

WESTY MARTIN
IN THE
SIERRAS

PERCY KEESE FITZHUGH

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WESTY MARTIN IN THE SIERRAS

WESTY MARTIN
IN THE SIERRAS

BY
PERCY KEESE FITZHUGH

Author of
THE TOM SLADE BOOKS
THE ROY BLAKELEY BOOKS
THE PEE WEE HARRIS BOOKS
THE WESTY MARTIN BOOKS

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MACHTEY

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WESTY MARTIN IN THE SIERRAS

CHAPTER I STRANDED

Westy managed to get to his feet and ran to the forward end of the car. He flung the heavy door wide open and stepped out into the vestibule as the Pullman rolled slowly to a stop. A quick screech of complaint sounded from the trucks, but soon the car settled itself resignedly over the snowy roadbed.

A frown overspread Westy's rugged features and he drew his coat collar up around his neck. The moaning wind drove great particles of ice and snow into his face but despite this annoyance he watched the long train struggling and puffing its way on the upgrade. The shrill blast of the siren sounded small and faint and it suddenly occurred to Westy that it was because of the ever-increasing distance between them. A strange, sickening sensation pervaded him for he realized that the big express did not know of the unhappy plight of its rear Pullman—in truth, it would have no way of knowing for some hours to come.

“Oi, and there's that conductor with nothing on his mind but a game of pinochle,” came a voice from the doorway. “He should know how we're marooned here in the desert or wherever it is and maybe we'll freeze to death, how do we know?”

Westy laughed and turned to the worried face of his friend, Benny Stein. “So you picked yourself up, too, huh Ben? Well, that was some spill, but I can’t see what we’re going to do about it. As you say, we’re marooned, but not in the desert. I’d rather it *was* the desert. At least we could cool off. This way we haven’t the heat to warm up even a little. Gosh, some pickle!”

“It am wuss dan a pickle, Mistah Westy,” the porter agreed, peering worriedly over Benny’s shoulder. “Dat dere conductuh won’t move out o’ dat drawin’ room befo’ dey comes tuh Boardman and dat is ’xactly three hours from dis minit. I’se rode wid dat crew befo’ an’ ah knows what am dere habits. Soon as dey leaves Hawkins Point, de conductuh gits out de cards an’ slips into de drawin’ room an’ one by one de boys come sneakin’ ’long an’ befo’ dey knows it dey is rollin’ into Boardman. Time goes fast when yo is playin’ pinochle.”

“What about the porter in that car, though?” Westy inquired hopefully. “Don’t you think maybe he knows our coupling gave way?”

The porter shook his head gloomily. “Boy, ef he did, dat engine smoke wouldn’ be miles away by dis time—it would be right heah. No suh, dat porter’s las’ passenger left at Hawkins Point an’ by dis time dat colored boy am sleepin’ de sleep of de weary. He won’t even wake up fo’ Boardman until de conductuh shakes him.”

“Oi,” groaned poor Benny, “we could freeze to death in three hours already.”

“*Three hours!*” exclaimed Westy, unwittingly heaping coals on worried Benny. “If it takes three hours to go to Boardman it takes the same length of time to get back. Six

hours—that’s how long we’ll be here! Maybe longer, huh porter?”

“Mebbe longer am right,” the porter answered. “Dey’ll send word tuh Hawkins Point fo’ a special engine mos’ likely and dat’ll mean nearer seven hours. Dey am a slow lot at Hawkins—dey nevah rush.”

“Yes, and that’s the reason we’re stuck here now,” said Westy. “I heard one of the yardmen say our coupling was in pretty bad shape and that it would just about hold out till we got to Boardman. Well, it didn’t and here....”

“Hey there, you birds,” interposed a brisk, deep voice from the depths of the car, “come in here and give me a hand, will you? I’m thinking that Dobbins has busted his leg or something—I can’t get him up!”

Westy reached the two young reporters, breathless. Nevins was struggling heroically to get his friend off the floor and into the seat of the rear section, but Dobbins seemed not to be able to move and groaned protestingly at each kindly ministrations that his friend attempted.

Mr. Nevins, of the *Chicago Sentinel*, looked flushed and discouraged. “Ain’t this a mess, kid?” he appealed to Westy.

“Kind of,” Westy answered, kneeling down at Mr. Dobbins’ side. “Can’t move your leg at all?” he asked the suffering young man, solicitously.

Mr. Dobbins groaned in answer.

“I thought he was kiddin’ me at first,” explained Mr. Nevins. “We kind of both plopped on top of each other when we went to follow you guys from the observation platform.”

“Yeh, he fell on top of me and crushed my bones,” moaned Mr. Dobbins. “I got to be lifted up from here, not dragged up!”

“Oh my, oh my!” said Mr. Nevins compassionately. “Now what are we going to do?”

“Well,” said Westy with brisk efficiency, “the porter can make up a berth, then we’ll get him up with the three bearers lift. That’s the easiest for a feller with any broken bones. Then I can see what first aid I’m able to remember from my scouting days. I can’t promise a whole lot.”

“I want a doctor!” groaned Dobbins impatiently. “No amateur stuff with me—how do I know but maybe I’m dying!”

Nevins shook his head hopelessly. “That’s the way he is when he’s sick—a crank!” he exclaimed, yet not unkindly. “Now, Dob, be reasonable,” he pleaded. “This young fella ain’t a numbskull by no means. Do you think a guy like Major Winton would take such an interest in him if he wasn’t showing pretty good signs of being clever? Not that I think learning to be an engineer would make him any better at this first aid stuff, but when he says he can do a thing, I’m willing to take a chance that he *can* do it!”

“Sure, he can do it, Mr. Dobbins,” Ben spoke up. “Believe me, I can speak from experience that Westy isn’t a fool when it comes to first aid. Already he’s as good as saved my life twice!”

“All right, if he can take the pain away for a little while, *all right!*” Dobbins moaned resignedly.

A few minutes later, Westy strode to the forward end of the Pullman and pressed his face against the cold window-pane. The thick, white flakes were piling steadily in the vestibule—up to the very doorstep. Mr. Nevins, Benny and the porter came forward to view this sweeping triumph of nature, looking over Westy’s shoulder gloomily.

Suddenly the pain-racked voice of Mr. Dobbins broke the momentary silence. “I can’t help if it’s snowing or not—*I got to have a doctor!*”

“And that’s no fairy story,” said Westy seriously. He fixed his eyes on the storm-swept horizon. “He has to have a doctor somehow. If it was just the leg broken, I could fix that up enough so’s to keep him from pain, but a dislocation—gosh, that’s a doctor’s job!”

“Hmph,” said Mr. Nevins, sorely perplexed. He pushed his derby back a little further. “A doctor in this neck of the woods! We might as well be in the Sahara desert looking for one.”

“Just the same one has to be looked for!” said Westy determinedly. “A feller can’t lie there with a dislocation for six hours—gosh!”

Mr. Nevins looked at Westy admiringly. “Well, kid, you’re all right in spirit, but Old Man Storm will have something to say about it. Great guns, a guy would get lost, out hunting for a house in this blizzard. Besides I don’t think there’s a shack for miles around.”

“Maybe two miles,” said Westy thoughtfully, pressing his face closer to the fast-freezing pane, “but it’s a shack or something. If they have a telephone, I’ll be in luck.”

“What—what do you mean?” asked Mr. Nevins edging closer to the door.

“Don’t you see something?” Westy returned, directing their attention to a little glow in the northwest.

They agreed that it was some kind of a light and watched fascinated as the glow alternately flickered and shone in the wake of every gust of wind. There was something indomitable about it, Westy thought, holding out against that

terrific storm. Truly, it seemed a beacon, a good omen, flickering against the murky, Sierra horizon.

“I got to have a....” began Mr. Dobbins in weaker tones.

“All right,” Westy interposed briskly, “You’ll have one, Mr. Dobbins, or I’ll know the reason why. I’m going!”

CHAPTER II

THE LIGHT

“Yo-all am flyin’ in de face of disaster,” said the porter drawing his immaculately white coat about his shivering body.

“Maybe it’s a mirage,” observed Mr. Nevins worriedly. “You might have your trip for nothing. It’s a queer place out here.”

“Then it will be my hard luck,” said Westy determinedly. “I’ll soon find out what it is and I can’t do it by standing here wondering, storm or no storm!”

“I’ll go with you, Westy,” said Benny mournfully. “You shouldn’t die alone by this freezing mountain.”

Westy laughed outright. “Don’t fool yourself that I’ll die, Ben,” he said kindly. “And I’m going alone. The porter’s job is to stick to this car, Mr. Nevins has to look out for Mr. Dobbins and you’ve a bad cold, so here you stay. It’s bad enough that Dobbins is in such a condition without you getting pneumonia or something worse. I’ll be all right, don’t worry.”

Benny had his doubts and not without sufficient cause for the storm seemed to be sweeping about with renewed zest. The windows of the stately Pullman were already freezing and the frosty flakes clung to them in graceful and variegated patterns.

“It’ll be colduh inside than out in a little while,” the porter predicted gloomily. “It beats all how quick de steam do go out when dere ain’t any comin’ in.”

This bit of intelligence brought a deep groan from Mr. Dobbins. Westy, bundled warmly in overshoes, overcoat and muffler, hurried to the forward door.

“There’s enough blankets in this car to keep you people from freezing,” he said cheerfully. Then, thoughtfully: “Pile a couple more on Mr. Dobbins, huh? He’ll need more than the rest of you. I’ll be back soon. S’long!”

The porter made the rounds of several berths and presently came forward laden with blankets, two of which he deposited at Mr. Dobbins’ berth. Mr. Nevins promptly spread these carefully over the suffering young man.

“Well, Dob,” said he, digging his hands deep into his trousers pockets, “that kid’s on his way, whether or no. I must say he’s got us reporters skinned to a frazzle when it comes to nerve. I wouldn’t put a toe out in that blizzard tonight for a dying man.”

“But I’ve *got* to have a doctor!” groaned Mr. Dobbins impatiently. “He’s got more sense than any of you; that’s the reason he’s taking the chance.”

“Chance is right,” muttered Mr. Nevins. He pressed his face against the icy window and peered out into the dusk. “Hmph, I can’t see a sign of him—nothing but snow, snow....”

“I’se got my own ideas ’bout de snow out heah,” said the porter in solemn tones, “and dey ain’t ’xactly pleasant ones nohow. It’s jest like committin’ suicide, dat’s what I calls it!”

“But Westy ain’t so foolish,” said Benny fearfully. “He’s got some idea maybe that he can get to the light. Already I

bet he's half way there."

"Yeah, but dat ain't half-way back again," countered the porter. He seemed not to be able to draw one hopeful word from the well-spring of his native optimism. "I likes dat boy too much tuh see him freeze hissself tuh death—fuh what?"

"Yeah, but what about me?" moaned Mr. Dobbins complainingly. "Here I can't move two inches, I've got such pain! I think I should get some sympathy and that young fellah's the only one that's got any for me. You're a fine bunch with your confounded gloom when he's trying to help me—*me* that's in need of a doctor!"

