separated the audience from the bench, which rose imposingly on a platform, with a carved oak screen behind it. On each end of the high desk was a large globe light, and Naoma also could descry a gavel, an inkwell and some statute books. In front of the bench were tables and chairs for attorneys, and to one side stood the twelve swivel chairs where the jury sat.

A fat, baldish man with a drooping gray mustache and eyes which peered myopically through double-lensed spectacles, awaited them. Naoma noticed the G.A.R. button on his lapel. He was the bailiff.

“The Judge is expecting you in his chambers,” the bailiff said.

They entered and Naoma’s heart beat so fast that she was half sick with something akin to stage fright. Behind a wide table sat Judge Fewell, a pompous man, cadaverous in the face, with hair of foxy red. There were a few chairs about the small room, and Grattan bowed to Naoma.

“Mrs. Troop, will you take this chair next to the Judge?” he asked. She obeyed and Mrs. McReynolds sternly appropriated the seat beside her. Naoma observed two other persons in the room: a lean, pale youth with a pencil and notebook, evidently the court stenographer; and a little, portly man, who seemed to strut even while he sat down. Grattan was on his feet, clearing his throat. If it pleased the court, he said, the plaintiff in the action of Naoma Troop versus Jubal Troop was here present and prepared to give evidence in the case now to be heard. Judge Fewell inclined his gaunt head.

“Is the defendant present?” he asked in a dry voice.

The little strutting man arose. “I represent the defendant, Jubal Troop.”

Grattan whispered to Naoma that he was Luke Luther, a lawyer, who had done much of Jubal’s legal work. “This is as much of a surprise to me as it is to you,” he told her anxiously. “Luther had informed me he was not going to oppose the divorce action.”

Apparently the Judge had the same impression, for he glared at the short, red-faced lawyer with annoyance.

“Is this case to be contested?” he asked testily. “I had understood it would be unopposed. Else I would not have moved it up on the calendar and agreed to hear it in chambers. What does this mean?”

“Your honor’s assumption is correct,” answered Luther blandly. “I am here merely to safeguard my client’s property interests, a step which my

distinguished colleague”—here he bowed ironically to Grattan—“will no doubt agree, in his heart, is not ill-advised.”

Grattan returned the bow with equal irony and Luther seated himself.

“Under these circumstances,” said the Judge with gravity, “the court will listen to the testimony.”

Naoma placed her hand upon a book brought by the fat bailiff, then heard, as from a great distance, her own voice answering “I do” to the oath. She gave her name, her husband’s name, and swore that she was a resident of Wettick, although now temporarily living with friends in Wichita. Then began questions, abominable questions. As she had been coached, she answered them, her eyes on the floor. Sometimes she felt like screaming out denials, in spite of the fact that she had steeled herself for the ordeal. Only by remembering, through sheer effort of will, that the man against whom she was testifying was guilty of one, possibly two, deaths; that he had a smirched business record; that he had brought Doc Shanks to his end; that he had crushed every unfortunate who happened to be in the way of his ruthless march for power; and that, finally, he had traitorously consorted with another woman, kept her resolution up. She felt Mrs. McReynolds’ hand cover hers. That helped.

Suddenly the questions ceased. Naoma looked up, dazed. It was over—over so quickly that she could hardly realize it. Quite abruptly the Judge’s rasping voice:

“Decree granted. Costs assessed against the defendant.”

“Now, your honor, concerning the property settlement.” It was Grattan, his face for the first time eager, his eyes burning. To him this was the crux of the entire case.

“Has there been a property appraisal?”

“Yes, your honor. I can subpoena the books of the Troop Oil—”

“How much does the appraisal total?”

“For the purposes of this action, it totals in round figures three millions of dollars, your honor.”

Luther assented to the estimate, happy that it was no higher.

“The plaintiff asks equal division of the property,” began the Judge.

Immediately Luther leaped to his feet like a bellicose little cock robin, vehemently protesting. Such a demand was preposterous, he shouted. It was

not in equity or justice. To grant such a demand would gravely injure his client, causing the bankruptcy of his business—a business which meant, he hoped the court realized, a very great deal to the community of Wettick. At this Grattan broke in. Angrily the lawyers bickered back and forth, Naoma sitting dazed, unable to follow the machine-gun legal phraseology. Eventually, however, the Judge banged his gavel and announced his decision.

Leaning on Grattan's arm, Naoma walked from the court room. Her head was whirling so that she hardly heard him as he gleefully told her the Judge had awarded her outright cash, property and common stock in the Troop Oil & Refining Co., which totaled half a million dollars. She only knew that she was a free woman—and a very miserable one. No longer was she the wife of Jubal Troop. No man held any claim over her.

And she felt wildly like rushing to find Jubal, and crying out to him: "I have been disloyal; a traitor to you!"

BOOK 12

The Nether Millstone

1

To Jubal the accumulation of disaster was akin to the blows rained upon the head of a dazed boxer in the ring. First came the murder charge, upon which Judge McReynolds was still working—the murder charge, somehow, seemed very remote just now.

Naoma's divorce suit really had staggered him. Almost to the last Jubal had maintained the forlorn, unspoken hope that the breach between them could be healed. Yet when notified she was seeking divorce he refused to oppose the action. In this he was ruled to some extent by a consideration for Judith Reeves. The world would never believe, he fully understood, the blamelessness of their relation. Therefore he could not allow her name to be linked in the case. When Grattan came to him and offered the alternative between an unopposed divorce action for Naoma, or the naming of Judith as corespondent in the divorce petition, he unhesitatingly made his choice.

Now he was learning another thing. Judith's plea, "Nothing will ever be the same again," had brought him to his senses; prevented him from taking her that last night in her apartment. Yet, although he had forgone her, nothing had been the same since. Judith's white, scared face the morning he called her into his office and told her of Naoma's suit and Grattan's threat, haunted him. Yet he could not find it in his heart to blame her for at once thereafter resigning from her position and returning to her home at Guthrie. After all she was newly married; not even privileged yet to live with her young husband. To have permitted the disclosure of Jubal's affair with her, harmless though it was, would have been ruinous to her life. So Judith departed and Jubal no longer had even the solace of her bright face in his trouble.

Jubal did not begrudge the large property judgment which Judge Fewell had given against him, although he foresaw that it might complicate his financial situation. He was, to be specific, too numb to have sensations very sharp of any kind on this score. Anyway there was the growing danger that Naoma might never collect much of her judgment against him. The structure of the Troop Oil & Refining Co. was tottering. For weeks a train of events had kept Jubal working almost without sleep. "Big Oil" was on the raid in

earnest, using all the vicious tactics in its repertoire. Cut after cut in gasoline prices was announced. Before Jubal on the desk at this moment lay a paper covered with figures, and he smiled wryly as he studied them. At Wettick, Tulsa, Wichita, Kansas City and other midcontinental points, gasoline was selling at eight cents a gallon. In Illinois, Ohio and eastward, the same gasoline was bringing eighteen and twenty cents. In other words, prices were below actual cost of production in the territory where the Troop Oil products were distributed, while in other parts of the United States, where Jubal's firm had no distribution, prices were higher than normal. It was the old story. "Big Oil" maintained in this manner an average which compensated for its losses in the midcontinent section, while Jubal possessed no such way to meet the ruinous price war.

Lately, moreover, he had begun to experience, as he had expected, difficulties with transportation. Breakdowns in freight schedules kept Jubal's traffic manager half crazy; tank cars were being misrouted or lost. Of course Jubal knew whence came this interference, although to prove it was impossible.

To these piled up disasters had now been added a capsheaf. Running his business at a loss of thousands of dollars daily, he had lately sought to extend a loan he had in a New York bank. Notice was on his desk refusing the extension. The amount involved was not comparatively great—two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Jubal's deposit in Ansell Goff's bank, where he kept his contingent cash fund, was almost sufficient to cover it. Certainly he could borrow the balance, even in these times. Always, however, there was the worry that additional cracks in his financial structure might appear. Should he be unable, for example, to deal promptly with the present obligation, a pyramid of demands would at once confront him from other creditors which would in the end wreck him. If, on the other hand, he succeeded in healing the lesions in his money front for another week or so, he might yet win. That was the important task at present—his personal tragedy concerning Naoma must await later consideration and search for solution.

Jubal pushed his chair back from his desk. The afternoon was late—too late to go to the bank—and the day outside was balmy, with a soft breeze blowing. In the hills, he knew, the blackjack oaks and the sumacs would be red, due to the first October frosts. A longing came over him to see them. It would be good once more to feel the fresh air. Nothing more he could do

this afternoon, anyway. Might as well be fit for tomorrow's heavy tasks. He telephoned the office garage for his roadster, drew on a light coat, and went downstairs.

Instinct turned Jubal toward the Shoo-Fly district. There he once had been happy as a cattle rancher. There he had drilled his first oil well. There, also, he once planned to build a big white house and live with Naoma. Another thought came to him: Reb Haizlipp lived in the Shoo-Fly Valley; Reb, to whom Jubal had not spoken in ten years. The longest ten years in Jubal's life, for in the same decade he had watched helplessly the gradual yawning of the gap between Naoma and himself. A vague wonder came to him as to how Reb might be prospering. Almost Jubal obeyed an impulse to go visit his former partner and friend, but he visualized his probable reception and decided against the idea.

Over the rolling prairie land for miles the roadster purred, until it reached the brow of the hill where once had stood the Yodel farmhouses. Old derricks there still cut the skyline starkly, with slow pumps bringing a few barrels of oil a day from wells almost drained after all these years. Jubal stopped his car beside the old "No. 1 Troop." No derrick there now, just a casing head and a blackened area around it. What a thrill had been the bringing in of that gusher—with every cent he could raise gambled upon it. The deserted well, now long dry, was like an old friend—one friend who had never played him false. Jubal stood looking down at it affectionately. But the casing head was mute, the pump still, the blackened area of desolation about gave an unpleasant impression of death. Jubal turned away and once more entered his automobile.

In the valley bottom was the old Shanks place—the land which he had obtained at such bitter cost. The irony was that Jubal had never profited from it, because the oil pool failed to extend in that direction.

Down the bumpy road and across the old bridge Jubal steered his car, then through a gate in a barbed wire fence. This was the flat pasture where he had dreamed of erecting his ranch home for Naoma. Jubal walked moodily beside the creek. From where he was he could see Reb Haizlipp's cabin. The same old ramshackle buildings, scarcely painted in the years Reb had occupied them. The same old battered windmill. As Jubal turned from gazing at the distant house, he heard a faint, rusty creaking. That old windmill again. Reb never would oil it. Jubal smiled faintly as he thought of how he used to joke with Reb about that windmill.