Mr. Nevins pushed the derby hat back still further on his head until it merely rested on his blond hair. "Listen, Dob," said he patiently. "We have sympathy for you, and you know that we have! We know, too, that the kind of pain you're in, is no pink tea. But it's the kind of pain that won't kill you and at worst we'll be rescued and you'll be relieved long before morning. That's a certainty, but this wild goose chase that young Martin's going on is an uncertainty. How do we know that he'll ever come back? Great guns, if he does—well, there's one sure thing, Dob, you owe him more right now than you'll ever be able to repay in a lifetime."

"Don't you s'pose I can see he's a good fellah!" exclaimed Mr. Dobbins in injured tones. But unable to repress an inherent selfishness, he added: "I hope he's able to phone for a doctor."

The porter wagged his big black head gloomily. "Yeah, an' if he's able tuh phone dat don't say no doctah kin git heah befo' we git help. In dis country de doctahs am as scarce as fo' leaf clovahs. We might be in Boardman safe an' sound befo' a doctah gits heah. Yes suh."

“You’re right, porter,” said Mr. Nevins worriedly. “I’m sorry now that we didn’t hold young Martin back by force. I don’t like the business at all. A few hours’ pain at the cost of someone’s life—hmph!” he added, more to himself than to his listeners.

“Just the same, Westy ain’t no dummy, storm or no storm,” said Benny, making a heroic effort to convince himself that his friend could triumph over anything. “Such a scout he used to be, he didn’t need a trail even. In the pitch darkness he could find his way so I bet already he’s found that light.”

And as if to add further weight to this very excellent argument, Benny secured a blanket from the porter and sitting down in Mr. Nevins’ section proceeded to glance at the pages of a magazine which he found there. At intervals he found himself glancing toward the frost-covered window-pane at his side, as if trying to penetrate the mystery of the storm raging outside.

Was Westy safe?

CHAPTER III

DANGER SIGNAL

Westy was giving this same question serious thought. Indeed, he was beginning to wonder whether or not it was sheer folly for him to attempt to carry out his errand of mercy in the face of unsympathetic elements. There was little incentive, to be sure, for he had nothing to guide him in that chaotic wilderness save the little flickering light. That too seemed to be eluding him, for the more distance he put between himself and the Pullman the further away did the beacon seem.

In a moment of despair he plunged his tall, slim body determinedly forward and slipped into a foamy looking drift that lay in his path. He found himself sinking, sinking into its soft, treacherous depths and extricated himself not without some effort.

He scrambled to his feet, dashed the snow out of his eyes, and scanned the murky night. The light again! It flickered bravely in spite of the furious gale and Westy took heart. Nothing should down him either!

He pulled the brim of his hat further down on his forehead and stumbled on through the great drifts. Soon he discovered that there was no longer any sign of the cheerfully lighted Pullman behind him and the knowledge gave him a sickening sensation. He had no way of knowing the distance between his friends and himself and was on the verge of panic when some welcome inner voice suggested that perhaps the sudden

disappearance of the lighted car was because of the peculiar position of the land through which the railroad ran.

A few minutes' reasoning brought him to the conclusion that the roadbed must certainly lie in a valley surrounded by virgin forests while the light flickered upon the rising face of the mountain. He had been quite ignorant of the fact that his journey thus far had been a steady up-hill climb.

It seemed hours since he had last seen Benny's anxious face. He longed to hear a human voice break through the sad, dismal moan of the storm. The gaunt, giant trees of the forest which he had just skirted cried plaintively with each merciless lash of the wind around their broad trunks, while the wide, bare branches swung to and fro in the darkness like so many phantom arms. A few dry dead leaves crackled eerily; small ghostly voices of a summer long past.

Westy shivered and stamped his feet upon the snow covered ground. Despite the heavy overshoes he was wearing, his toes were numb with the cold. His fingers, too, buried deep in his overcoat pockets, felt icy and whenever he held his head up into the wind his nostrils seemed to contract, so intense was the cold. For this reason he preferred to stumble along uncertainly with his nose hidden under his upturned collar rather than expose his face to the freezing blasts.

Once he was certain that something leaped out of a drift just ahead and slunk away into the darkness. He called but the wind seemed only to mock his efforts. Something else moved past him and this time he could hear a sort of deep sigh which brought him to a full stop.

A deer perhaps? He laughed at his fears and wondered what time it was. A moment he spent in trying to find out but

there wasn't a match that could withstand that gale for half a second and he decided presently that he didn't care about time anyhow. He felt suddenly warm and drowsy standing still.

A great drift over four feet high that stood to one side of his path had a peculiar fascination for him and he wished he could lie down alongside of it and sleep. Just a short nap, he thought drowsily. He would then be fine and fit to battle the storm and find the light.

His heavily-lidded eyes sought the flickering light and found it. Yes, there it was and not a great distance from where he was standing. In point of fact, it seemed very near but for some strange reason he did not now desire to rush straight to it. He wanted first to sleep—he would not sleep long.

He knew vaguely that he was stumbling toward the drift and just as vaguely was he conscious of sinking down in the soft mound. It seemed very warm, very delightful there. He knew he ought not to be losing time sleeping when his friends, Benny and Nevins, and most of all the suffering Dobbins, were waiting for him. But he could not rouse himself to his errand now. Sleep was all that mattered.

Warmer and warmer did he feel. The wind seemed not to whistle so shrilly, indeed it crooned gently about his ears. And was that a voice he heard—a distant, human voice? To be sure it was, but he could not rouse himself to do anything about it. Now the voices called in answer to each other, drowsily distant. Now they died away.

It was then that Westy ceased to feel anything—ceased to hear anything....

CHAPTER IV

DALE

Westy choked on the warm liquid that trickled down his throat and he was roused by two strong arms that set him forcibly on his own feet. For a moment he felt dazed and the strange drowsiness seemed loath to leave him when the strong arms pushed him forward.

[Illustration: Westy choked on the warm liquid that trickled down his throat.]

“Move, young fellow,” said a voice, deep and soothing. “Keep your feet, legs, hands and arms moving and don’t stop for even a second!”

Westy obeyed mechanically and after a few seconds, found that the drowsiness was leaving him and that his whole body was tingling strangely. He then became aware of a square shouldered young man at his side who was looking anxiously down at him from a height of almost six feet. He was muffled from head to foot.

“Uh—uh,” said Westy puzzled and surprised.

“Where ... what....”

“Ah, you’re coming around O.K.,” said the tall fellow with evident relief. “Talk and move constantly—that’s the ticket!” He put a firm, thickly gloved hand under Westy’s arm and fairly lifted him along the snowy ground. “We

haven't but a little way to the house and it's darn lucky or I wouldn't have found you otherwise."

"You...." Westy stammered, puzzled. "I ... I was sleeping, wasn't I?"

"Sleeping! Well, in truth you were sleeping—a sleep that you would never have to bother waking from. You were freezing to death, young son, that's how much you were sleeping. But God's in his heaven—I spotted you right after you spread yourself out, I guess, for your pulse was doing its duty. Good thing I make a habit of carrying my thermos on nights like this. Nothing like hot black coffee for bringing a fellow around."

Westy surveyed his rescuer as well as the darkness would permit. His eyes were frank and penetrating and most likely a deep blue. One felt that they were, instinctively. And the chin that emerged from the upturned collar of the sheepskin coat was determined and strong looking. When he spoke again his full, generous mouth revealed a row of even teeth.

"Now you're sprinting it like a regular fellow," he said in the full, deep tones that were particularly soothing to Westy. "Here's the house right ahead of us."

"Ahead? House?" asked Westy, still a little dazed.

"Absitively," laughed the young man. "Bunk house—mine included. I'm Phil Dale—just an ordinary cowboy, and this is the Binford Ranch—Binford's house is right up there where you see the lantern."

Westy was startled into a vivid recollection of the nature of his errand. He rubbed his eyes instinctively and laid a detaining hand on the cowboy's muscular arm. "That's the light—that's the light!" he exclaimed weakly, and proceeded

to pour out the whole strange tale of the stranded Pullman and the keen suffering of young Mr. Dobbins.

At the conclusion of this breathless information, Phil Dale gave Westy's arm a little friendly pressure and walked him on to the bunk house. "Some chance you took, young son," he said admiringly, "but the one thing you must remember in this country—never lie down in a storm like this when you feel yourself getting drowsy. Run, jump, do anything and everything but lie down!"

"Can you 'phone for a doctor, then, huh?" asked Westy insistently.

"The lines have been down for a couple of hours," answered Phil Dale thoughtfully. "The only doctor nearest here lives exactly forty miles from Mr. Binford's house and he couldn't possibly make the journey before morning. How bad is this Mr. Dobbins' leg?"

"Dislocation—that I'm sure of and I think it's broken too," answered Westy. "He's in awful pain—I couldn't stand to see him have to wait until a train picked us up and then wait three hours longer before we got to Boardman. I had to try and see what I could do anyway. Gosh, maybe I'll have my worry for nothing. Maybe the relief train will get there before I get back anyhow."

"Not a chance, Martin," the cowboy assured him. He looked at a wrist watch, bending his tall body forward in the light from the bunk house windows. "It's just two hours since your train gave you the slip and your relief engine from Hawkins Point will probably be towing the snow plow, so you may as well get used to the idea of steaming into Boardman about sun-up."

Westy got a clear view of the cowboy's features in that light—a view that made a lasting impression upon his mind. To begin with, Dale had a way of smiling sadly as he spoke and shutting his eyes as if to imprint the thought just spoken for future reference. And then there was a slight cleft in his chin which seemed to add to his masculinity rather than detract, for it had a way of immediately drawing one's attention to his shock of flaming red hair which curled recklessly under the brim of his Stetson.

"A regular guy," was the way Westy summed it up; then aloud he said: "Say, how do you know it's only two hours ago that our train left us? Gosh, it seems like twenty to me."

They had reached the door, but Dale paused and faced him. "I heard the Mountain Express—I always hear it picking up steam for Dawson's Ridge. I listen purposely because it kind of keeps me balanced with the rest of the world." Then seeing Westy's puzzled expression, he smiled. "We're only a quarter of a mile from the railroad, young fellow. You just mixed up your checkers coming here in a storm, that's all. What you did was to circle the valley instead of coming straight up the ridge. But that would have happened to anybody who wasn't on to the tricks of this country in a storm. Now come on in and thaw out. We'll give you some more hot coffee, then we'll figure out what we can do about poor Mr. Dobbins."

At that juncture, the figure of a short, stockily-built man came gliding out of the darkness. "'S you, Dale?" he asked in thick, guttural tones.

Westy could feel Dale's arm grow taut in his.

"Yes, it's me, Cork," he answered tonelessly. "I found this chap starting to take a nap 'longside of a drift just below. He

came from a stranded Pullman looking for a doctor. Fellow in the car fell and busted his leg when the coupling gave way from the car ahead. Name is Martin—Martin, this is Corcoran, ranch foreman here.”

Westy felt an enormous hand grasp his own and looked into the frowning weather-beaten face of the foreman. “Hmph,” said the man gruffly. “Howdy! Dale tell you we were out hunting wolves? No? Well, we were. That’s the only thing’d get me out in such pesky weather. Valley’s full of wolves and they pester our stock. Snow drives ’em down from the mountains. Lucky me or Dale didn’t take you for one of the critters, eh Dale? Ha, ha, you’d have a couple of slugs in you now if we did. Well, let’s be gettin’ inside and hear what’s what. Hmph!”