He turned again to survey the site of the home of his early dream. Here was where the house would have stood—here where the small grove of trees would furnish shade for the lawn. Yonder would have been the horse barn, and the horse corral beyond it. The balance of the bottom, except the necessary ground for buildings and corrals, could go into alfalfa for winter feed. It was childish of him to be reliving those old fancies in this manner, but even a man who has been case-hardened by adversity is entitled once in a long while to relieve an old ache—an ache so old that it had become part of him. Many a hard-fisted, hard-faced man has a secret longing or sorrow, or a recollection which he cherishes apart from every eye, jealously fearful lest someone should suspect it. The dream home was Jubal's wistful secret—just to imagine how it would have appeared warmed him.

There went Reb's windmill again. A long, creaking wail. Why *didn't* Reb oil it? Funny it should be screeching like that, though. The day was absolutely still. No breeze to veer the vane.

Jubal stopped suddenly stock still and stared at the distant windmill. *No breeze to veer it.* There went that faint, rusty scream again. *And the windmill had not stirred.*

3

Jubal leaped into his car and whirled it about. With throttle wide open he rattled across the plank bridge once more and spun up the lane with its choking growth of sunflower stalks, toward Reb's home. Nobody was in sight in the yard. Jubal stepped from the roadster and walked up to the door.

The door was ajar. Jubal pushed it open and glanced inside. At first he thought nobody was there. The furniture was disarrayed, some of it broken and overturned. In one dark corner lay what looked like a bundle of ragged bedding. Of a sudden the bundle stirred and Jubal's flesh crawled as he heard that rusty, creaking scream come from it.

"Reb!" The cry was torn from him. "Reb—oh, my God—*Reb!*"

He bounded across the threshold and seized the ragged bundle in his arms.

"Uh—it's you, ain't it, Jube—uh—I knew ye'd come," came Reb's faint voice.

"Jesus, Reb, what happened?"

"It was—Pretty Sam G-Gooney done it—him an'—an' another feller. They made me—hold onto—hot poker."

For the first time the full horror burst upon Jubal. He gave a shuddering look at the old man's hands. The palms were charred like burned leather, and the tendons in them had contracted until the hideous fingers were clutched . . . like the claws of a bird. . . .

"They knew—I had—m—money in the—house," Reb gasped after a long time.

"Did they get it?"

It was minutes before the answer came. "I wouldn't tell—them at fust. But the fire—h—hurt too much. I g—guess—I lost my—mind. When I—come to they—was gone."

Dried blood was on the poor old chin, and Jubal tenderly wiped it away.

"They—they beat me—too," Reb whispered. "I got somep'n—broke inside—I think. Oh, God—how I suffer."

His eyes closed and he mumbled faintly and incoherently. After a moment he once more opened his eyes and said something indistinctly. Jubal leaned closer to catch the words.

"I knew ye'd—come. Jube, I knew—my old—pardner would—come. So I yelled—when I could git—strength."

"Great God, when did this happen?" groaned Jubal.

"Yest'day—no, longer—I dunno. Will ye—can ye—give me—drink water?"

As Jubal held the dipper to the piteous gray lips a heavy refrain beat through his breast. This helpless, tortured creature in his arms was Reb! The same Reb who had lived and worked with him, had laughed and sympathized with him, had shared the last crust and the single blanket with him, time out of mind; the same Reb who had ranched with him, gambled for him, loyally schemed for him, loved him. It was Reb Haizlipp—and yet Jubal could hardly believe that it was Reb Haizlipp. Tortured, broken and dying for the sake of a few dollars he kept in his house. Like a white hot flame Jubal's fury burned toward the men who had done this thing.

He picked up the old body in his arms and carried it tenderly to the car.

Reb died at midnight. In the last minutes, Jubal, sitting beside the hospital bed, heard the old man talking as if he were again living the days of

his own lusty youth, and the West's. Just before the clock on the courthouse tower tolled its twelve strokes, Reb looked with lucidity into Jubal's eyes.

"Jube," he said feebly. "My will—thar ain't much left—poker an' the cattle market about broke me. But the land's left—ye'll find that thar will of mine—it's in the leetle trunk out—at the cabin. Git it. The—ranch goes to you. All that's left—of the old JR—ain't it?"

He sank into silence and his eyes closed. Presently, however, the tired eyelids fluttered again. Reb looked up and Jubal bent low to hear.

"Sorry, old pardner," the old cowman whispered, "about the—row we had. But we—made up at last—didn't we?"

In an agony of anguish and remorse Jubal's arms gripped the old body tightly, but Reb was gone. And Jubal Troop, whose rim-rock qualities were a proverb up and down the West, wept with great, shaking sobs for the friend who was restored to him—and lost.

An hour later, having given instructions for the care of Reb's body, Jubal left the hospital with a great, burning resolution on his heart. Until he accomplished that object, other considerations were to be forgotten. Retribution for Reb. Come what may, he would square the account for his partner.

He snatched a few hours of sleep at the hotel and walked to his office so deeply abstracted that he scarcely saw the familiar scenes through which he passed. Once he was conscious of a large crowd in the street, of cries, and agitation, but he pushed his way through, scarcely noticing, and hurried on. Faces were there at the office when he arrived, familiar faces, but they were like vague blobs of light in a blurred vision. He heard excited voices, but the words they spoke were meaningless to his ear.

"Our shipment held up at Omaha . . ."

"New price cut at Tulsa . . . best authority . . ."

"Unit Number Three out of commission . . . at least a week . . ."

Then like a single drop of clarifying acid in a mass of insolubles: "*The Wettick State Bank closed its doors this morning.*"

"The Wettick bank? How do you know?" snapped Jubal. His vision was clear enough now. Before him he saw Brady, the production chief, and Ellsworth, the office manager.

“Just came from there,” said Brady. “Big jam outside the bank. Lots of folks are depositors there.”

So, thought Jubal, that must have been the crowd I pushed through. Funny nobody told me. Aloud:

“What was the shortage?”

“They say a quarter of a million. The bank examiners found it last night and ordered all check payments stopped. Ansell Goff’s gone—skipped, some say, to South America. Mexico, anyway. There’s pickup orders for him all over the country.”

“I always knew he was a polecat. But to think . . . at a time like this . . .” Jubal thought of the day he had forced Goff to call poor August Yodel’s note. That deal made a million dollars for Jubal. For Yodel it meant the loss of his farm. For Ansell Goff it was merely a confession of weakness.

“How much did we have on deposit?” he asked Ellsworth.

“I just checked up. A little over one hundred and ten thousand.”

“That’s bad!” Ordinarily a sum like that would make slight difference to Jubal, but now, with the wolves howling . . . He had fifty thousand or so of his own personal funds tied up there, too. No—it was not his money. The court had issued an attachment on it as a part of Naoma’s settlement. Odd, Jubal reflected, how things turn out. Naoma may never receive anything at all if this crash continues.

A half-whimsical thought: What a disappointment to Webster Grattan—but then, he will have Naoma.

Jubal shrugged his great shoulders as if he would throw off the burden of his business problems. Nothing could be done at present, and he had elsewhere important matters to occupy him. Important matters . . . Jubal was pleased at the realization that the business was less consequential than the primitive necessity of retribution for Reb. A return to basic principles at last. If Naoma only knew . . . perhaps she would approve of him. Something within him leaped joyfully to escape from the attenuated concerns of finance.

He put on his old cowboy hat. Dismay showed on the faces of his subordinates.

“You can’t think of leaving just now, Mr. Troop!”

“What are we going to do?”

“What about this bank failure?” The last speaker was Ellsworth who beseechingly held forth a sheaf of papers. “What about these?”

“Act on ’em yourself!” snarled Jubal. “I’m tired of dry-nursin’ you all. An’ I’m through with this office until I get a job done. Good-by!” He flung out of the building.

5

Sheriff Benner’s office hummed like a swarm of hiving bees. Reb’s deathbed statement, sworn and attested, unequivocally named Pretty Sam Gooney as one of his assailants, and described the other as a middle-aged, undersized individual, with a pale face, thin cheeks and yellow eyeballs.

“It’s Dopey Dan Howell—we’re sure of that,” said the sheriff. “He’s a snowbird, an ex-con, and a dope runner. Also he’s been hanging around with Gooney, and he’s missing now that Gooney’s missing.”

Reb’s statement described how the pair had come to his cabin at night and forced him to prepare supper for them before they “went to work” on him. Always the question was: “Where is your money hidden?”

Not until they forced his hands to grip the red-hot stove poker did Reb break down. Then the robbers seemed much disappointed to find only thirty or forty dollars. They had expected thousands. It was Gooney who smashed the old man’s brittle ribs with a chair.

“That’s to remind you of the time you skinned me out of my bank roll,” he shouted. “An’ this is for that son-of-a-bitch Jubal Troop,” he added. Reb felt a heavy blow, then lost all recollection of what happened afterward. Apparently the thugs believed they had killed him, for they left him. Hours later he recovered consciousness and began the periodic cries for help which at last brought Jubal to him.

“We’ve got warrants for the murderers,” said Sheriff Benner, “and with the reward you’ve posted, there ought to be plenty of incentive to run ’em down.”

Jubal smiled bitterly to himself. That reward, of ten thousand dollars, which he had announced that morning—nobody realized how unlikely it was ever to be paid, now that the Wettick bank had burst open the rift in his financial dikes. The public would never believe that the loss of a few thousand dollars could cause the collapse of a giant structure like Troop Oil, the methods of pyramiding being unknown to the people. Jubal must, therefore, play the game as if this hole card were an ace instead of deuce.

The reward offer was his chief assurance that the hunt for Gooney and his companion would be rigorously prosecuted.

“There’s already been a lot of false leads,” Benner was explaining, “and there’ll be more. One report was they’d got into the Wichita Mountains, down in the Kiowa-Comanche country. Then we heard they was headin’ for the big towns up north—maybe Kansas City or St. Louis. The Rockies to the west might be a haven for ’em, but my private hunch is that they’ve gone east, into the Osage Hills, or the Cookson Hills, or clear to the Ozarks, maybe. We’ll get a line on ’em pretty soon.”

6

Naoma returned to Wettick for Reb’s funeral and with her came Judge and Mrs. McReynolds. For an instant Naoma’s eyes met Jubal’s in recognition across the church, then hers dropped. How Jubal had changed . . . his face appeared worn and wasted, haggard with some strong anxiety. The head was still massive, but its cheeks were sunken, and its eyes, now bleak and gray, were weary. Almost it seemed to Naoma there was a hint of feebleness in the way Jubal moved and sat.

For Jubal’s part, he covertly watched Naoma after she looked away, saw her weeping silently into her handkerchief as the service started. Afterward, Grattan came for her and took her to his car, but Judge McReynolds lingered until Jubal left the grave.

“It is impossible to express my feelings,” he said. “You know, Jubal, that we all loved him.”

“Yes,” said Jubal, dully, “I reckon.”

“Remember one thing,” continued the Judge in his friendly voice. “Some mysterious influence took you to him in that last hour. Some great Wisdom, which reunited you two. Have you ever thought how strange was the coincidence that you should have taken that trip in the car just when you did? Be thankful to God.”

And Jubal, his heart touched with warmth for the first time since Reb’s death, gripped the other’s hand silently in gratitude.

“I have another matter with which to acquaint you,” resumed the Judge. “The murder charges against you have been dropped.”

“How?” In spite of his depression, Jubal’s interest focused.

“A simple matter. I went to Teton where the—ah—alleged murder took place, and from there I have just returned. A few are still living who remember the incident. But no legal complaint was ever issued against you. No warrant was sworn. There is nobody who can identify the grave where Shep Horgan was buried. No *corpus delicti* can, therefore, be produced. And nobody in Teton but says that you fired in self-defense—after your antagonist fired first. The charges thus automatically fall.”

Good Judge McReynolds. Without saying anything about it, he had been laboring these weeks to settle the case for Jubal. A sensation of relief came to the latter, even though he had at no time greatly feared the charges preferred by Gooney.

“I can never thank you enough,” he told the Judge.

“Thanks are unnecessary. An act between friends.”

“I want to tell you something more, Judge.”

“Very well.”

“I want to tell you—about—Judith Reeves.”

“Yes.”

“An’ about Mae Horgan.”

“Very good.”

“I guess you’ve heard that I—that I took a low kind of advantage of her. That I caused the shooting at Teton by—taking advantage—”

“I heard it, Jubal, but I did not believe.”

“Thank you for that, Judge. Well, now that you’ve said it, I didn’t take advantage of Mae Horgan. I was just a lad, Judge. Eighteen. I ain’t shiftin’ the blame—but she was older than me—an’—well, Judge, she was as much to blame as me. Shep found out an’ followed me to Teton. I didn’t run away from him—I went to town on an errand for her. It was me or him, Judge, an’ he shot first.”

“That tallies with the accounts I obtained, Jubal.”

“Thank you again, Judge. There was some trouble an’ I left the country. Next time I saw Mae was in El Paso. She’d married Pretty Sam Gooney. It was the night Reb won Gooney’s roll. I went down into Mexico next day, an’ she followed me. Judge, I did everything a man can do to make her go back, but she kept on following. I couldn’t leave her in the desert to die.

Judge, she followed me right into the middle of a big fight between the bandits an' a hacienda. That's how she got a bullet—an' died. So help me, Judge, that's the story of Mae Horgan."

"I fully believe it, Jubal."

There was a long moment of silence, then Jubal took up the thread again.

"Now about Judith Reeves. Judge, she's just a girl—a young, carefree, warm-hearted girl. She was friendly, an' just then I was needin' friends, bad. But, Judge, standin' right here above Reb Haizlipp's grave, I give you my oath there was never anythin' wrong between us. Judith is straight, an' I—well, I've done some bad things, but I was honorable with her. First off, she's only a kid. Second, that night Sam Gooney spied on us, she'd invited me to supper, Naomy bein' gone—to tell me about her marriage."

"Her marriage!"

"Yes, it's a secret yet, but she was married the night before to an old sweetheart from the university."

"Hm-m-m."

"That's the story of those two women."

Deeply moved, neither man spoke for some time. At length the Judge said: "I'm glad you told me, Jubal. And if you will permit one deeply interested in you—"

"Go ahead."

"Do not lose your hope of the future."

With that cryptic word, the Judge was gone.

7

In the days which followed, Jubal became a veritable slave-driver in the sheriff's office. Richey Benner gave him a chair at the desk, commissioned him a temporary deputy, permitted him to take over the active control of the man-hunt for Gooney and Howell. Far out across the state and neighboring states went out the ripples of Jubal's thought. Whenever the search flagged, he was there to spur it. Constantly alert, continually seeking to whip the hunt to a faster tempo, he seemed never to rest.

The long distance telephone was comparatively new and little used. Benner and his men scarcely thought of it. But Jubal, accustomed to that method of communication in his far-flung business transactions, ran up the

tolls unsparingly, and demonstrated how the wires could be eyes, ears and brain for the hunt in places far distant.

Every town in Oklahoma was combed. A hundred false leads were raveled out. At the end of a week not only Jubal but Benner's entire force were haggard with the ceaseless drive. Then, early one morning, a telephone rang in Jubal's hotel room. The voice on the wire was the sheriff's:

"Just got word that two men answering the description of Gooney and Howell are hiding in the Cookson Hills."

"Where'd it come from?"

"A Choctaw Indian. He saw 'em go in and knows where they are."

"I'll be right over, Richey."

The trails into the hills were rudimentary, so it was a posse of horsemen which was formed. A mount was awaiting Jubal. It was good to feel the saddle again. Jubal noticed that he filled the leather seat from horn to cantle as he had never done when he was lean and young.

8

At midnight the posse halted and the sheriff conversed with a gaunt backwoods farmer. The man's dark face was deeply lined, but it was his little black buttons of eyes which betrayed the fact that he was an Indian.

Two men had been seen riding wearied ponies, a week before, he said. He thought nothing of it, until he heard of the murder at Wettick. Then he had done some scouting. The men passed up Sawlog Creek—so. By the trail toward Sweeney's trading store. The Indian said they did not go to Sweeney's.

"There is leetle trace headin' off up the hills through the thick brush, jest after the Sawlog crossin'," he explained. "Leads to the ol' Higbee cabin. Nobody live there now. Two-three mile from Sawlog crossin', come to Higbee's gulch. You never know it is there, unless you know jest where to look."

The Choctaw accepted a ten-dollar bill from Jubal and led the posse as far as the opening into Higbee's gulch. There the horses were tied to trees and Jubal stood in the darkness with Sheriff Benner and heard him directing his men in whispers, outlining their positions. Oak, elm and walnut trees wove a canopy of dense blackness above them. The night was crisp and frosty, but it was forbidden to strike a match, and everyone was warned

against stumbling, striking a rifle barrel against trees or boulders, and unnecessary rustling of the bushes.

Gradually the darkness was diluted by the approach of day. A heavy sweetness of frost-nipped fern and moss hung in the air. Afar, a liquid bubbling told of tiny Sawlog Creek running amidst its pebbles. Jubal and the sheriff moved forward to take up places in the circle of riflemen which by now surrounded the cabin in the gulch.

A strange lightness of limb possessed Jubal. His bulk moved with freedom he had not known since he was a youth. The death hunt—primitive as the race dawn—was like a splash of icy water in the face, clearing the brain and setting the nerves tingling to their utmost activity. Jubal's hand grasped his rifle; he tried the hammer, softly raising and lowering it, marking the well-greased smoothness of the action. The magazine was filled with soft-nosed bullets, ready to be pumped out when the time arrived.

Where the hill sloped steeply down, he and Richey Benner halted. A faint spice of wood smoke prickled Jubal's nostrils. Down there, between the trunks of the trees, he could see a lighted window. The Indian had described Higbee's cabin as deserted. Clearly it had occupants now and they were arising early. Jubal wondered. . . . Pretty Sam one of them? Closer, as the birds began a sleepy chattering to the dawn, he wriggled with the sheriff.

Miraculously, it seemed, the vision cleared. One moment everything was faint, shadowed, scarcely discernible except by the aid of imagination based on foreknowledge of how objects looked. The next moment the brilliant autumn landscape seemed to blaze in the first daylight, every frost-brightened leaf distinct, the feathery tops of the red and gold trees rustling in a tiny breeze which already was shredding away, like tufts of white wool, the vestiges of mist which hung in the little valley.

Voices down there in the cabin. A door must have opened. Suppressed, tense excitement among the watchers on the hillsides. No excitement underneath the heavens equals the first immense thrill at the climax of a man-hunt. Atavism showed in the faces of the possemen. Eyes grew narrow, jaws set, lips thinned to cruel lines. Back a thousand generations into the primordial these men stepped in the second that they awaited the appearance of the most dangerous quarry in the world—cornered man.

Anticlimactically, a slouching figure stood forth on the step outside the door. It stretched its arms widely, flexing the muscles, its mouth opening in a gaping yawn. Then it stood scratching like an animal its sides and groins.

Even from the distance Jubal could detect the pasty face of the narcotics addict.

“It’s Dopey Dan Howell,” whispered the sheriff. “I know him. Shoot.”

Jubal almost smiled at the incongruousness of the undramatic entry of this actor upon the stage, as he raised his rifle and his eye caught the sights against the man’s chest. Someone else was less whimsical. Before Jubal’s finger tightened on the trigger, a single peremptory shot rang through the clearing, shattering the silence. Dopey Dan pitched forward, doubled up, thrashing and screaming. Mercilessly Jubal pressed his own trigger, felt the kick of the gun against his shoulder. Other shots echoed stunningly in the gulch. The huddled figure before the door lay still.

Richey Benner’s voice: “Sam Gooney, you’re surrounded. Come out with your hands up or take the consequences!”

For answer, from the window came a shot which cut the leaves just above the sheriff’s cowboy hat. Instantly Jubal fired back at the window; heard the splintering crash as the pane shattered. Around the clearing broke the rippling roar of a volley. Splinters flew from the sides of the house and the handsplit shingles on the roof showed new, raw weals in their wood. Again and again the jangle of shattered crockery sounded within. Once or twice a sonorous *bong* in the cabin told of where a bullet struck an iron pot or some such object.

9

Beneath the sill of a window in the cabin crouched Pretty Sam Gooney, drawn back in the shadowy corner so that no glint of sunlight would fall on his body and thus betray movement. The interior of the shanty seemed to have been attacked with pickaxes. Scars and jagged splits appeared in the rounded surfaces of the logs which comprised the walls of the single small room; the stovepipe, after having been battered and punctured by bullets, finally had collapsed, coughing soot and smoke over everything. No window pane remained and the splintered glass, strewn on the floor, made it difficult to crawl about. To stand meant death.

Pretty Sam’s right hand was lacerated and bleeding from glass slivers. He used the right hand when he crept from window to window to watch for a shot at his enemies. The left hand was not lacerated, because it hung useless. Early in the battle a bullet had broken it and Pretty Sam, in spite of the fact that he had plugged the hole in the arm and contrived from a strip of

gunnysack a sort of sling, went gray in the face each time he moved because of the exquisite agony of the grating bone ends.