He threw open the door and stepped in first. Dale took Westy’s arm, giving it the same friendly pressure as before. “I hardly think you’ll like Cork,” he whispered with the suggestion of a chuckle.

“I don’t,” murmured Westy.

CHAPTER V

CORCORAN

Westy felt the glowing warmth of good circulation in his veins by the time he had told his story to the foreman and cowboys of Binford's ranch. They listened attentively, and with the exception of Corcoran, sympathetically. That swaggering personage paced to and fro, smoking a short-stemmed pipe and smiling as if secretly amused.

"Wa'al, this here Mr. Dobbins has to have his leg fixed, I take it, eh?" asked Corcoran with a cold gleam in his black eyes. A straggling lock of black hair over his left eye made him look actually pugnacious.

"He's in terrible pain," said Westy, puzzled at the man's attitude. "Of course, he's got to have it fixed, but I don't know what we're going to do now. Mr. Dale said we couldn't get a doctor before morning anyway, so I suppose Mr. Dobbins will have to wait until we get into Boardman. Gosh, I dread spending a couple of more hours hearing him moan like he did when I left."

Corcoran swung round on his short legs and faced Phil Dale. "Say, Dale," said he in a booming voice, "what's th' matter with you seein' what you kin do fer that feller, eh? Yuh kin fix things 'round here a-plenty, maybe you kin do somethin' fer him, eh?"

Dale took Westy's overcoat, spread it on a chair before the great glowing stove, then glanced at the foreman. "I don't know how you can say I've done plenty around here, Cork,"

said he testily. "I've bandaged a couple of minor cuts and bruises for the boys and set a broken thumb for you, that's all. Quite a far cry from a dislocation, eh?"

"Yeah, but yuh admit yuh wuz one o' them there orderlies in that Texas hospital an' do yuh mean tuh tell me yuh never saw them there doctors fix up somethin' like this hombre on the train has, eh?" Corcoran sputtered, fixing his eyes steadily upon Dale.

"The fact that I saw them do it doesn't say that I can do it, too," Dale returned with that sad smile that Westy so liked. He shut his eyes for a moment, then looked up at Corcoran again. "I wouldn't want to make the chap's lot any harder with my bungling, amateurish efforts."

"Say, youse couldn't bungle any job, Dale," spoke up an angular-looking cowpuncher named Dolan who hailed from New York's own East Side. "Fer an amychoor, youse got any professional medico beat a t'ousand ways. Lookit de way youse fixed me up dat time I cut dat artery! Why, I'd o' liked tuh bleed tuh death if it wuzn't fer youse! Amychoor, me eye! You wuz born tuh be a medico an' dere ain't no two ways about it. I bet anyting youse can handle dat guy in de Pullman, an' I'm de boid what knows it."

Dale smiled and bit his under lip thoughtfully. A startled expression appeared in his eyes, then quickly disappeared. Westy noted it and wondered.

"Gosh, Mr. Dale, if you can do as well as that, you can at least try to do something for Mr. Dobbins, can't you?" he pleaded. "He must be pretty nearly exhausted by this time and you can imagine how he's suffering. So, won't you come and try to do something for him, huh? *Please!*"

Corcoran gave two short guffaws and whacked Dale's broad shoulders soundly. "Sure, you'll go, eh Dale?" he roared, as if it were a side-splitting occasion. "Fer a puncher yuh're th' prettiest nurse I ever did see." He strutted to the window and looked out, his lumpy, muscular shoulders heaving with merriment "Naow, this is fine," he shouted, turning about, "snow's stopped and it 'pears like th' moon's pushin' through. You go on with Martin, an' Dolan an' me'll rustle some coffee an' grub fer th' folks on th' train. We'll be duckin' at yuh're heels 'fore yuh start doin' yuh prettiest. Eh, Dolan?"

"I'm wid youse, Cork," answered Dolan, rising from his bunk and stifling a wide yawn. "Anyting tuh have a woid or two wid a coupla buddies from Noo Yawk—didn't youse say dem two newspaper boids wuz from me ole home town, kid?"

Westy laughed outright at Dolan's typical New-Yorkese, as he was wont to call it. Then: "Mr. Nevins and Mr. Dobbins are from Chicago," he said mirthfully, "but Benny Stein, my friend, and myself are from Bridgeboro, New Jersey. That's only fourteen miles from New York, Mr. Dolan. Won't we do?"

Dolan's answer was lost in the hearty mirth that followed. Dale, however, took no part in it and stood staring into space for a moment, with that strange, startled expression in his eyes. Westy saw it immediately and for some reason which he could not define, he was drawn still more to the handsome cowboy. Corcoran, too, was obviously interested in these kaleidoscopic changes in Dale's countenance, but his interest was unsympathetic and the cold gleam of his little eyes bespoke a hostile curiosity.

“What’s th’ matter?” Corcoran asked with a sardonic chuckle. “Yuh look as if yuh see a live ghost or somethin’, Dale, eh?”

Dale started and flushed vividly. “Ghost?” he asked, laughing lightly. “You’re crazy, Cork—absolutely crazy. I’m just seeing what would happen if I dislocate this Dobbins chap’s leg more than it’s dislocated right now. I’m not exactly looking forward to it with pleasure, despite your wise cracks about me being a pretty nurse. It’s a serious thing for an amateur to monkey around with broken bones and such, believe me.”

Corcoran guffawed deafeningly and walked over to Dale. “Say,” said he, in a mockingly confidential manner, “yuh ain’t afraid of breakin’ little things like bones, are yuh? Some of us break lots o’ bones that we don’t tell ’bout, eh Dale?”

Dale’s face was livid for a moment, then he smiled sadly and turned to the chair for Westy’s coat. “You’re talking in circles, Cork,” he said, holding up the coat, “and I don’t know what you’re trying to get over to me. But one thing I do know—there are lots of bones that we’d like to break and don’t talk about. That’s one thing I do know!” His eyes were shut as he spoke, but it did not make this declaration the less convincing.

And somehow Westy understood, and understanding, sympathized.

CHAPTER VI CORK'S WORK

They waded back through the deep snow under a full moon, whose pale yellow light gleamed steadily down upon the tops of giant trees bordering the mountain forests. As they descended the ridge into the valley, Dale grasped Westy's arm.

"Just in the event that you slip and fall, we'll both fall together," he explained with a quiet chuckle. "Don't mind, do you?"

"*Mind!* No! I like it, Mr. Dale. It's buddy-like and that's my weakness," answered Westy delightedly. "Everything's so still out here, it's nice to feel that someone else is here besides myself."

"O, I'm here all right, Martin," said Dale heartily. "Sometimes I think I'm too much here. Especially with this crazy, reckless stunt I'm about to do," he added, and his voice trailed off into the crisp, mountain atmosphere and echoed in a profound sigh round about their heads.

"Dolan and the rest of the fellers have a lot of confidence that you can help some, so please don't worry," Westy said anxiously. "Even if you can just kind of ease his pain, it will help a lot. And as much as I don't like the way Mr. Corcoran acts toward you, he seems to have confidence in you when it comes to doing things."

Dale pressed his arm gratefully. "Thanks for your loyalty, anyway," he said smiling. "Most every fellow in that bunk

house is too afraid of Cork to express such an opinion even out of his hearing. Yes, Cork has confidence in me, Martin—for a reason of his own, I think. I've suspected it for a long time and he knows I suspect it. He dislikes me because Mr. Binford has often asked me my opinion on ranch matters over Cork's head. Not that I know any too much about ranch affairs, but Mr. Binford thinks I have a little more education about certain matters than our sour-tempered foreman has. That's what started things boiling and now he has something else in his head, I think."

"Well, couldn't you quit here and get a job at some other ranch?" asked Westy naively.

Dale hesitated a moment. "I could, but I don't want to," said he wistfully. "It's so nice and out of the way here, notwithstanding that the railroad is so near. You're the first railroad passenger I've talked to since I left the train that dumped me off at Boardman."

"Gosh, are you sorry that I've had to bother you?" Westy asked apologetically.

Dale laughed. "No, Martin," he said in that deep, throaty way, "I'm not. It's strange too, because I had made up my mind that I would be. But I've just taken a liking to you, instead. I've been out of sorts with the world for the last few months and I wasn't hankering to mingle with people, that's all."

"And here I'm dragging you against your will," said Westy. "But there aren't many people, Mr. Dale—just my friend Benny Stein and Mr. Nevins and Mr. Dobbins and the porter. And I've got a lot of confidence in you, too."

"I know you have, Martin," said Dale pleasantly. "And that's why I made up my mind to go back with you, whether

or no. Cork's wise cracks and insinuations didn't influence me one darn bit. Of course, I couldn't feel free in mind in refusing to help this Mr. Dobbins whatever my personal objections were—I wouldn't refuse! But let me tell you, kid, I'm going largely to ease your mind too."

"Thanks, Mr. Dale—I won't forget it, honestly," said Westy. And then with a laugh: "But don't forget, I'm not a kid. I'm going on nineteen."

Dale laughed. "Nevertheless I like to call you kid," he said. "And to show you that I don't mean that as a slight to your intelligence or manliness, I'll give you leave to call me Dale. How about it?"

"O. K. with me, Dale," Westy laughed. "Boy, that doesn't make me mad."

"All right. That's settled. And as long as you're going to park in Boardman for a while, I intend seeing you now and then. Why, we'll be neighbors, do you realize that, kid?"

"*Neighbors!*" Westy laughed. "My gosh—a three hours' ride on the train and how many hours in a car?"

"Car! Through these mountains?" Dale chuckled heartily. "That's a good one. It takes a horse to pick his way through some of the ravines from Binford's to Boardman and with the little mare I have, I can make it in six hours at a pinch. Short cuts help too. I'll pay you a visit on my next day off."

Westy was greatly amused and after his mirth had subsided, found himself telling Dale his hopes, his fears and aspirations. There was that about the tall cowpuncher that inspired confidence for he listened with such rapt attention to the smallest details that one could not help feeling that here was the world's perfect fellow creature; sympathetic and

understanding. In point of fact, it was thus that Westy summarized him to Benny, shortly afterward.

“You see, I’ve been on jobs with Major Winton a couple of times,” Westy was saying to Dale as they crunched the snow underfoot. “Sometimes I was just invited along to look on and sometimes I helped out with odd jobs. Odd jobs is what I’m going to do now, I guess, because the major said that there wouldn’t be much real work until spring. He’s a good friend of my father’s, the major is, and he says he feels like I’m kind of his son and he wants me to be an engineer some day, so whenever there’s a big job on hand he always urges father to let me come out and look on.”

“Keeps you under his wing, eh?” said Dale understandingly.

“That’s just it, Dale,” answered Westy enthusiastically. “And while I’m waiting to go to college, he likes to keep me interested and occupied. That’s why I’m out here now. And Benny—well, Major Winton says Ben will make a fine engineer some day too, and knowing that we’re such good friends he invited Ben to keep me company and to look on also.”

“In other words he’s the world’s record engineer maker, eh?” Dale chuckled.