The riflemen about the clearing were too cunningly posted for Pretty Sam to retaliate against them. He believed he had marked one or two with bullets; at least he fervently hoped he had. It was maddening to be thus cooped up like a badger in a hole, unable to fight back successfully.

Behind the cabin was a log barn. Pretty Sam knew there were men in it, because all day they had been shooting at him from its shelter. For the last half hour, however, there had been no shots from that direction. Pretty Sam wondered what those men were doing. They were up to some malignity. There could be no possibility that they had departed from such a vantage point.

By peering through one of the many bullet holes in the door, Pretty Sam could see Dopey Dan Howell lying on the doorstep. He was badly shot up. When the first bullet took him as he stepped out of the cabin in the morning, he had thrashed about, howling and holding his flabby belly as he tried to hitch himself toward the door. Pretty Sam had seen it. But the men in the woods soon quieted Dopey Dan. Funny how a bullet sounds when it hits a man. *Splut*. Like striking a side of pork with a wooden mallet. Even after a man is dead, he jerks every time he is hit. Some of the possemen out there still occasionally sent a bullet into Howell's carcass, and it always winced as if it could feel pain. The head was turned partly toward the cabin. A portion of the jaw was gone, and the mouth was a smashed pulp of dark blood, with white splintered bone protruding like fangs. As soon as the sun warmed the frost out of the air, flies began dipping and buzzing over the mangled face. Pretty Sam wished he could cover that face with a cloth or something, to hide it. Dopey Dan was not beautiful to look at in death.

The men at the stable were still quiet. Pretty Sam felt very lonesome, alone in the cabin, even though he knew a score of fellow human beings were within the sound of his voice, and the racket of rifles constantly blasted through the bright autumn foliage. It would not be so bad if there were someone to talk with. Jubal Troop was in that posse out there. Pretty Sam heard his voice once and fired directly at the sound, but he knew he did not strike the invisible mark. At the thought of Jubal, helpless, hopeless rage shook the gambler's soul. This was Jubal's doing; he had kept the law on Pretty Sam's trail like a pack of bloodhounds, and now he was present to witness the kill. . . .

Pretty Sam hoped that he might hold off the posse until dark. Once the sun set there was a possibility—just a chance—of a quick dash to the trees and a zig-zag flight through the gloomy forest. But as the day lengthened hope faded. Counting the individual places from which shots came, Pretty Sam estimated that not less than twenty—perhaps thirty—men were around him. Just now the firing had ceased. Pretty Sam waited, tense. Something was up. He knew Oklahoma too well to believe that a posse like this would sit silent unless it had some lethal plan.

Few of the things he had done in his shabby lifetime were regretted by Pretty Sam, but just now he was keenly regretting what he did to old Reb Haizlipp. It was a sort of a joke at the time—he was drunk and Dopey Dan was crazy with morphine. The devil in the drug fiend's brain suggested the whole thing after they got to Reb's cabin, although it was Gooney who had originally concocted the scheme of robbing the old man.

At first Reb seemed very comical, hustling around, cooking supper for them, with the fear of death making his old face gray. Pretty Sam took a lot of satisfaction in recalling to him that poker game twenty years before. Later, however, the fool turned stubborn. By that time the affair had become serious and they used the hot poker to make Haizlipp tell where his money was. If Pretty Sam only had struck the old man a little harder . . . or had taken the trouble to go back and assure himself Reb was dead . . .

Well, what had happened was done. The present moment was the pressing one.

. . . What in hell were those men doing at the stable?

Smoke!

The truth burst upon Pretty Sam—the cabin was to be fired. He was to be roasted like a dead hog. For a moment the thought sent him insane.

“I can't! I can't!” he sobbed. “Oh, lemme off. Jube Troop, *lemme* off!” The last words were a howl.

Around the corner of the stable moved a strange wheeled vehicle. A wagon's running gear had been provided with a flimsy floor of long branches laid across the bolsters. Upon this was heaped dry hay, sticks, and oily wood, the whole mass blazing. The wind blew from the direction of the barn, so that the smoke and flying sparks, added to the mass of the moving hay, made it impossible to see or shoot the men who were pushing the fire wagon down hill. At the same time a wild volley from the sharpshooters in the trees sent bullets whining in at every window.

This way and that Pretty Sam glanced like a cornered beast. His face, with its hanging dewlap and flaccid mouth, was drawn with terror and pain, little beads of sweat standing out on his oily skin. Deeply withdrawn into their pouched sockets, his eyes glittered with the venomous despair of a snake under the cudgel. He could not stay in this place to be burned, yet if he stepped out he would be shot down. . . .

Pretty Sam Gooney's courage broke. Wildly he seized a dirty flour sack from the floor, hooked it on the end of a broom handle, and waved it out of a window.

"Hold it, men!" he heard the sharp order from the wooded hillside. Then: "If you want to surrender, Gooney, step outside with your arms up. Otherwise you burn where you are!"

Pretty Sam, shaken and unmanned, his mouth drawn and black, stumbled into the open, his one good arm held trembling aloft.

10

In the spring many people clustered in the halls of the courthouse at Wettick, and others lounged in the warm sun on the steps, or spat and speculated on the benches which stood to either side of the solitary Civil War cannon at the entrance to the grounds. These were the overflow of the crowd—the ones unable to find a place in the choked district court room where the trial of Pretty Sam Gooney was in progress.

A matter of common agreement was that the case presented a climax to the legal history of the county. Never before had lawyers of such renown and brilliance been arrayed in a criminal case at Wettick. For soon after Gooney was brought, a prisoner, to the Wettick jail after his stay in the hospital under guard while his wound healed, an announcement was made that Webster Grattan had volunteered to head the defense of the accused man. This move of Grattan's required tremendous audacity, for the public indignation over the murder of old Reb Haizlipp was deep. But the lawyer understood crowd psychology, as was demonstrated in the fact that after a few days sentiment against him changed, and it began to be whispered that this, after all, was nothing more than a finish fight between Grattan and his old foe, Jubal Troop.

As for Jubal, he well knew that the massed forces of all the enmities he had aroused were at last arrayed against him. To Grattan the opportunity was one for which he had prayed for eighteen years . . . eighteen years, wasted and empty, because the shadow of Jubal Troop had fallen athwart his life. So

he gathered about him other attorneys, noted in the court rooms of a state where notable lawyers were many—thundering Judge Thomason of Muskogee; harsh, bitter Colonel Amidon Sparks, the criminal expert from Oklahoma City; eloquent and resourceful Napoleon Yancey Struthers, as purposeful beneath his portly joviality as a steel chisel; and others. Their gathering at Wettick was a summoning together of the chosen ornaments of their polished profession.

To oppose this battery of notable legal figures the state presented at first only the youthful and rather inexperienced county prosecutor, Meade Talcott, and his mediocre staff of politically appointed deputies. But later an addition as distinguished as the brilliant figures on the defense legal staff was made, when a small, mildly spoken man, with white hair, mustache and imperial to bring out the dark color of his olive skin, was introduced as a special prosecutor. And all Oklahoma knew that no one save Jubal Troop could have induced Judge McReynolds of Wichita to enter the case.

From the very inception of the trial it was apparent that Jubal Troop was being arraigned fully as bitterly as the prisoner at the bar. Tall and sardonic, Webster Grattan at all times dominated the court room. With his polished manner and immaculate dress, he made a striking contrast to the powerful, silent, carelessly attired man at whom he directed continually the shafts of his sarcasm. Day after day, Jubal Troop was the theme of his discourse. Prospective jurors, being examined before they were seated in the jury box, were asked if they knew or had ever known Jubal Troop—and the manner of the asking implied that a heavy taint attached to the character of the man who acknowledged such an acquaintance. In his opening statement after the jury was impaneled, Grattan mentioned Jubal Troop not less than a dozen times, and in such a way that, in spite of the objections of Judge McReynolds, the remarks were allowed to stand by Judge Fewell, who, fox-haired and grim, presided on the bench. As one by one the witnesses were questioned, the name of Jubal Troop entered the trial again and again.

Throughout the adroit, sneering attack, Jubal sat silent and helpless in the court room, staring stonily ahead. He seemed numb, so that words which, two months before, would have brought him, fighting mad, to his feet, did not now affect him at all. Everything that an able, resourceful lawyer could do, Judge McReynolds did to protect his friend; and, in spite of his personal friendship for Grattan, Judge Fewell's dry-voiced rulings were of the finest impartiality. But so skillfully were Grattan's shafts delivered that to parry them all was impossible.

On the evening of the fourth day of the trial, Jubal sat in his hotel room, his knees apart and his forearms resting on his thighs—the attitude of a weary, discouraged man. Beside him on the bed lay an envelope and some legal papers. The door opened and Judge McReynolds entered, an expression of concern upon his face.

“It’s you, is it, Judge?” said Jubal, scarcely raising his head.

“Yes,” replied the other. “I see you’ve . . . heard.”

“The bankruptcy? Oh, yes. They didn’t keep me in darkness long. I guess the whole thing’s gone—lock, stock and barrel. The Troop Oil & Refining Co. is folded up—rubbed out.”

The Judge was gravely silent. Jubal turned to him a face which showed no sign of stress over the subject under discussion as he said, evenly:

“I’m broke. Flat broke, Judge.”

“But you had something beside your holdings in Troop Oil?”

“All gone. The divorce suit and the property settlement took most of it—the house, my Shoo-Fly ranch property that wasn’t included in the Troop Oil holdings, an’ my personal cash. When Ansell Goff’s bank folded up, it took the rest.”

“I had feared as much. As Naoma’s attorney, Webster Grattan has been—thorough,” commented the Judge.

A thought illumined Jubal’s face. “I forgot. I do have one little piece of land—the ranch Reb left me in his will. I just filed the deed the other day. Judge, it ain’t worth a whole lot, but now that everything else is gone there’s one thing that matters a good deal to me, an’ that is to see Pretty Sam Gooney get what’s comin’ to him. It—it’s a sort of religion I guess. He’s a snake, an’ a cheat, an’ a tin-horn as well as bein’ a murderer. He tried to blackmail me—what he done to me I had comin’, I guess, an’ I don’t hold it against him. But to torture the finest, cleanest, bravest man I ever saw—that’s somethin’ which is fairly yellin’ for justice to be done. Now look, Judge. I know if you draw out of this case, Meade Talcott an’ his crowd will be like a bunch of hog-tied babies before Grattan’s bunch of high-binders. The little ranch ain’t much, Judge, but if you’ll just stay with this case . . . I’ll make the whole thing over to you.”

Judge McReynolds gazed queerly at Jubal, his expression gradually changing to a smile of compassion.

“You’ve been hit pretty hard, my poor friend, haven’t you?” he said at last, as if musing aloud to himself. “I should regard that statement and request of yours as an affront, had it come in any other way or under other circumstances. But a man is not to be blamed for losing all his faith in humanity under the experiences you have lately had. Therefore, Jubal, know that your old friend Judge McReynolds has no intention whatever of deserting you in this case—nor of accepting the last little shred of your possessions, either. We go through this case, come good or evil, and see it to its end.”

12

It was on the front page. Every day in the morning paper.

Oklahoma Torture Murder Trial Nears End. Prosecution Scores as Witness Bares Past. Gooney Refuses to Take Stand.

Naoma sat in Mrs. McReynolds’ parlor, clutching the paper in her hand. What were they doing there in Wettick? A titanic conflict was being waged—great forces which were beyond and above the fate of the prisoner. Somehow she was involved in it. The booming headlines day after day seemed to say to her: You. *You*. YOU.

Webster Grattan on one side. He was making a brilliant record for himself. The most talked-of lawyer in the Southwest. She felt a little warm flush of pride. There was an understanding between her and Webster. Nothing definite, but already she was making plans. Perhaps the following spring they would be married—if she could put him off that long.

But on the other side was Judge McReynolds, almost her father, his quiet, generous nature inflamed with the fervor of his battle. And Jubal Troop. He was on the other side, too.

Naoma pressed her forehead with her palm. I don’t know what’s the matter with me. I must be going mad. What concern is it of mine? He’s out of my life. Jubal Troop is out of my life. Definitely. He has proved himself unworthy. I do *not* care what happens to him.

Yet that trial . . . that terrible, fascinating trial. She read the columns about it with avid eyes. Her glance went to the page again:

Final Arguments of Counsel Tomorrow. Interest at White Heat Over Prospect of Clash of Verbal Duelists. Case May Go to Jury By Nightfall.

Naoma rose from her chair. There was a sudden, decisive purpose in her movements. A capitulation to an insistent clamor of her whole being that she

go and see. That she hear for herself. That she know what was behind the charged vaporous blanket of conflict in that little Oklahoma court room.

Mrs. McReynolds' surprise did not betray her into a remonstrance. She knew Naoma, and so she permitted her to go without suggestion or question.

Train to Wettick. *Click-click, click-click*. Incessant sound of wheels below the floor. Smell of greasy steam and bananas and crackers. Children squalling. Pale yellow kerosene light from the station windows passed in the darkness. Stars flickering above the black mystery of the night landscape.

It was an all night ride from Wichita to Wettick. Tiresome, dreary hours, especially when the soul hammered and tortured itself with frantic, fruitless speculations.

“Wettick.” It was the brakeman at last, summoning them. “All out for Wettick. Don't forget your parcels.”

Nobody must know she was here. The hotel was out of the question and the house was closed. As she stood on the station platform, she thought of Mrs. Alex Brown. A former neighbor, a hospitable, motherly woman, but a wearying gossip.

“My dear! What a surprise. A delightful, *delightful* surprise!” Mrs. Alex Brown shepherded her in from the hack, settled herself in a rocking chair and began a gushing fountain of talk.

What time would the court open? Nine o'clock. It was good to see Naoma again. The town had changed so much in the last few years. Georgia Shanks was gone and nobody in Wettick had ever heard from her. A strange woman. One would think she might have communicated with some of her acquaintances, after so much was done for her at the time her husband died. . . . Miss Hostetter was gone, too. Gave up school teaching and returned to her relatives at Barnstable, Massachusetts. Funny name, wasn't it? Like two horse sheds hooked together. Mrs. Brown chuckled quakingly at her own conceit, but hurried on as if in fear that Naoma would break into the talk.

Mrs. Ansell Goff, the banker's wife, was still here. A sad, sad case. Mrs. Brown felt so deeply for her. Of course Mrs. Goff had put on airs. There were those who might say she was only getting her deserts now. But not Mrs. Brown. Mrs. Brown forgave and forgot. Who was she to question God's doings? We are all in the hands of Divine Providence, and she noticed that in the end things were evened up some way. Ansell Goff had not been

heard from. It was rumored he was in Honduras, but his wife was barely eking out an existence in a rooming house, having given up her residence.

After what seemed an eternity of this, Naoma was able to break away. It was nearing nine o'clock and the court would be opening.

13

The heavy atmosphere of the packed court room was oppressive and Naoma felt the air had been breathed over so many times that she could scarcely breathe it again. These were the shopkeepers and farmers of the district, and their women, crowded together in the ill-ventilated, dark auditorium to see the final drama of the great murder trial.

A soft, weighty mass leaned against her elbow. Naoma pulled away. Woman. Heavy, slow-moving, face like a puffy sponge, eyes glassy, great slabby mouth open like a fish, the play of lust upon her, every fiber of her thrill-craving grossness quivering to the excitement before her. A mewling, like a kitten. Naoma stared curiously. She had not before noticed the baby. Fascinated, remembering her own, she watched it. The fat woman fumbled in her dress, pulled forth a monstrous flap of discolored flesh which she thrust at the child's mouth. The mewling stopped as the infant greedily fastened and began sucking noisily, its mother never having for one moment taken her popping eyes off the scene up in front.

On Naoma's other side hunched a thin, bearded man, his fingers searching, searching through the greasy tangle at his throat, as if hunting something lost there; his eyes, also, fixed with fascination on the judge's bench. The man gave off the goat-like odor of an unwashed body. Naoma felt a little faint, but there was nowhere else she could sit.

Everywhere it was the same. People crowding every corner of the court room. Stupid, morbid hunger on their faces. Slobbering hunger for sadistic sensation.

The court has not yet convened. In the cleared space before the bench she saw figures she knew—Judge McReynolds, Meade Talcott, Richey Benner, others moving about. Webster Grattan came in. How elegant he looked, how distinguished. He smiled at his associates, bowed to his opponents, seated himself and became concentrated on some papers. To the right of the Judge's bench a door opened and a shuffling figure came forth. Pretty Sam Gooney. Decently, quietly dressed, instead of wearing the garish checks he preferred. That would be Grattan's idea. He thought of everything.

Gooney seated himself at his lawyers' table and leaned over in whispered conversation with Grattan, while his guard sat ostentatiously behind him.

Involuntarily Naoma's eyes searched for another figure. She found it. Heavy shoulders. Massive head. The look of settled purpose which she knew of old. Jubal Troop, at the table of the prosecutor. At the sight of him she seemed to shrivel up in her seat, cowering, a small person in the very rear of the court room, hoping she would not be seen or recognized.

A gavel rapped and she rose with the crowd, dimly hearing the fat bailiff's voice announcing the court in session. Men in front of her were so tall she could not see, but when the people were seated again, dry, fox-haired Judge Fewell was on his high rostrum where he had not been before. He said something in a voice which did not carry to her. Webster Grattan arose, and in spite of herself she leaned forward with the greedy mob.

Bankrupt!

Defrauder!

Persecutor!

Despoiler of women!

Bearer of the brand of Cain!

Words, hurled like bombshells at Jubal all the long afternoon. Naoma could see him where he sat, impassive and grim, unable to defend himself as Webster Grattan, with alternate bitterness and derision, lashed and hammered in his final plea to the jury. As it had been through the trial, it was Jubal the lawyer excoriated now. Reasons more cogent than the death of Haizlipp were behind the oil man's unrelenting animosity toward the defendant, Grattan hinted. He dragged at the corners of the slaying of Shep Horgan and the death of Mae Gooney—testimony concerning which only the persistent, hawk-like watchfulness of Judge McReynolds had prevented him from introducing as evidence. Sneering, Grattan alternately shook a finger under Jubal's nose and stormed at the jury. Time after time he was interrupted by sharp objections from Judge McReynolds, but always the court over-ruled these objections and Grattan roared triumphantly on. For two hours and more the lawyer poured the lash of his invective upon Jubal Troop in a jury speech which was long spoken of as a masterpiece of its kind.

And Jubal . . . Naoma could not take her eyes off him. His self-respect torn to ribbons, his life's motives distorted, his inmost secrets dragged forth and laid quivering to the eyes of the world, he sat with a face of stone.

Emotions struggled with each other in Naoma's bosom, but slowly indignation began to dominate them all. She had been married to Jubal Troop and had lived with him for many years. True, she had divorced him, but she knew him well—so well that she had an angry certitude the things being said concerning him were unjust. Tears smarted in her eyes. Why did nobody defend him? Helplessly she writhed, as the speech went on and on. Gradually, out of everything, grew the realization that perhaps there were other injustices . . . which she had not hitherto considered. . . .

To Naoma's relief, Grattan concluded at last and seated himself amid the congratulations of his associates. The crowd was still spellbound; the fat woman next to Naoma did not even know her baby had gone to sleep, sitting with her gross bosom exposed, mesmerized by the spectacle.

Now Judge McReynolds arose to deliver the final summation for the state. His address was short.

“Gentlemen of the jury,” he ended, “through the course of this trial, you have heard from counsel for the defense more, much more, concerning the chief witness for the state than concerning the prisoner at the bar. Let me charge you to remember one thing: It is Sam Gooney upon whom you are sitting in judgment—not Jubal Troop.”

It was after the jury had retired, while he was making his way through the crowd, that Jubal felt a sudden upward surge of the heart, followed by a stonelike sinking. Was that Naoma, standing at the back of the court room? It was. He sought to catch her eyes, but her eyes were not for him. They were fixed on Grattan who, laughing and chatting with a group of satellites, passed down the aisle ahead. Suddenly the lawyer saw her and went quickly to her. They exchanged a few words, then left the court room.

So Naoma had been there all afternoon . . . to hear his character derided, his name held up to scorn, his very being made a mockery. Through all the denunciation he had kept his mind on his definite goal, the deadly doggedness of his nature ignoring or shouldering aside any opinions expressed concerning himself. But now a black typhoon of rage seemed to swell within him. It was succeeded by pain which shot through his heart like a sharp dagger. His knees almost trembled beneath him as he groped down the court room aisle through the shuffling, elbowing mob.

It was the following morning and Judge McReynolds was talking to Naoma at Mrs. Brown's home.

"I learned it was true," continued the Judge, "the records showed that Evan Thomas and Judith Reeves were lawfully wedded on that night—the night before Jubal Troop was alleged to have betrayed her. They are living now at Oklahoma City, and I have visited them. The young husband and the girl united in saying that nothing wrong occurred—his faith in her was one of the convincing things to me. Judith and Jubal were friends. She invited him to her home to tell him of her secret marriage the previous night, to a man with whom she was very much in love. Does it seem reasonable to you that she would on that night of all nights have been unfaithful to her new husband? It does not to me."