“You said it. Gosh, he’s O. K. Well, Ben’s a good friend, too. He’s nervous and finicky and always wondering what trouble is coming next, but you’ll like him, Dale. He’s the best hearted kid ever and he’s saved my life a couple of times. Not afraid to face things when it comes to a showdown.”

“I can readily appreciate that if he’s your friend,” said Dale, interested. “Is he your age, Martin?”

“Mm, just a few months younger. How old are you, Dale?”

“Old enough to have better sense,” the other laughed. “I’m going on twenty-three.”

“Gosh, that’s young.”

Dale did not make any further comment for a time, then suddenly he stopped short, his head bent to one side, listening. “It’s Cork and Dolan bringing up the rear,” he said looking up the ridge. “Let’s hurry! Perhaps I can fix up this Dobbins before they reach the Pullman.”

Westy listened intently but could hear no sound save the impatient, shrill voice of the wind. “Are you sure it’s they?” he asked puzzled. “I don’t hear them.”

“That’s because your ears aren’t mountain-trained yet,” Dale explained taking his arm and hurrying on. “In a week’s time you’ll be able to identify even surprisingly small sounds. It’s because of the silence here. Even with the wind cutting capers I could distinguish Cork’s laugh. They haven’t reached the top of the ridge yet and by the time they have, we’ll have rounded that next bend. Soon after we’ll be sighting the lights of your Pullman. Not fifteen minutes. Cold?”

“Nope,” Westy answered. “I’m kind of tingling from my experience before, but that’s all. Your arm keeps me warm too. What’s that ahead of us?”

“Where, kid?”

“There.” Westy pointed at a large dark object lying beside a drift.

Dale took three powerful strides ahead and stopped with a long whistle. “Hmph!” he exclaimed angrily. “A fawn, Martin! And a doe at that! This is Cork’s work. He’ll say he

mistook it for a wolf. That's Cork for you. That's why he got Dolan to come along with him—he'll attend to it on their way back—with Dolan's help, of course. It's disgusting, eh?" His voice quivered with emotion.

Westy came up to his side and viewed the scene with dismay. The creature was beautiful and its graceful body lying so still upon the soft, white carpet of snow made a picture that was at once magnificent and pitiable. The pale, friendly rays of moonlight fell full upon it, revealing the victim's soft, appealing eyes, startled and fearful, just as the cold, swift hand of Death had glazed them.

Westy shuddered and gulped. "How could he do it? *How?*"

"That's something I couldn't tell you," answered Dale softly. "I've seen Cork do lots of work like this, but he never fails to have an alibi. The man has a cruel vein—you'd agree with me if you could see how delighted he is to have an excuse for hunting things down. He's been as happy as a lark since the wolves have been pestering the stock—he's out every night stalking them and waiting his chance to kill. That's why he picked me to help him—he knows how I hate to put my finger on the trigger, as bad as the pests are. Come on, kid; the poor thing—it makes me feel kind of sick to look at it. I suppose you think I'm a regular old woman, eh?"

"Nope," said Westy, "I don't. In fact, I feel kind of sick, myself."

CHAPTER VII

THE FIRST SHADOW

It happened soon after they sighted the welcome lights of the Pullman and though the incident occupied but the fraction of a minute, it served later to make Westy's faith in Dale unwavering.

Westy saw it first—just a dim, gray phantom that for a second seemed but a shadow cast by the moonlight on the snow. But in an instant the shadow became animate and moved stealthily from under a high snowbank, gliding so close to them that they could feel the force of life in it and hear the deep, labored breathing as it swung around and sought cover behind the drift once more.

Westy cried out, more in surprise and shock than in fear. Dale took a step forward and his hand went swiftly to his right pocket.

“Wolf,” he hissed between his teeth. “Might be more than one.”

Westy saw the cold, gleaming barrel of steel dart forward as the animal bounded gracefully back and slunk away into the shadows. Dale's hand came back to his pocket and he dropped the revolver into it, shrugging his shoulders with a sort of hopeless gesture.

“Can't do it, kid,” he said quietly. “I'm beginning to think I'm not even half a man, but just the same I can't do it. I can't kill *anything*, not even those pests! Especially her—her cubs are somewhere up on the ridge waiting for her to bring

home the bacon. Live and let live, eh Martin? Hunger is all that drives them down here after our stock—instinct. Well, I haven't the instinct to kill them, that's all."

They walked on in silence. Then: "Would they attack you without provocation?" asked Westy.

"I've never seen it happen. And seeing is believing, eh? Cork would tell you that they do. I've heard from a more reliable source that they'll simply snap at you like a dog if they are desperately hungry and at bay. But, that's all."

Suddenly the shrill echo of Cork's laugh drifted down to them from the ridge and they quickened their pace. Westy could not help wondering if the foreman's mirth had issued from the spot where the beautiful, lifeless fawn lay. Was he boasting of his prize? Did not the man have at least one moment's contrition for his wilful act?

A sharp, shrill bark sounded and in its wake came a shot, followed by another and then another. After that the whole region seemed to settle into a deadly, ominous silence broken only by the soft thud of footsteps hurrying over the thick carpet of snow. Neither of the young men had stopped for even a moment, their thoughts seeming to drive them on toward the Pullman at breakneck speed.

Within a few feet of the lighted car, Westy said "Do you suppose that was the mother wolf, Dale?"

"Perhaps. I figured she would just about have made the ridge by the time Cork and Dolan reached there. The poor, hungry beasts scoot off into the forest at that point, but from the sounds of things, I guess there was one who didn't scoot, eh?"

"Yes, from the sounds of things. Gosh, Dale, I don't know why such things have to be, do you? Hungry wolves; mother

wolves especially, that have pups to feed and don't know any better than to run right into danger by getting in the way of a man like Mr. Corcoran. Why does he have to be that way, too?"

"Why? That's what I'd like to know too. Well, anyway I'm glad that you feel the same way about those things. Fellows out here say that that point of view isn't manly, but I disagree with them. It's simply humane, eh?"

"That's what! You should worry about what they say, Dale. Of course, after all, I don't know much about you, but I liked you right away. I have the feeling that you'd stand up in a showdown better than Mr. Corcoran ever could. Know what I mean? You're softhearted just like me and I know I'm no coward, so you can't be either. Oh gosh, what's the use of trying to explain, huh Dale! I just like you and trust you and that's all there is to it."

"Thanks, kiddo," said Dale with a ring of real feeling in his voice. "I'm always going to count on you, eh? I say *always*, because I have a hunch this won't be the last time I'm going to see you. Not by a long shot."

They shook hands heartily and smiled into each other's eyes while the yellow moonbeams danced gaily across their features. Indeed, it seemed a favorable enough sign, but that wise old fellow up in the moon blinked his eyes sleepily and nodded his round head sagaciously as if to say that he knew what he knew.

CHAPTER VIII

COMPARING NOTES

They had still an hour before the little mountain town of Boardman was reached. Westy was idly watching the drifts that piled up at either side of the roadbed as the locomotive puffed laboriously up the steep grade, pushing the snowplow relentlessly onward. The moon flickered feebly under some western clouds and the stars on the eastern horizon had completely disappeared.

“It’ll be just as Dale said,” Westy murmured, “we’ll be steaming into Boardman at sun-up.”

The porter and Mr. Nevins who sat in the forward seat facing Westy, nodded drowsily. Benny, curled up right at his elbow, had nothing to say for he was fast asleep. And Mr. Dobbins, now free of pain and his broken bones skillfully set in splints (thanks to the efficient Dale), was slumbering peacefully in the section just opposite.

“Well, there’s two things I’m thankful for,” said Nevins after a prolonged yawn; “I’m glad that the snowplow picked us up and took us away from that confounded Dawson’s Valley, and I’m glad that Boardman is a government settlement where Dob can get regular hospital care and sleep in a regular bed. Ain’t it a hot one? We came—Dob and I, to report progress on the Boardman Dam and now I can get busy doing that alone and reporting on Dob in the bargain. It’s a great life!”

“Dale said he ought to be able to get back to Chicago on a stretcher in less than a month and if luck favors him, on crutches in six weeks,” Westy said with his forehead resting against the cold window-pane.

“That Dale guy is as good as any doctor as ever I did see,” said Mr. Nevins. “Did you get an eyeful of the way he handled Dob? Soon as he came in Dob quieted down and seemed to be almost hypnotized.

“Yassuh, dat wuz some transformation,” the porter agreed. “It wuz refreshin’ tuh see de way he rolled up his sleeves an’ went tuh work on Mistah Dobbins. Jes so business like.”

“Professional like,” corrected Mr. Nevins benignly. Then: “Didn’t he give Dob some kind of medicine in that glass of water, Martin?”

“Uh huh,” Westy answered brightly. “A powder—he called it a sedative I think. Something to make Mr. Dobbins sleep for a few hours, he said. He told me that he most always carries a few around with him from habit. You know he was an orderly in that Texas hospital for a long time and they get to know almost as much as doctors, I guess.”

“Did he tell you that?”

“What?”

“About being an orderly in a Texas hospital.”

“Oh, sure.”

Mr. Nevins drummed his short, thick fingers on the window sill for a moment. “Funny the way that Corcoran guy kept razzing him all the time. Did you notice it, Martin?”

“Uh huh. That was nothing to the way he talked to him back at the bunk house before we started. Dale told me on the Q. T. that it was jealousy about some ranch affair. What did you think about Mr. Corcoran, Mr. Nevins?”

“Hmph,” answered the newspaperman after a lengthy pause, “I liked him for being so kind in bringing us sandwiches and coffee. Yes, I liked him for that. I can’t say I have any urge to make a buddy of him.”

“I wouldn’t care ’bout meetin’ him on a dark evenin’ ef he had a grudge agains’ me, I knows dat,” said the porter convincingly.

“Now take that Dolan,” said Mr. Nevins with a flourish of his pudgy hand. “He’s a tough enough egg, goodness knows, but yet you can get a laugh out of most everything he says. That Cork though, as young Dale called him, he makes me feel kind of creepy and uncomfortable for no reason at all.”

“Gosh, that’s exactly how I feel, Mr. Nevins,” said Westy with boyish enthusiasm. “It’s funny the way some people make you feel. I liked Dale about as well as any feller I ever met outside of Ben. But I wouldn’t be crazy about going to Binford’s ranch to visit him just on account of that Corcoran. Well, anyway, I’m glad things happened as they did because Mr. Dobbins is out of pain now.”

“Sure,” Nevins agreed and rose from his seat with a vigorous stretch of his arms and legs. “It’ll make a corking little story ... neat, snappy ... about a seven and a half inch column ought to do it ... center front page! Mmm! LONE PULLMAN STRANDED IN HEART OF SIERRAS ... RESULT DEFECTIVE COUPLING.... I’ll even improve upon that while I’m sipping a cup of Java in Boardman, They’ll be reading it in Chi and New York this afternoon.”

“Oi,” Ben murmured and sat up rubbing his blinking eyelids, “do we get publicity already?”

“Surest thing you know, kid,” said Mr. Nevins in the act of lighting a cigarette. “Your old man will feel two feet

higher in his shoes when he reads it, eh? Ben Stein and Westy Martin, proteges of Major Winton, famous army engineer, etc. You'll not be sorry you had such a tough trip to that ranch when you read about it, eh Martin? I can give 'em quite a kick when I describe the blizzard and the wolf business. Want me to put young Dale in about that mother wolf?"