But she lifted a hand as if to brush these considerations away. He gazed at her in surprise, gave her a little, formal bow, his face changing, took his hat and departed.

Naoma watched him go without a word. Words were beyond her. Something inexplicable was going on within her. She cared nothing for the Judge's reasoning; nothing for the circumstances he outlined to her; nothing for anything. What was all this about? All at once the whole fabric of her life seemed shoddy and valueless. A blurred vision came to her—a vision which brought with it a wave of nostalgia. Arch above her of a wagon tilt, the sun shining through tiny holes in the old, discolored canvas. Swaying, creaking wagon body. She lay back in the soft, musty quilts, looking at the lantern which swayed back and forth from its hanging on the front bow, with every jerk of the vehicle. Bent back up ahead—her mother, old black pipe in mouth, spitting now and then and wiping her lips with the back of her skinny hand. Smell of dust, smell of horses, smell of camping utensils in her nostrils. The Rawhiders. That was what she was—a Rawhider after all. Longing for the days which that vision conjured up went over her, and with it the sick realization that those days would never return. There were no complications then, no worries, no impossible emotional conflicts. Peace. Peace, and the right to certain basic things. If she were a Rawhider today instead of a modern, evolved woman, she would not now be fighting, fighting . . . the anguish in her. She would throw aside with a glad heart the conventions. She would go to the man who, she suddenly knew, meant more than any other thing to her. To Jubal. Her husband Jubal.

At the front door the bell rang and Naoma heard Mrs. Brown's gushing voice. Mr. Grattan! Come in, come in. You wish to see Mrs. Troop? In the parlor I believe. Let me take your hat.

Webster's face was tense when he entered the room. He had not forgotten her words of the evening before.

"The jury has come in," he began, opening the conversation casually on a subject not now very near to either of them.

"Oh," she said, looking away from him. Why had he come at this time?

"The verdict was guilty in the first degree."

"Oh."

"Your—former husband will be delighted."

She turned at the edge in his words. "And why shouldn't he be?" she flared. "That man killed poor old Reb, didn't he? I am delighted too!"

"Will you be delighted to know that this means poor Sam Gooney will die, frying to death in the electric chair?"

The words made her stomach turn a somersault, but she looked at him defiantly. "Yes, I am!" It was the Rawhider woman speaking.

"Naoma," he said gently, "what's come over you? You've changed, it seems, overnight. What have I done? Why should you hold this resentment for me? Last night you treated me like a stranger. I am still dizzy with trying to understand. Can't we talk things over, thresh things out? There's something wrong here and I want to straighten it up. You mean too much to me. I've gone too far, worked too hard, planned too long, to have some little thing intervene—"

"You are right, Webster." Calm had returned to her. "We do need to talk things over. I've made my mind up about some things. You have been—most kind. But I have arrived at a conclusion—"

In that moment a great fear leaped into his eyes. "Don't say anything, Naoma, that we both will regret."

"I only regret that I haven't thought clearly and spoken clearly before. Webster, I cannot marry you."

He took it in silence, a silence which hung long, draining the strength out of her as she awaited his answer.

"You are sure of this?" he said softly at last.

"Sure."

“Naoma, I have sought to please you. I have sat up nights for you, protecting your interests. I have loved you more than you will ever know—”

“Are you sure that is all you have done?”

“What do you mean?”

“Haven’t you also—tell me this, Webster—haven’t you also used me as a tool to work out your resentment against Jubal Troop?”

“Certainly not! As your attorney, it was my duty—”

“You did your duty well, Webster. It should give you satisfaction. Jubal is ruined.”

“It’s his own fault!” In spite of himself Grattan could not keep the savage joy out of his voice.

“Is it? Is it his own fault? I have been learning some things since I came back to Wettick, Webster. It is my fault more than it is his. I ruined him, and now I want to find him—and—and tell him so!”

The blindness of tears came over her. She turned away, dabbing with her handkerchief, fighting for calmness. But when she regained control of herself and turned to speak to him again, Webster had silently gone.

She did not greatly care. His goings and comings suddenly had become very unimportant to her. Where was Jubal? All that morning she had sought to find him, sending messages to every place where she thought there might be a chance to reach him. He was nowhere in Wettick. A sudden conviction came over her. He saw me in the court room. He thinks that I came to—to gloat over him. He has gone away and I will never see him again.

15

“I just talked to the governor over the long distance telephone. He says he won’t do anything for the condemned man.”

The announcement came from a newspaper reporter and two dozen men, lounging in the warden’s office at the penitentiary, raised their heads attentively. Some of them had been playing poker. Some were gathered in groups, exchanging bawdy stories. Others were obviously drunk. They were all reporters or official witnesses, gathered to see the execution of Pretty Sam Gooney, sentenced to die that night in the electric chair.

A clock was ticking off the seconds on the wall. The poker game resumed its course, the hum of talk began anew, and in one corner three men

struck up a discordant, defiant barber-shop melody:

“Everybody loves a baby,
That’s why I’m in love with you—
Pretty ba-a-by, Pretty ba-a-by—”

“Only an hour to live!” The exclamation came from the youngest reporter present—a cub from Oklahoma City, going through the horrors of his first execution assignment. An older newspaperman laughed, his features flushed with whiskey.

“What does he care—the man that’s going to die? I’ve seen a dozen hangings—Fort Smith in the days of old Judge Ike Parker. The hanging judge, you know. He had ’em hung by job-lots, and they always did it the same way—condemned man got a quart of whiskey, twenty-four hours ahead, to drink the way he wanted. He could down it all at once, or take it a little drink at a time, or wait until just an hour or so before the hanging and get good and drunk. Mostly they were so hooked, by execution time, that they couldn’t see to take the last walk up the thirteen steps.”

“Oklahoma’s got prohibition,” protested the boy. “They don’t allow liquor in the pen.”

“Is that so? Well, we’ll see. Electrocutions can’t be any worse than hangings,” rejoined the veteran grimly.

At the poker table most of the players looked oddly at a big man who played with an expressionless face. Jubal Troop, they knew, was responsible for the presence of the doomed man in the death house. The dominant, driving force behind the capture and trial of Pretty Sam Gooney, the oil man was present now to witness the infliction of the penalty which he had hammered the courts into imposing—smashing to that goal while his own business went to flinders about him. Such single-purposed malignancy chilled the blood of the other poker players.

A group at the window discussed war reports from the European battle front, and agreed gravely on the impossibility that the United States might ever be drawn into the struggle. Through the window they could see across the prison grounds to the wing of the building which contained the death house. Before a heavy door a dozen uniformed guards strolled back and forth. Some men in overcoats and low-pulled hats—for it was early autumn again and the weather was brisk—conversed with the guards. These were reporters also. The newspapers had grown hysterical over the Gooney case.

They screamed it from every front page. Correspondents were present at this execution from as far away as Chicago.

The clock on the wall ticked on. At the poker table Jubal was amassing a neat pile of nickels and dimes. In all the crowd he seemed the least moved by the impending event, and with immobile countenance he sat back and capitalized on the emotional recklessness of the others.

Somebody yelled at the barber-shop chorus in the corner:

“Hey! Cut it out! Can’t you drunks pick out some other place to make that racket?”

“Jealous?” came a silly giggle from one of the singers. But as the quartet leaned into “Tipperary,” an empty whiskey bottle whistled through the air and shattered against the wall above. At that the music stopped.

Once again the sound of the clock, ticking on the wall, was broken only by the shuffling of cards, the occasional gruff comments of the players, and the clinking of small coins on the table.

“Hello, padre!” The door opened and a dark, hawk-faced man with searching brown eyes stood on the threshold. He wore the black cassock and berretta of a priest.

“Is there a Mr. Troop here?” he asked.

“I’m Jubal Troop.”

“I am Father Morelles, chaplain of this prison.”

Noise in the room subsided into complete silence. Here was drama and the reporters waited breathlessly for it. Jubal eyed the priest with suspicion.

“What do you want?” he demanded.

“I bring you a message from a man who says he has wronged you greatly and wishes to make amends before he dies.”

“Pretty Sam Gooney?” growled Jubal. “I don’t want to hear anything about him.”

“Be merciful, Mr. Troop. Here is a man about to die! Cannot you find it in your heart to pity him a very little? He has embraced the church and I have brought him what belated comfort the blessed sacraments can bring. While I speak to you he is praying in his cell. Mr. Troop, acknowledging his great wrong, Sam Gooney, a truly repentant soul, begs you to forgive him.”

Jubal spat.

“Tell him I hope he goes to hell!”

16

“A quarter of one,” somebody said. “We ought to be moving. They generally do these things right on the dot.”

Conversation in the warden’s office ceased. Time to go to the death chamber. Some of the faces looked drawn, through the haze of the cigar smoke. A door opened, admitting a rush of cold, clear air, and the occupants of the room clattered down the hall toward the stair.

Jubal saw men throw back their shoulders and breathe deeply of the refreshing breeze in the prison yard. In the pit of his own stomach, for the first time, was a strange uneasiness, and he also inhaled deeply to fill his lungs with oxygen. At the door of the death house the guards formed them in line and they entered one at a time.

“Everybody hold his own ticket.”

It was like entering a theater. The tickets were examined to make certain the right date and signature were upon them. One by one the reporters and witnesses, including Jubal, filed into the hall. An obese, flat-faced man, with a mop of damp, curly blond hair shot with gray, held up both hands.

“Gentlemen, please!” he begged. “Remember this: As we go down the corridor, let there be no talking and no smoking. This is a ceremony of society. It is right that society should do this thing, but it isn’t very pleasant for anybody. Please observe these rules.”

The great barred doors to the corridor swung open. Scuffing feet on the stone floor sounded loudly in the silence. Up a stairway and down a hall Jubal followed the crowd. At the end of the corridor was a low-ceilinged room. The death chamber.

Jubal had a shock at the sight of the execution room. Everything in the prison elsewhere was polished and finished, some of it new. Here everything was crude and unfinished. On the cement floor stood crude wooden benches. An object at the end of the room arrested the eye . . . the electric chair. It, too, was crude, with the appearance of being home made, and by no very skillful workman. Queer iron clamps yawned on its arms and legs. Jubal knew they were to hold the limbs of the man who was to die; to hold him tightly so there could be no possibility of his jerking loose from the embrace of the grisly seat, thus spoiling the execution. Beside the chair’s back hung

the electrodes, the actual dealers of death, and to one side was a small closet. In this was the electric switch.