"I don't think he'd want you to, Mr. Nevins," Westy said. "Don't say anything about the fawn, either. It'd probably only make trouble for Dale. Mr. Corcoran always seems waiting to jump on his neck for one thing or another from what I could see. You can describe Dale though; I guess there's no harm in that. He makes a swell-looking cowpuncher."

"*And how!*" Mr. Nevins exclaimed. "He's got a face and physique that takes to print like a duck takes to water. *And his hair!* Great guns, what a mop. Say, and did you notice how he shuts his eyes when he talks? Kind of nice, eh?"

"A regular guy—that's what I think of him," said Westy frankly. "He saved my life, too—don't forget that! *I'll* never forget it. Goodnight, was I sleepy!"

"Hmph!" Mr. Nevins fairly howled. He let his match go out, and with the unlighted cigarette between his generous lips, sat down on the arm of the seat with his notebook and pencil. After a few hurried notes he looked up, puzzled. "Guess that seven and a half inch column won't do at all ... won't do justice to your heroism, Martin ... need a full length for that. YOUNG MARTIN, BRIDGEBORO, N. J. BOY, EIGHTEEN YEARS...."

"Make it nineteen because I'm almost that anyway," Westy interposed.

“Nineteen, then,” mumbled Mr. Nevins as he wrote, “RISKED LIFE IN BLIZZARD TO SECURE AID FOR SUFFERING REPORTER ... RESCUED BY STALWART COWPUNCHER. Hmph, let’s see how much space it’ll take to tell the way Dale came back and worked on Dob.”

“Say listen,” said Ben enthusiastically, “such a dream I had before I woke up! It was about that Cork feller and I guess how Westy was telling me about those wolves and how cruel that feller was by that poor deer, so anyhow I dreamed I saw a man who had long legs like a deer and a head like a wolf. But when I looked at the eyes such a shock I got! They were the same little eyes that that Cork man has. It was like you sometimes see by the talkies. Do you think you could put that by your newspaper, Mr. Nevins?”

“Do you think I’d hold my job five minutes if I did?” returned Mr. Nevins. “This isn’t a magazine story, Ben—it’s a newspaper story. The public ain’t interested in nightmares except when they come true. Real life nightmares! That’s what they want.”

“Yeah, well this nightmare was so real by me that I was afraid,” said Ben. “I saw that Mr. Cork’s eyes like I see you and when I looked at him he laughed crazy like. Then Westy came and we started to run from him through a big forest. Were we frightened! It was like a story, it was so real.”

“Forget it, Ben,” said Westy kindly. “Don’t let dreams bother you—there’s too much else to worry about in the world, believe me. For instance, the jobs Major Winton will pick for us and whether we’ll be able to do them well—that’s a worth-while worry. Anyway you should worry about Corcoran or Dawson’s Valley or Dawson’s Ridge. There isn’t

a chance in a million that we'll ever see any of them except maybe to pass them by."

"Well, it shouldn't make me mad if I don't, Westy," said Ben quizzically. "The blizzard and the wind even didn't make that valley noisy, so lonely it is. Each minute I'm happier because we're further away from that place."

"Well, I agree with you there, kid," said Mr. Nevins, pocketing his notebook and rising once more. "That place gave me the willies, too—I never spent a longer seven hours in all my life. Guess I'll toddle along and see what Boardman looks like from the vestibule."

"We'll be in Bo'dman befo' ten minutes," said the porter, studying his watch.

"And the sun's coming up, bright and clear," said Westy joyfully. "You're such a believer in omens, Ben—wouldn't you say that was favorable for us? Good luck, happy times and all that sort of thing?"

"Seeing is believing, Westy," said Ben with innate sagacity. "This time next year I can maybe tell you how lucky that sign is."

CHAPTER IX

A QUESTION

“Do you think you’d rather go out with Travers on his trips than stick around here?” asked Major Winton tilting his chair backward until it touched the wall.

“Is the attraction greater going out with Travers or sticking around here?” Westy returned with sparkling mischief in his brown eyes. “Ben wants to know, too.”

“Oi, mostly Westy wants to know, Major Winton,” Ben protested. “Me, I’m so glad to be here, I don’t care what I do.”

Major Winton’s black eyes sparkled with merriment and he sat forward at his desk. “The attraction is in going out with Travers,” he admitted, chuckling. “Much as I’d like to have your entertaining company—both of you—I want you to get the most out of every day that you’re here. And you can’t get it by sticking around Boardman. I didn’t count on such weather when I invited you and there seems no let up in the heavy snows that we’ve been having. The weather man promises a month or two more of it.”

“And what would we do if we did stick around?” asked Westy seriously.

“That’s just it, Wes,” the major answered. “There’s nothing that you could do. Clerical work and all sorts of detail that only experienced men can do. Even Travers, who has been with me five years now, throws up his hands at the idea of inside work. He says he’d rather battle the drifts and

intense cold than do that. But then I don't blame him. It's great fun checking water."

"Is that what he's going to do?" Westy asked enthusiastically.

Major Winton nodded. "He's going to cover as many of the streams emptying into the river as possible. We want to get an idea of how heavy the snows are up above. Each storm swells them that much more so that by the time the weather warms up we'll be wanting to know what we're up against. Travers is one of our best men, Wes. He's quiet, but a splendid teacher. You and Ben will do well to listen very closely when he does decide to talk. And aside from the mental exercise, you'll get more than your share of the physical."

"Does that sound like we're going to be regular Daniel Boones, oi!" Ben exclaimed joyfully. His dark eyes gleamed delightedly.

Major Winton laughed heartily and rose from the desk. He was a rather short man, but his broad shoulders and lean, muscular physique had the effect of making him appear taller. And when he paced up and down a room as was his wont when making plans, one was apt to admire the vivacity which he displayed in every movement.

He flicked a bit of dust from his well-fitting khaki and lighted a cigarette. "Now, I tell you what," he said, enveloping his head in a perfect circle of smoke, "if you're both as apt as I think you are, you ought to learn enough from Travers in two weeks to go on your own. Oh, I don't mean I'd expect you to do any specifications—all that we'd expect of you would be to use your eyes and make general reports. Travers could go and look them over later."

“Oh boy, that sounds great,” said Westy. “How would we find our way—maps?”

“Exactly,” the major answered. “It’s just simply a case of tracking on a wholesale scale. And didn’t I understand that you were quite renowned for that not two years past?”

“Tracking? Me? You bet,” said Westy. “That was the best part of my scouting career. I most always have a hunch as to which is the right trail and which is the wrong trail. And Ben...”

“Please, Westy, don’t make me out what I’m not,” Ben interposed with mock horror. “An eye for figures I got—yes, but an eye for direction—no! I can maybe make good reports on the snow, Major Winton, but don’t count on anything from me by directions.”

“All right, Ben,” laughed the major, “that’s settled. Wes will be the guide then. But we won’t go into that definitely until after you’ve had a couple of weeks experience with Travers.”

“How do we travel?” Westy asked impulsively.

“Mules,” said the major smiling. “There are even places where you’ll have to lead your mules. In these thriving mountain communities nothing much else beside the mountains thrive. A gas station hasn’t a beggar’s chance. Now we’ll get down to brass tacks and think about the immediate present—today. You and Ben, myself and Mr. Nevins will have to crowd into my two by four cabin tonight. Mind? This project is in its infancy and we’re miserably short of accommodations. But it’ll only be for tonight. By the time Travers brings you back there’ll be two more cabins completed.”

“Oh, boy—you mean we won’t come back here for two whole weeks?” Westy asked spiritedly.

“Just that,” the major laughed. “Why, doesn’t that appeal to you?”

“And how! Where do we make camp while we’re away?”

“Rangers’ camps,” the major answered. “You’ll like them—you’ll like the whole business, I’m thinking. It’s just your idea of adventure, eh Wes? I don’t know about Ben.”

“By me it’s O. K. too,” Ben assured him. “What suits Westy, suits me.”

“All right. That’s settled. Now come on, boys, you must be starved. After you’ve had a good government breakfast, you can look around and see what preparations Uncle Sam must make before the building of a big dam. I’ll be interested to hear what your opinion is of Boardman. Mountains, mountains everywhere. The eats shack (as you boys would call it) is right across the way. Let’s go.”

Westy and Benny did not need a second invitation, for the night’s experiences and the clear invigorating air of Boardman had done much to sharpen even their good appetites. Mr. Nevins, too, had apparently been affected in much the same way for they found him already seated at the long table in the mess hall, smiling and benign as ever.

“Howdy boys,” he called genially and flourished his pudgy hand as if to include them all in his salutation. “Well, here I am, a boarder of Uncle Sam’s and beginning to like it already. Great country this—have an appetite like a horse. Ordered everything on the menu and then some. Just waiting. That’s it, sit down all together and we’ll hash things over. That’s what I like at breakfast—hash inside and out.”

“Get your story off?” Major Winton asked pulling out his chair and sitting down.

“And how!” exclaimed Mr. Nevins, rubbing his palms together. “The old man (that’s the big boss, Major) will howl with glee when he gives it the O. O. Yes, sir, he’ll howl with glee. Some snappy bit of writing if I do say it myself. I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if the camera man was poking his nose out here in a day or so, wanting to flash us principals.” He nodded amiably to Westy.

“Well, Wes is the stuff that heroes are made of,” said the Major proudly. He leaned over and gave Westy a fraternal slap on the shoulder. “It’s because he isn’t afraid to do things, eh, Wes?”

“No,” answered Westy modestly, “I just got it into my head that Mr. Dobbins ought to have someone to help him, that’s all. I didn’t think about the blizzard or anything else—I just had the idea that I was better suited than the rest to plow through that crazy storm and see where that light would lead me. Anyway it all came out O. K.”

“Surest thing you know, Martin,” said Mr. Nevins gratefully. “Doc Bertrand said that Dobby will be like a two year old before I realize it. And while we’re on the subject, he said that he’d like to meet this Dale guy who could claim he was an amateur (or an orderly, like he said) and do such a professional looking job as he did on Dob.”

“Hmph, must have been good, eh?” queried the major, interested.

“Good!” repeated Mr. Nevins. “Why it was so good that Doc Bertrand bet me five bucks that it *was* a professional job. I took him up on it and I promised him I’d take a trip

over Dawson's Valley way after a couple of weeks and talk it over with this Dale bird."

"What good will that do?" Westy asked with an interest that surprised himself.

"Well, I'll just ask him out and out how he came to get the dope on the medico line," Mr. Nevins answered pursing his lips thoughtfully. "Great guns, I don't want to lose five bucks without a little battle."

"I'd rather lose it than take such a long and foolish trip way down to Dawson's Valley," said Westy. "I told you that Dale told me he was an orderly in a Texas hospital, so what more could you find out?"

"Didn't he tell you that he was a native Texan, too?" Mr. Nevins asked suddenly.

"Mm—mm," Westy mused, "come to think of it, he did. Why?"