Directly above the chair on the wall hung a large clock. Every eye was fixed upon it. The hands pointed at exactly one o'clock. Five minutes left for Pretty Sam Gooney to live. In the death chamber absolute silence. Even the drunkest of the reporters was awed into sobriety. Behind Jubal a man breathed stertorously, fighting for breath in the grip of horror. Each time a foot scraped on the floor, the sound rasped every set of nerves in the room.

How was Pretty Sam feeling now? Jubal wondered. Was he facing his doom with a sneer on his face? Or was he cringing and craven? The priest said the gambler regretted what he had done to Reb Haizlipp. More grimly than ever Jubal's jaw set. For an instant he had almost fallen into the weakness of pitying Gooney.

A knock on the steel door to the death cells. Two guards opened the portal. Pretty Sam Gooney was being led out to die.

With complete momentary detachment Jubal watched the scene. A dreamy impersonality imbued it; the fact that the central figure before him had been the evil genius of his life seemed remote, hazy. Jubal had heard of the death march, and imagined it as something slow, dignified, and decorous. But about this spectacle there was nothing dignified. The condemned man was hustled forward—fairly jerked, until he stumbled and almost fell. Over his face was a black mask. His neck and naked arms were sickly white with the pallor of fear. Pretty Sam was wearing a sleeveless undershirt, and the right leg of his trousers was split to the knee. Both trousers knees were grotesquely bagged—Gooney had stretched them out of shape thus by long hours of praying in the death cell. About his neck was a string of beads—a rosary. Jubal remembered that he had been told that Pretty Sam had espoused the Catholic faith.

With what seemed indecent haste the prisoner was jerked over to the chair and fairly hurled into it. Half a dozen guards pounced on him as if he were a wild beast. They worked feverishly; one clamped down the hooks on Gooney's arms and another did likewise with his legs. Two broad leather straps were drawn across his laboring chest and buckled tightly to the back of the chair. Then the warden, perspiration beading his broad face, stepped forward to inspect the adjustment of the electrodes—one on top of the skull, where Pretty Sam's iron-gray hair had been shaved away at one spot; the other on the right leg where the trousers was slit.

“Father!” The strangled sound was unlike Pretty Sam’s voice, but Jubal knew that the wretch, in his extremity, had gurgled his first word since entering the chamber. The chaplain, standing near, replied.

“Repeat: ‘Lord, have mercy upon me.’”

“Lord, have mercy upon me.”

It was a muttered jumble of words. The paralysis of terror hindered articulation. The priest stepped aside, intoning the extreme unction, and the warden entered the switch room.

Of a sudden Pretty Sam Gooney seemed to bound in the chair, and the electric lights in the chamber dimmed almost to nothing. Against the straps and clamps the prisoner’s body stiffened in terrible contortion. He looked as if he were making a superhuman, ghastly effort to rise from the seat as the electric current galvanized the muscles in his limbs. Blue sparks danced up and down the string of prayer beads upon his neck. A little cloud of white smoke arose from the electrode on the head—the flesh was burning. From the lower edge of the mask, strange, ropy substances dripped. That was saliva—congealed by the current. A thin stream of water trickled from the right trousers leg. Urine, thought Jubal, then decided it must be liquid squeezed out of the sponge under the electrode by the contorting muscles. A weird buzzing sound in the room as the mighty shock jolted through the body in the chair. It lasted for five seconds. To Jubal it seemed five hours.

The buzzing ceased and the body collapsed back into the seat. Poor devil, he was out of his pain and horror. Jubal sighed with relief.

At that moment Pretty Sam *swallowed*.

Clearly Jubal saw the Adam’s apple beneath the mask rise and fall. Gooney was not dead.

Two doctors stepped forward with stethoscopes. They examined the man in the chair, listening to the heart and feeling the pulse. Then they shook their heads and stepped back.

Again the whirring, buzzing sound. Again the blue sparks danced up and down the necklace of beads, and the acrid white smoke rose from the burned flesh. Again ropes of saliva dribbled down below the hood as the victim gave a grotesque, ghastly impression of one seeking to rise from the chair, his galvanized limbs laboring futilely to straighten out against the shackling straps and clamps.

The odor of the smoke began to permeate the room, smelling exactly, Jubal thought, like a blacksmith's shop when red-hot shoes are placed on a horse's hoofs, scorching the horn. Behind him the man with the stertorous breathing became ill, retching miserably. Jubal glanced around. It was the whiskey-soaked veteran who had boasted of witnessing a dozen executions in the days of the hanging judge, Ike Parker.

This time the electric charge was continued for ten seconds—more than two thousand volts smashing through Pretty Sam's system. The doctors renewed their examination. Again they shook their heads. The man appeared dead, but it was well to make sure. Society wishes no mistakes when a life is being taken by the law.

Once more the whirring. Once more the leaping, galvanized figure. Once more the blue sparks on the beads and the acrid white smoke. This time there was no possibility of mistake. Pretty Sam Gooney, murderer, was dead.

The clamps were loosed. Grotesquely dangling, the limp body was placed on a wheeled stretcher. Jubal, sick in body and soul, stumbled out of the stinking room, his nerves twisted as if they had been wrung into knots by malignant fiends.

17

A condign retribution had been Reb's; everything was made clean as far as he was concerned. But Jubal, as he stepped from the penitentiary, felt a sagging within. For the first time in his existence, all motive for life was gone from him.

Driving his car northward toward Wettick, his mind flashed back over his life. In the beginning a mere strong instinct for survival had kept him existing at all. Then came the evanescent hope of prosperity, doused as a spark is doused, by the episode with Mae Horgan and the shooting of her husband. After that fear, for a time, was the driving spring of action. It sent him through the blizzard, fleeing from the vigilantes, down to Texas. There love succeeded fear when he found Naoma in the Rawhider camp. It was love which kept him on the long and fruitless quest in the mountains and when he came to the end of that trail the desire to live at all almost left him. But he was still young and gradually he came to see the vision of fortune in his wild plan of the Mexican cattle, which succeeded beyond all expectations and led him, step by step, to fulfillment. The reward of that incredible foray gave him, in spite of the sick feeling it left within him, an appetite for wealth, but more especially for the making of wealth; and the

ruthless philosophy of Mesa, coupled with his own harsh experience, tempered his character to hardness. As Jubal thought it over, the actual possession of money was secondary to him. It was the wresting of money from others that captivated him.

Even when at last he found Naoma, the fascination of the quest for wealth held him. From his present perspective Jubal could see how, blindly, he had permitted Naoma, the finest thing his life had ever known, to take a position subordinate to his money mania. In his distorted vision of things which were neither great nor beautiful, he had been like a man drunk, unable to appreciate the beautiful and great right beside him. Intoxicated with success and power he had lost Naoma, and Reb also, through headlong stubbornness.

That loss, he now knew, was the real end of his life. He had gone ahead, building his oil empire, obtaining a passing satisfaction from business victories. But now that the crash had come he was astonished to discover how really little the loss of his millions meant to him. Then came the final phase of his career, when revenge was the driving motive—the desire to pay the score for Reb Haizlipp. In the white haze from Pretty Sam Gooney’s charred flesh he had witnessed the end of this last chapter. He felt like one scoured out, without emotions, without strength, without desire to go anywhere or do anything.

The refinery was gone, so was the oil. The Shoo-Fly land had been taken over by Naoma’s lawyer. Jubal had no place to turn. Incontinently he had departed from Wettick the previous spring on the evening when he had seen Naoma at the trial. To face her and know that she had seen his humiliation was more than he could stand, so he spent the summer in Tulsa, using up the last of his little cash reserve, drinking heavily, waiting for the day of Gooney’s execution as the goal of his existence. Now he realized for the first time with a minor shock that he, who for years had been accustomed to any luxury his whim might suggest, was facing the stark necessity of determining where he should obtain his next meal.

Jubal took stock of himself. He was forty-five years old. Too heavy for the saddle at present, but, grimly, he expected that some of his weight would come off as his meals grew less regular. He wondered if he might find a job again as a range rider. Of course he could go to work for some oil company. “Big Oil,” in fact, had offered him a position after breaking him. But the thought of oil revolted him. The whole appearance of the country through which he was passing—small patches, closely fenced, of corn, wheat and cotton—towns and cities of pridelessly monotonous sameness—highways

stretching and cluttered with traffic—oil wells and refineries everywhere—filled him with loathing. An echo of old Reb's wistful longing came to him. The old West. That was what Jubal suddenly craved. The new West . . . to hell with it.

All at once Jubal remembered the old Agnew place. It had been Reb's home, now belonged to Jubal. Because it came to him after the divorce it had not been included in the general court order confiscating his other properties. The ranch was small and barren, but it offered him at least temporary shelter. A place where he might recuperate. The next hill was where he turned off to it. He would drive over to Reb's old home and spend the night.

18

Nothing had been changed since Jubal carried Reb out of the house, save that the weeds grew rankly, waist high, in the yard. He unlocked the padlock which fastened the door, and which had been put on by him when last he visited the place with officers, to seek evidence and obtain Reb's will. As he entered the cabin a breath of stale air came forth. He must open the windows and permit the fresh breezes to blow through.

Jubal went from room to room on that errand. Into the place came the good sunlight and the cleanness of the autumn evening. This was Reb's bedroom. The covers still were in the crazy disarray Pretty Sam Gooney and Dopey Dan Howell had left when they dragged the old man out to torment him. Jubal glanced about. Here and there were familiar objects. The old boots Reb had worn. His ancient, battered Stetson hat. A thin, limp-leather book. A prayer book. On the fly-leaf a name:

Mortimer Bartee,
with the affectionate well wishes of his cousins upon the
occasion of his confirmation, Palm Sunday, 1856.

So all these years Reb had preserved that memento of an old friend. Jubal remembered . . . they read Mort's burial service from this old book.

One or two trinkets which he himself had given Reb lay about, including a picture of Jubal as a young man, taken on one of their visits to El Paso in the Arroyo Grande days. Jubal had long forgotten about that picture, but there it stood, leaning against the mirror of Reb's battered chiffonier, young, slender man, with wild, reckless look and strange eyes . . . even after they parted his old friend had kept it where he could see it every morning. A lump came into Jubal's throat.

In the corner stood a Winchester rifle. Idly Jubal picked it up; its stock fitted kindly to his hand, the hammer worked smoothly. He threw up the lever. A bullet in the chamber . . . it was like Reb to keep the magazine loaded, even in a country of ostensible law and order. How ironical that on the one occasion when the rifle might have helped him, he should have been unable to reach it. Jubal replaced the weapon in its corner.

An examination of the kitchen revealed a can of tomatoes, one of peaches, and another of deviled ham. There were some crackers, too, very stale but edible. Also coffee. He built a fire in the stove to heat water.