"Well, just because he don't talk like a Texan any more than I do. He's got an out and out easterner's twang," said Mr. Nevins lacing and interlacing his smooth, puffy fingers. "On the whole, Martin, this Dale guy seems to throw out a scent to me. I'll trek down to Binford's ranch when my two weeks assignment is up here, or my name ain't Charlie Nevins."

Westy was annoyed, but for the life of him, he couldn't think why.

CHAPTER X

UP TRAIL

They were off the next morning before the sun was very high. Dick Travers, a tall, angular Yankee, led the way on his mule, amusing Westy and Ben greatly by his stiff, straight attitude on the animal's back. He gave the impression of rising precipitately out of the saddle like some grave-looking statue.

"I can see where this isn't going to be a very wild two weeks," Westy whispered to Ben.

Ben shrugged his shoulders and urged his mule on nearer to Westy's. "We should know now how wild it is or it isn't going to be, Westy," said he in an undertone. "Me, I'll enjoy it just like this—quiet and peaceful and nothing to worry about. Just going around looking at lakes and brooks, how could it be wild? Such a feller you are to be always looking for something exciting! Next you'll be wishing the mountain is full of wild animals."

[Illustration: Four snorting young cattle rushed past the breathless onlookers.]

Westy laughed. "Hey, Mr. Travers," he called, "are there any wild animals where we're going?"

"Depends on what you call wild," answered Mr. Travers without turning around. "They do say that a couple of jaguars and quite a few cougars have been sighted up where we're

going. But they won't bother us unless we bother them. So much snow and intense cold drives them down from the peaks in search of food."

"Talking about food," said Westy; "I was wondering how we're going to live on the little bit of food that we've brought along. Is there some place where we can stop and buy supplies?"

"Not until about this time next week," Mr. Travers answered, spurring on his lagging mule. "Giddap!"

"*Next week!*" Westy repeated. "Goodnight..."

"Oh, we'll not starve," Mr. Travers interposed. "Day after tomorrow we'll strike a ranger's camp. We're going to make that our headquarters. We'll stay there a little short of a week and then take a trip down to Tully's Gap—nice little village. It's the other side of Dawson's Ridge, as they say in these parts, but quite a stiff walk if you ask me.

"We'll buy up enough provisions to replace what we use at the camp and still have enough to keep us going until we strike back for Boardman. That's a law in ranger's camps—got to replace what food you use as soon as possible. If you can't replace it yourself you have to find somebody who will take it back and replace it for you. They don't take any excuse. Giddap!"

That being quite a lengthy statement for Mr. Travers, he said not another word until they stopped in a sheltered pass for some luncheon. And then it was to say that he was hungry.

They spent the two following nights in deserted cabins and at dawn on the third day set forth on the snow-packed trail for the last lap of the journey to Reckoning Pass where was the ranger's camp. Dick Travers painted a brief but vivid

word picture of this lonely camp in the heart of the mountains. Westy and Ben listened, fascinated.

“There’s a fair-sized stream about five hundred yards away,” Mr. Travers explained. “It’s the source of the river.”

“That runs down to Boardman?” Westy asked, interested.

Mr. Travers nodded. “It’s as lonely a place as you’d ever find in a lifetime though,” he said. “That’s where it gets its name from. It’s situated in a peculiar way—exposed to all the storms and they come in pairs up there. Get storms that no place else in the world gets. Funny. Two or three rangers have lost their lives there—that’s why they built the camp—so that the future rangers would have a place to run to during the heavy storms.”

“Boy, that sounds nice,” said Westy enthusiastically. “Do you think we’ll meet any rangers up there?”

“No,” answered Mr. Travers. “They only get around to Reckoning Pass twice a year—spring and fall. It’s so very much off the beaten track, you see, and quite out of the timber regions. Just the usual mountain shrubbery and dwarfed trees. It’s too rocky and precipitous for forests. Why, just a few feet from the pass you can look down into Dismal Canon, a dizzy drop and narrow as they come. Lives up to its name all right.”

The sound of steady hoof beats coming down the trail caused Mr. Travers to draw his mule up abruptly. “Hmm,” said he, “sounds funny, eh?”

Before there was time for further comment, four young mavericks came trotting around the further bend at a fair clip, headed straight toward the astonished young men. Mr. Travers reined in his mule, calling to Westy and Ben to do likewise.

It seemed only a second afterward that the four snorting young cattle rushed past the three onlookers. They paid not the slightest heed to anything, but dashed blindly on down the trail. Westy, Ben and Mr. Travers hugged the cliff until they were well out of sight.

“Phew!” said Westy. “Now where do you suppose they’re going?”

“Me, I’d say they were on their way,” said Ben with infinite relief in his voice, “only they shouldn’t change their minds and come back this way, huh, Mr. Travers?”

Mr. Travers chuckled quietly. “Not when they’re going at that speed. If they weren’t going so fast, I’d think they had strayed off from the herd. But then again what would a herd be doing up in the mountains this time of year? No, that can’t be it. Well, no use worrying about things that aren’t our concern, eh?”

“Maybe they just ducked out of their herd and ran away up here from the valley, huh?” Westy asked.

“Maybe,” said Mr. Travers and slapped his mule vigorously. “We’ll have to hurry if we’re going to get to the pass tonight. No fun being caught without shelter at night in this kind of weather. Giddap, boy!”

Westy and Ben got in line and they started on once again. The snow glared blindingly under the bright sun’s rays and here and there was the suggestion of thawing. It did not make much progress, however, for soon the constant shifting of sullen-looking clouds obliterated even the tiniest ray and presently they felt the chill and gloom of sunless mountains. High above to the east, the snow-capped peaks seemed to mingle their frowning features with the leaden-colored skies.

Westy drew his coat collar more securely about his neck for he felt suddenly depressed and strangely sad. The white, silent world had been precipitately plunged into an almost terrifying gloom. Below, to the east and west as far as the eye could see, the snow-clad forests gave one the impression of a gaunt, ghostly army encamped and waiting for its summons. And in the low, moaning wind that was blowing out of the east, the creaking of frozen pine boughs added to the eerie atmosphere.

The temperamental Westy shivered and his fine, high forehead was drawn up in a frown. Ben, too, of sensitive nature, felt no less affected and after sighing audibly spurred his mule up close to his friend.

“You feel it’s creepy too, huh, Westy?” he asked, unconsciously lowering his voice in the clear, still air.

“And then some,” Westy admitted. Ben’s worried, nervous expression appealed to his sense of humor and he laughed. “All we need now is some nice, slow funeral march, huh, Ben?”

“Oi, what a time to joke. Doesn’t that creak, creaking down there in the forest sound like funeral march enough, I ask you?”

“There’s nothing to be afraid of,” said Mr. Travers complacently. “It’s just clouding up for a storm, that’s all. We probably won’t get it for a couple of hours yet.” Then: “Listen ... I hear hoofs again!”

“Cattle, do you think?” Westy asked.

“Hmm, no,” answered Mr. Travers with his head inclined a little to one side. “Sounds like ponies to me—walking easy.”

All three stopped instinctively and listened. It came from up trail just as before, a steady thud, thud upon the thick carpet of snow. And before long it was borne in upon them that more than four hoofs contributed to those approaching thuds.

“It’s two men and two ponies,” Mr. Travers announced presently. “My, but we’re running into things today, eh?”

Westy’s heart pounded unreasonably and he told himself so. What was there to feel expectant about? Mr. Travers seemed not to feel at all disturbed nor expectant, either. Why should *he*? Nevertheless he did feel so and there was something intuitive about that feeling.

And all the while came the steady thud, thud down, down the snowy trail, making a queer, haunting echo in that vast, white silence.

CHAPTER XI

SUSPICION

Westy had jumped down from his mule by the time the two men came into view leading their ponies briskly down the precipitous trail. It was apparent that they too were expectant, for upon their faces was the taut, inquiring expression of listeners.

Ben smothered a sigh, but Westy gave vent to his surprise with a resounding, "*Gosh!*"

Mr. Corcoran brought his short, stockily-built body to an abrupt halt and chuckled. In the next second, the hard, determined face of Mr. Dolan peered over the foreman's shoulder, then he straightened his angular person and laughed.

"If it ain't our two little friends from de Pullman," he shouted delightedly. "Now ain't this a hot one!"

Mr. Corcoran gave his pony's halter a peremptory tug and led him toward the waiting trio. Westy had difficulty in suppressing the laugh that the little man's swaggering strut inspired.

"Wa'al, wa'al!" he boomed as he came up to them. "Whar 'bouts do yuh think yuh're going, heh?"

"Mr. Travers can explain that to you better than we, Mr. Corcoran," answered Westy. "Meet Mr. Corcoran, Mr. Travers—he's foreman at Binford's Ranch down at Dawson's—the one we told you about."

“Oh, yes,” said Mr. Travers and pleasantly acknowledged the introduction.

“Howdy,” was Mr. Corcoran’s salutation. “Yuh look like yuh wuz on a campin’ trip with them thar bulging saddle bags, eh?”

“We are,” Mr. Travers admitted with a thoughtful scrutiny of the foreman. “We’re on our way to Reckoning Pass. I’m detailed for some inspection of that stream up there. Guess we have quite some journey yet, eh?”

Westy wondered whether or not it was some trick of his imagination, but he fancied that he saw Dolan start suddenly at Dick Travers’ mention of Reckoning Pass. Certainly it was not imagination that caused him to see the frown that had puckered the narrow forehead under Mr. Corcoran’s Stetson.

“Is it such a distance, Mr. Corcoran?” Mr. Travers asked anxiously.

Corcoran straightened his broad shoulders and forced a smile to his thin, red lips. “Six hour or more,” he said with a chuckle. “Looks like yuh’ll git caught in a storm too, heh?”

“Looks like it,” said Dick Travers thoughtfully. “We better be getting on, boys, eh?”

“Absolutely,” said Westy. “I’m not keen about getting caught in any blizzards.”

“That’s right,” chuckled Corcoran. “Me and Dale ain’t always out huntin’ fer wolves, heh? Yer wouldn’ have Dale ter find yer an’ pour his thermos bottle full o’ coffee down yer throat, heh?”

“Then you’re not out hunting for wolves now, huh, Mr. Corcoran,” Westy asked, unable to keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

Mr. Corcoran reddened perceptibly, then grinned. “Naw, Dolan and me ain’t aimin’ fer no wolves terday—we’re out lookin’ fer a couple o’ young cows what strayed out o’ th’ valley. Seen ’em?”

“Rather,” answered Dick Travers. “Not ten minutes ago, either. They were going at a pretty fast clip, Mr. Corcoran—not like lost cattle. One would almost get the impression that they had been driven or frightened on. Wouldn’t you say so, Martin?”

“Come to think of it—yes,” said Westy eyeing the little foreman closely. “Suppose they were frightened, huh, Mr. Corcoran?”

The man returned Westy’s steady glance, taking out of his pocket a package of chewing tobacco. After he had securely inserted it against his right cheek, he chuckled amiably. “I reckon yer right ’bout them cows bein’ frightened,” he said in that thick guttural way that so annoyed Westy. Then, in quite a confidential attitude he leaned forward: “’Tween th’ whole pesky lot o’ us, I think thar’s some rustlin’ goin’ on. Looks that-a-way ter me. Why, Dolan an’ me wuz up here a month ago lookin’ fer a half-dozen cows what disappeared just like these here you jes’ seen. We spent mos’ a week lookin’ fer ’em, but nary a one have we seen.”