Was that an automobile coming over the hill? Yes, it was. The cut-out was open as was the frequent custom of the day. A loud, ugly sound, destroying the peace of the countryside.

The car was stopping . . . in his own yard. He rose from the table and went to the door.

“Richey Benner!”

Surprise was in the sheriff’s face.

“Well, now, Mr. Troop, I hadn’t expected to find, you here.”

But Jubal was gazing beyond Benner. Too well he knew that tall figure with its satiric smile. Webster Grattan.

Jubal gathered his wits. “Who did you expect to find, Richey?”

“To tell the truth, nobody.”

“Why did you come then?” Before the reply came Jubal knew the answer.

“Well, as to that, Mr. Troop, I’m here to serve out a court order. You understand that this is a matter of unpleasant duty. I’ve been ordered to post a notice of attachment on this property.”

“I see. Sheriff, I can’t blame you for this, but I wish you’d stand to one side. It’s your companion I want to talk to. Grattan, what’s the meaning of this?”

On the lawyer’s well-chiseled features was almost a pitying smile. “I’m sure you wouldn’t expect me, as attorney for your—ah—former wife, to neglect my duty by her,” he said. “As you perhaps know, Troop, due to your rather spectacular failure in business and to other factors, Mrs. Troop received only a fraction of the sum allotted to her by the court as a property settlement. Consequently when I happened to glance over the records of the

register of deeds, I was agreeably surprised to notice that within recent months you had filed deed to this piece of property in your own name. I took a motion immediately to court—as, you will agree, a good attorney should do—and received an order empowering me to take over this place as part of the settlement of Mrs. Troop’s just claims against you.”

So it was Webster Grattan’s plan. Jubal might have known the implacability of the man’s hate. Through a score of years Grattan had bided his time and now that the opportunity was at hand he was exacting from it every iota of satisfaction in paying back his ancient grudge. Nothing but crushing Jubal, abasing Jubal, pauperizing Jubal and forcing Jubal to grovel on the earth would satisfy Webster Grattan.

Jubal brushed a hand over his eyes. His face suddenly had become very haggard and he looked, for the first time in his life, old.

“Does Naoma hate me so much?” he asked. “This land did not belong to me when she got her divorce. It was willed to me by Reb Haizlipp. Moreover, when the court allowed her that property settlement, I was a wealthy man. I’m broke now. Are you and Naoma going to take this last vestige away from me?”

“We have the right,” sneered Grattan. “Every legal right in the world. The court gave judgment against you. That judgment stands until it is satisfied in full. And don’t worry, Troop. As long as I am Naoma’s attorney, I’ll see to it that you pay every penny of that judgment. I’ll follow you to the end of the earth. I’ll grind you and I’ll strip you. For years you had the laugh on me. You took away from me the woman I loved. You were the big man, while I was just a struggling lawyer. But now the situation’s reversed. The laugh’s on the other side. I have you where I want you, Jubal Troop, and by Heaven I’ll never let up on you! I’ll ride you as long as I’m alive, and if I ever allow you to raise your head again, may I be everlastingly damned!”

Richey Benner, watching the man in the doorway during Grattan’s tirade, suddenly felt his skin prickle. Slowly Jubal Troop was altering in appearance. His slack body straightened, seemed to swell. Forward thrust his jaw and his eyes blazed suddenly white with the old, baleful wrath. Like a lone champion defending his portcullis, Jubal braced himself in the door.

“Get off this place!” His voice was choked and guttural. “Get off this place! I’ve heard enough. Webster Grattan, you son-of-a-bitch, you made a mistake. You thought you’d see Jubal Troop crawl. Well, you can’t make me crawl! Nobody on God’s green earth can make me crawl! You mangy coyote—I’ll give you just thirty seconds to get off my place!”

“Now, Mr. Troop,” interposed the sheriff. “Don’t you make any trouble. This is my duty. Just calm down. The law’s in charge here. I’ll have to ask you to pack up and leave—”

Leaving a bitter oath crackling in the air behind him, Jubal leaped backward into the cabin. In two jumps he crossed the front room to Reb’s sleeping quarters. That Winchester! He knew just where it was. Again the cunningly shaped walnut stock fitted gratefully to his hands. There was a cartridge in chamber—that he knew. A second, and he strode back to the door.

The faces of both Webster Grattan and Richey Benner went sickly white when they saw the rifle in Jubal’s hands.

“My God, Mr. Troop, don’t shoot!” screamed the sheriff.

The crash of the rifle rang out against the sweet quiet of the evening.

Stumbling, falling, almost crawling in eagerness to escape, Grattan and the sheriff tumbled into their car and whirled away.

19

No one needed to tell Jubal how utterly finished he was. And he also began to see how well he had played into Webster Grattan’s hands. The one thing which would completely destroy him he had done—he had defied the law, and fired upon an officer, although the bullet from the Winchester had not been aimed at Sheriff Benner but purposely into the ground.

Jubal well understood the seriousness of his situation. His act meant prison probably—that added to the rest of his pyramid of misfortunes. Only yesterday, it seemed, he had been one of the West’s giants, an autocrat in his own oil empire. Tonight he did not even possess a legitimate claim to this small, tumbled-down cabin. Wife, friends, the work of his life, were gone. Moreover there faced him the bitterness of the belief that a man he hated would enjoy all that had been his, both Naoma and her property.

An extraneous thought suggested itself: How much had Naoma been able to salvage out of the wreck? There was the old Shoo-Fly ranch. The oil wells never had reached into the valley and two or three thousand acres of rich grazing land remained unsullied by them. With this land and the house in Wettick, and Reb Haizlipp’s ranch where Jubal was then sitting, together with whatever monies and other property she might have recovered here and there, Naoma would be comfortable . . . and so would Grattan.

The sun was sinking low. It would soon be setting. Jubal knew what would then occur. On the insistence of Grattan and backed by the power of a court order, Sheriff Benner would return with a posse to force his way into the cabin and arrest Jubal. Arrest? Jubal smiled thinly. That was not the word. He and Richey Benner knew and respected each other. The officer would be certain in his own mind that Jubal would never be taken peacefully. There would be a fight . . . Jubal barricaded in the cabin, the posse ringing it with spurts of fire from their rifles. Richey was a brave and conscientious officer; of this Jubal was glad. When the battle was over, everything would be cleaned up. Jubal would be carried out feet first. Others might be carried away, too, but the fight would never end until Jubal was finished. Without rancor, but nonetheless efficiently, the sheriff would go about the task of wiping out Jubal Troop, just as he would wipe out uncollected back taxes or a bad debt to the county.

Jubal approved of that. It seemed to him as he sat looking through a window toward the east, where the distant derricks loomed blackly on the horizon, that a bullet would be sweet release from the utter weariness which racked him. The neatness of the arrangement pleased him.

He would wait. The sun was sinking fast. Already it touched the top of the long hill to the west, which Reb used to sit and watch.

It came—the sound for which he had been listening. A motor car droned toward him over the hills. Nervously Jubal rose. Life burns deep even in those who wish to die. A pity. The rifle in his hands was slippery with the sweat from his palms.

The posse would stop its car well out of rifle shot and come slowly up through the dark valley. No, the sound of the engine had not ceased as he expected. He could see the automobile now, dipping and rising as the distant road followed the contours of the land, with a high plume of dust mounting in its wake.

Although the sun was not yet below the horizon, the low Shoo-Fly Valley already was deep in shadow. Into the gloom Jubal strained his eyes as the distant car plunged downward from the top of the hill and entered it. Up the lane where the sunflowers grew in summer the motor car was coming rapidly. He could not make out the identity of the occupants but there seemed to be only two of them.

The automobile came to a halt inside the gate. Jubal carefully leaned his rifle against the wall and went forward, his throat too full to speak. It was

Judge McReynolds who sat at the wheel of the car. And it was Naoma who advanced shyly toward the door.

20

Life was like the sea. For years it had been at ebb. Suddenly, now, the tide came rushing back, engulfing him and rendering him speechless. He was mute to Naoma, standing there at the threshold. He was numb, too, unable to move. Only his eyes hungrily took her in.

After a long time, his perception of himself returning, he shook his mind back into sentience. He stirred in the doorway.

“Come in, Naomy,” he said.

The Judge followed her into the house. Unable to comprehend why these two should have come to the cabin, Jubal perceived that he should warn them.

“You better not stay long. The law’s after me.”

Then Naoma said something inexplicable: “Not now, Jubal.”

He did not try to understand. He was content. The anguish, bitterness and despair were drawn from him by the sweet balm of her nearness.

“It’s over, dear,” her soft voice came to him. “It’s ended. The Judge and I came to Wettick just an hour ago—thinking you might come here—after things were finished at the penitentiary. He has told me the . . . story. But I did not need it. Long months ago, when I heard what was said in that trial, I wanted to tell you . . . to tell you . . . but I could never find you again.” She paused a moment, tears in her eyes, to recover the strong timbre of her voice. “As to what happened here this evening, I had not known what Grattan intended. But we arrived in time—to stop him definitely, and forever!”

The Judge intervened. “What she is trying to tell you, Jubal, is that she dismissed Grattan as her attorney an hour ago just as he was starting out with his posse to get you. She further has ordered all legal action against you in her name dropped. It was a solution simple, yet very effective. Your friend Grattan, by one word, was shorn of every vestige of his power over you, for it was only as Naoma’s attorney that he could do anything against you. He was crushed, the look in his eyes half of a severed snake, half of a fallen Lucifer, when Naoma told him.”

This was rich, blessed surcease. At last Jubal began to fathom what had occurred. With restrained eagerness he turned toward the woman who sat wistfully smiling at him.

“Naoma—”

She knew what hung, trembling, incapable of utterance, upon his lips. And she answered the unspoken question of his soul:

“Yes, dear. I’ve come back to you.”

He was on his knees, his great, rough head in her lap. With almost a mother’s compassion she cradled it in her arms and placed a little kiss upon the tanned back of his neck. When she raised her head, upon her uplifted face was the beatitude of love.

The Judge, self-effacing in their sacred moment, silently tip-toed outside. Happily he drew his lungs full of the evening air. Within he heard the low, thrilling voices.

The Judge smiled to himself. In the intense stillness of the evening the cough of an oil engine came from so far away that it was more like the beating of the pulse in the ears than a sound. Nearer, a cow called gently to her calf and the reedy bawl of the little one was succeeded by a contented mumbling. Shut off by the black opaqueness of the hill, the sun still sent its final rays across the upper sky. A solitary nighthawk flipped its wings ecstatically, bathed in the high, fading light.

Peet . . . peet . . . came the bird’s wild call.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Jubal Troop* by Paul Iselin Wellman]