“Why, that’s quite a serious thing, isn’t it, Mr. Corcoran?” the engineer asked, interested.

“It’s serious fer Mr. Binford’s pocketbook,” chuckled Mr. Corcoran. “But it ain’t so bad as if he wuz a poor hombre like me and Dolan, eh Dolan?”

“You said a mout’ful,” Dolan agreed and smiling pleasantly. “When a few cows is missin’ why me an’ Cork takes a trip up here follerin’ their trail fer a coupla days, but

we ain't no Shoilock Holmes dat we kin find out where dey go when we ain't got no cloos. Anyways we git a coupla days rest."

"Shut up, Dolan!" commanded Mr. Corcoran summarily. "Ain't yer got no more sense...."

"Dey can't expect us not to git a night's rest, can they?" returned Dolan indignantly. "Dat's what I wuz goin' tuh say ... anyways we look all we kin, so dat's all old man Binford kin expect hah? What does a couple lost cows a year mean tuh a guy what kin shell out twenty-five and fifty t'ousand grand, huh?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," said Dick Travers.

"Well, I do, dat's a sure t'ing," said Dolan emphatically. "Any guy in dis ranch business has gotta expect dat he'll lose a coupla cows every year, hah, Cork?"

"I kinda reckon so," answered Corcoran with his little chuckle.

"Well, we better not keep you and Mr. Dolan," Westy spoke up. "All the time we're standing here talking to you, those cattle get further and further away. If we hadn't stopped you, maybe you would have caught them, huh?"

Mr. Corcoran fixed his small, beady eyes on Westy and they gleamed with a cold, harsh light. "Reckon we couldn't," he said at length. "We can't run ponies down this trail like them cows kin leg it and by the time we did get down t' the basin them thar rustlers would have 'em roped and under cover."

"And maybe branded, hah, Cork?" Dolan chuckled.

"Sure," Corcoran agreed. "I reckon that's just 'bout it."

"Where is the basin, Mr. Corcoran?" Westy asked.

"This side o' the gap," the foreman answered tersely.

“Tully’s Gap, that is, Martin,” Mr. Travers put in.

“Oh,” said Westy naively, and turned again to Mr. Corcoran. “How do those cattle know to come up over this trail and down to the basin in the first place? Who drives them out of the valley?”

The foreman reddened slightly, then laughed boisterously. “Wa’al, wa’al, young feller,” he said lightly, “if you don’t beat all. I reckon if I could answer them questions that me an’ Dolan wouldn’t be up in this here forsaken place now. We’d be down toastin’ our toes by th’ bunk house stove. Mebbe if we could think up sech questions as that fer Dale, we could git somepin’ outa him, heh, Dolan?”

“*And how!*” exclaimed Dolan agreeably. “S’pose we toddle on, Cork, hah?”

Corcoran nodded and smiled amiably upon Dick Travers. “Glad ter met you, buddy,” he said. “Reckon yer won’t find Reckonin’ Pass ’zactly nice company in a wild storm. Even th’ rangers dodge it if they kin git by with it.”

“If yuh ast me, it’s on de edge of de woild,” Dolan remarked. “We only hang out dere when dere ain’t any place else tuh....”

“Shut up, Dolan!” Corcoran yelled angrily. “Don’t yer know better’n ter talk an’ waste more time standin’ thar? Come on!”

They waited until Dolan and Corcoran had passed and were out of hearing. Westy uttered a profound, “Phew! That’s something to think over. Those two are darn mysterious if you ask me.”

“The same thoughts I’ve had, too, Westy,” said Ben thoughtfully. “Did you maybe notice how they weren’t going crazy to hunt for those cattle?”

“Sure, I noticed it. Gosh darn it all, did you notice that the fine Cork wasn’t in any hurry to go until Dolan started saying something about Reckoning Pass?”

“Hmph,” Mr. Travers sniffed with disgust. “I thoroughly dislike that chap, Martin. He actually taints the air.”

“Now you’ve said something, Mr. Travers,” Westy agreed. “But what’s making me mad is that I’d like to know quick what’s wrong with Reckoning Pass.”

Neither Benny nor Mr. Travers seemed to be able to say what was wrong with it and after a few moments had apparently ceased to care, for they rode on quietly, intent upon their own thoughts. Westy, however, did not give up and was soon convinced that the footprints he had been observing belonged to the racing cattle and intermingled with those he could pick out the smaller hoof marks of Corcoran’s and Dolan’s ponies. It was evident that they had made the bend on their respective ways down trail just as surely as the three puffing mules were making it on their way up trail.

It did seem as if Reckoning Pass was destined to solve Westy’s problem.

CHAPTER XII

TWO COYOTES

The snow fell out of heavy, overcast skies late that afternoon. An almost gentle wind blew it into the faces of the three travellers, making it brush their cheeks lightly and fall upon the trail with gay abandon.

“Gosh, this is great,” said Westy joyfully. “This is the kind of a snowstorm I like—not like that howling thing I was creeping through down in Dawson’s Valley.”

“Even it’s so quiet you can’t hear it,” said Ben. “And not so very cold—it’ll probably melt as soon as it falls.”

“Not if I’m any judge of this tricky country,” said Dick Travers scanning the far horizon with pursed lips. “Don’t celebrate too soon. Our best bet is to get on as quickly as we can. No more stops. We want to get in a bit of wood if we can. They always leave a neat pile, but I want to be on the safe side. Get in some more in case we’re stuck indoors for a couple of days.”

There was such certainty in Dick Travers’ tone that Westy and Ben did not question further. Indeed they were too glad to get on to the camp where the promise of clean, comfortable bunks and warmth awaited them. The past two nights in deserted cabins did in a pinch (as Westy termed it), but two nights of that sufficed.

It was about dusk when the new snowfall had all but formed a fresh layer over the old and Westy could no longer

discern the tell-tale footprints that he had been watching since early that day. He was disappointed and annoyed.

“Does this trail lead anywhere else beside Reckoning Pass?” he asked suddenly.

“Not unless anyone wanted to break a trail of their own,” Dick Travers answered. “Why?”

“I was just wondering. I’ve seen footsteps ever since we left Corcoran and Dolan this morning—their tracks, the tracks of the ponies and of the cattle. Kind of funny, huh? I bet I’d still be picking them out if it wasn’t for this storm. Just my luck. What do you suppose....”

“You say you’ve been picking out the tracks of the cattle?” interposed Mr. Travers.

“Uh huh—every once in a while. Especially where the snow was soft. I always said there was something mysterious about that Cork—now I’m beginning to think I was right.”

“Shouldn’t it be that they trailed those cattle up here and chased them down again?” Ben queried.

“On this narrow trail?” Westy returned. “Gosh, a man that’s been cowpunching all the years Cork has, ought to be able to rope a couple of them, if not all of them, if he came as near as that to them up here.”

“Exactly,” said Mr. Travers. “I’m afraid there’s a good deal we’ll never learn about Mr. Corcoran. And while my sense of justice prompts me to feel a strong sympathy for the wronged Mr. Binford, still I can’t let it run away with my better judgment. I am an employee of Uncle Sam’s, not Mr. Binford. And now, fellows, we better use our flashlights if we don’t want these lazy animals to throw us off into the ravine. They can’t see any better in the dark than we can.”

Dick Travers' powerful light flashed upon Reckoning Pass shortly after dark. They rounded a sort of promontory and got an occasional glimpse of giant red rocks sheltered from the storm by the great overhanging ledge. Gaunt, steeple-like pines, dwarfed pines whose tentacles were clutched firmly by the stony hand of the mountain all stretched their boughs to the soft swish of the snowflakes hurrying before the wind. Nothing else could be heard but the creak of the saddles and the saddlebags while at intervals the mules would bray and kick at the snow.

Then at last came the welcome sight of the camp, a neat, low cabin in a fair-sized clearing just off the trail, and hugging the dark jagged cliff. As they came nearer it fairly gleamed in the bright rays of the flashlights while the snowdrifts seemed but to enhance its comfortable aspect. And when they stopped, Westy could hear the unmistakable sounds of a waterfall.

"Spring adjacent," said Dick Travers, divining Westy's thought. "It falls over some rocks beyond and into the creek (I call it a creek but it's listed as a brook) and it's a mighty frisky little stream."

"So, at last we're here," Ben sighed. "It looks peaceful yet, until I think how we have to get in wood before we can eat and sleep. Am I tired!"

Dick Travers laughed. "I bet you are. Never mind, it won't take us long. But first, we'll have to dig a pathway to the door."

An hour later, they threw themselves down on the rustic chairs in the cabin, tired and weary. The wood was in and piled up in the shed attached to the building. There also were

the blanketed mules, out of the storm and quite safe from any serious drop in temperature.

“That shed’s a boon to this place,” Dick Travers announced, feeding the new fire in the big stove. “We’d have some job finding those animals in the morning if this storm keeps up. They’d just naturally disappear in it.”

“That’s some stove, Mr. Travers,” Westy observed amusedly. “I should think it’s big enough to heat a dozen cabins.”

“Don’t you fool yourself, Martin. They’ve put everything that’s required in this cabin. And when they put in this big stove they knew what they were doing. If we should happen to get a real norther during the night, you’ll agree that they can’t come too big for a cabin up in this wilderness.”

It was a good-sized room and the four walls were almost entirely covered with skins, gifts of visitors who came up during the summer and hunting seasons. Then the bear rug which spread itself so comfortably under their feet was also a contribution, Dick Travers explained. And the wide, rustic table that stood in the center of the room was a donation of Major Winton.

“Was he up here?” Westy asked surprised.

“We all were,” Dick Travers answered. “Last summer. We were up here looking over the situation—here for almost a week. There’s the magazines that we left behind,” he added, indicating the various piles that were spread over the table.

“Boy, I think it’s great!” Westy enthused. “Talk about your one-room kitchenettes!” He got up and inspected the four bunks, two on either side of the room.

From there he went to the stove, squinting curiously at the cupboard that was built above it. He opened it and was soon

inspecting every can and container that was there. Suddenly he turned to the quietly smiling engineer.

“Did you say we’d find a stock of provisions here, Mr. Travers?” he asked.

“That’s what I said, Martin. Why?”

“Well, first of all—how much grub did we bring in with us?”

“About enough for two meals. Again, why?”

“Because there isn’t any such animal as provisions in the whole of this cupboard—a few coffee beans in this container and a handful of flour in this other one,” Westy answered, jiggling the cans up and down in either hand. “Some provisions, huh? Nary a can of beans, nor a can of anything else. I can see where one of us must trek down to Tully’s Gap, the first thing in the morning, huh?”

For a moment, Dick Travers stared, then he strode to the cupboard. It took only a cursory examination to convince him that there were plenty of dishes but no provisions. He whistled with surprise.

“That,” he said with a vehemence that amazed his listeners, “is a doggone shame!”

Westy was puzzled. “We’d have to make the trip to the Gap anyway, wouldn’t we? We’d have to replace what we ate, so it seems to me to be about six of one and a half a dozen of the other.”

“And that’s where you’re wrong, Martin,” said the engineer, striding back and forth across the big room. “These rangers’ camps aren’t run on that basis. They trust their guests to replace what they have used as quickly as it’s humanly possible. These camps aren’t mountain inns or boarding houses, mind you—they’re for the rangers, but the

forestry service is kind enough to offer them to the stranded wayfarer, only as temporary shelter. Why, the major even went so far as to ask permission for us to stay here during our trips of inspection. He didn't have to do it—just courtesy. Well, whoever was here last didn't have the least semblance of courtesy. And they weren't here for mere temporary shelter or they wouldn't have completely emptied the larder. A ranger would call that the unforgivable sin.”

“Do you suppose there's been more than one visit made?” Westy asked.

“Perhaps. If so, the greater their guilt. Danny Crockett, a ranger in these parts, stopped at Boardman about a week ago. He told the major that it was O.K. for us to come up to the Pass and that when he was last here in December he left the larder full. He said there was no one that he could think of who would have any cause to come up here until spring, for it would take a fellow the same time to get to the Gap or to the Ridge as it would to come up here. And yet look at this!”

All three stared into the empty cupboard. Ben shook his head, tragically. “Maybe Westy was right about those footprints, hah, Mr. Travers? Remember how that tough Dolan let it slip that they hung out here and before that how he said they got a couple of days rest? And right on top of that, that crank Corcoran told him to shut up—remember?”

“I should say I do,” said the engineer. “Wait a moment—come, I'll show you something.”

Westy and Benny followed him to the front door where he pointed to a small square of cardboard that was tacked up on the panel. In large printed letters was the reminder:

ONLY A COYOTE
WILL STEAL FROM AN OPEN CAMP

“Apparently, there’s been two coyotes here, eh?” said Dick Travers.

“And how!” exclaimed Westy with disgust.

CHAPTER XIII

EVIDENCE

Westy slid out of his bunk shortly after the first light of dawn had found its way into the cozy mountain cabin. There was an almost unusual glare in the big, warm room and he rubbed his eyes briskly.

“Up, eh?” said Dick Travers who was standing by the front window.

“Oh,” said Westy, startled for a moment. “I thought I was the only one awake. Never heard you. Gosh, it’s awful bright for this time of day, huh? My wrist watch says five forty-five.” He brought it out into the center of the room and peered at it again. “Yep, I knew I was right—that’s what it says.”

“All right,” said the engineer, “come over to this window and see what makes it so bright for this time of day. Just take one nice little glance now that the sleep has gone from your eyes.”

Westy did and his eyes widened with amazement as he looked off into a snow-banked world. The flakes were still falling, thick and fast, adding and adding to the great drifts that had already piled up to the window sill. The snow-capped peaks on either side rose high up into the frowning heavens, barely visible through this white mist, while below the canyons and mountain forests seemed all but buried under the glaring mantle.

“My gosh!” exclaimed Westy. “I’ll have to dig my way to the Gap today, huh?”

Dick Travers laughed. “Did you say *the Gap*?” he returned, not unkindly. “You wouldn’t be able to dig your way nor try any other method to get there today. Not as long as this snow keeps falling. Neither you, nor Ben, nor myself will see Tully’s Gap today, I can promise you that. We’re lucky if we’re able to dig our way out to the spring.”

“How will we eat?” asked Westy, prompted by a very healthy appetite.

“We’ll just have to cut down on our portions,” the engineer answered. “With good judgment we can make it stretch over until breakfast tomorrow morning. Goodness, I never counted on this; never!”

“And we never counted on that, either!” said Westy, pointing toward the cupboard. “If Corcoran and Dolan did that, why, they’re mighty poor sports.”

“Say,” Ben said sleepily from his bunk, “I could eat up this cabin such an appetite I got. Just because I shouldn’t have. And by my home I wouldn’t ever eat more than a roll and a cup of coffee. Isn’t that luck?”

“We’re all in the same fix, I guess,” said the engineer. “Well, we’ll have to be good sports and dole out a piece of bacon to ourselves and a half cup of coffee, huh? That’s the only way we can stretch it over.”

“We’ll make it do,” said Westy gaily. “Gosh, darn it, I’ll kid myself that I’m sitting down to a big feed. How about you, Ben?”

“Always you’ve had a better imagination than me, Westy,” Ben answered whimsically. “I only see good with my eyes, not with my mind. I can’t see roast chicken and all

those things, just by telling myself they're there. But I should worry about the one piece of bacon and only a half cup of coffee—it's better than nothing at all."

"That's the stuff," said Dick Travers and fell to getting the frugal meal with a great flourish.

Westy and Ben also got into the spirit of it and soon filled the cabin with their whistling and singing and occasional pleasantries toward one another. And when they sat down at the major's table (as Westy called it) they acted with all the grave formality that one sees occasionally at banquets. It kept up until the quiet Dick Travers laughed outright.

After the dishes were washed, they took turns digging paths from both the back and front doors. The mules had to have exercise and the spring had to be reached, so that it was almost mid-morning before all these things were accomplished. Several buckets of spring water stood in the far end of the shed and Westy had added a few more logs to the woodpile by burrowing in under the snow at the spring. And the animals, after a long airing in the piercing wind, were safely tethered and warm in fresh straw.

"Before we get our big lunch ready, what do you say we clean up here a little bit, huh?" Westy asked, flushed and exhilarated by the sharp air. "Where's the broom in this house, Mr. Travers?"

"At the side of the cupboard, son," said the engineer smiling. "That's where all good housekeepers put them, isn't it?"

"Search me," Westy laughed. "As long as we can find it, that's the main thing. I notice that our friends, the coyotes, have left a mess around under the chairs, too. Ashes from the

stove, ashes from their pipes and cigarettes, matches and heaven knows what!”

“Typical coyotes, all right,” frowned Dick Travers.

“And even I found tobacco in my bunk last night,” said Ben. “Chewing tobacco. I couldn’t imagine what it was.”

Westy was whisking the broom with rapid motions, pushing the chairs this way and that and raising a good deal of dust. When he came to the chair in the far corner of the room he flung it aside, whistling flippantly the while. Ben was at his heels with a dust cloth, a pitiable looking rag that had not always been of lowly estate, for it had once been immaculately white and bulging proudly with Hecker’s Gold Medal Flour.

Suddenly Ben ceased flicking the dust-laden cloth and stooped to pick up something that lay under the chair he was dusting.

“What is it?” Westy asked, seeing the action. Dick Travers, too, turned around from the stove.

Ben held up a large blue calico handkerchief for their inspection, pointing to the initial C which was stamped in the corner. “Maybe we’ll be convinced already that that crank, Corcoran, was up here, hah? It’s clean like new so that shows it wasn’t left here from December yet.”

“I’m convinced, Ben,” said the engineer quietly. “In the old days it would have meant death for a chap to rifle an open camp the way he’s rifled this. But in these days....”

“A good crack in the jaw wouldn’t hurt that little bow-legged cur,” interposed Westy angrily.

“Exactly, Martin, exactly,” said Dick Travers. “And I may even say that perhaps that would not be as effective as making him try a little of his own medicine.”

“I’d like to meet him on my way down to Tully’s Gap tomorrow,” said Westy with blazing eyes. “I’d just like to meet him, that’s all!”

After a few moments he went on with his sweeping.

CHAPTER XIV

SNOWBOUND

Westy did not get his wish that next day nor the next for the snow continued to fall through seventy-two long hours. And on the evening of the third day, the little cabin was all but buried under those miniature mountains of snow. The hungry trio within had long since given up trying to keep clear even the path to the spring.

Growing hollows were evident under their eyes and since noontime they had been inclined to an irritability that, under normal conditions, would have been utterly foreign to their genial natures. Dick Travers brooded, Ben sighed at frequent intervals and Westy sulked at the snow-banked windows.

“There’s this much about it,” he said hoarsely, “we can’t stand another day of this.”

“We thought that at dawn this morning, Martin,” said the engineer, vainly trying to read a story in a magazine left from the summer before.

“Yes, but tonight’s another day gone.”

“Oi, it’s awful, if you ask me,” Ben wailed and went to his bunk. “I should lie down and sleep so I forget that I have a groaning stomach.”

“Haven’t we all got groaning stomachs?” Westy snapped.

“Now, Martin....” began Dick patiently.

“Oh, I know. I’m sorry! Gosh, this business is getting on my nerves. I feel as if I’m just going bughouse—looking,

looking at this snow ... nothing but snow! That's why I said I couldn't stand another day of it. I won't either!"

"What'll you do, Martin? Are you bigger than nature? Even if this snowfall stops tonight, it'll take another day or more before we could attempt to dig ourselves out to get as far as the spring. And we don't get stronger, being on this forced fast. It takes a full stomach to give leverage to the shovel, remember that. That's my argument—now what's yours?"

"I haven't any argument to that," Westy admitted, "because I know that all you said is true. But I thought that maybe I could do something with those two old crates out in the shed. I have my bowie-knife and I can make the framework for snowshoes. The sinews I could make easily enough by cutting up one of the skins here. Now don't say you think I shouldn't do it or that I can't do it, because *I know I can!* I used to be able to make most anything with that little old knife of mine, I'll leave it to Ben."

Ben brightened at this little ray of hope. "He even whittled a pair of wooden skates once, just for fun," he assured the sceptical engineer.

"Oh, I believe you can do it, Martin," Dick Travers said thoughtfully, "and I think it will be good for your nerves to do it. Give you something to think of. I wish I had a hobby of that kind. But, after you've made them, what then? Believe me, that doesn't solve the problem of getting down to the Gap. You couldn't make it on snowshoes in less than a day and maybe a sixteen or eighteen hour day, allowing for rest."

"And lunches," Westy said with a cheerful smile.

"We'll see what kind of a day it is tomorrow."

“If we’re able to,” laughed the engineer. “We won’t have much chance of telling whether it’s morning, noon or night if we’re buried any more.”

Westy, being a young man of action, was as good as his word. In five minutes he had the crates in from the shed, selected suitable parts and fell to whittling them into the required shape. His strong brown hands clasping the strong knife flashed back and forth in the cheerful light of the lamp.

Ben and the engineer sat at the table watching him until nine o’clock. By that time he had both frames made, but his little audience could no longer keep their winking eyelids open and crept silently off to their bunks, leaving him alone and busy.

It was one o’clock before Westy finished. He viewed his handiwork not without a flush of pride and, before getting into his bunk, gave them a final tryout over the bear rug. Travers heard him and sat up in his bunk.

“What the dickens,” he murmured sleepily, then: “oh, I couldn’t imagine what I heard. So, you’re finished, eh?”

Westy took off the awkward-looking devices and held them up for Travers’ inspection. “Nifty, what?” he asked proudly.

“They’ll get you over the ground, certainly. That’s if you can get out that far. But seriously, Martin, I must compliment you. Your spirit’s as fine as your work. I’m almost inclined to believe you can triumph over anything.”

“Not *anything*, Mr. Travers—*everything!*” Westy grinned and put his hand to the lamp, preparatory to turning it out. “If I didn’t believe that way sometimes, I’d go crazy.”

“I can readily understand that, Martin. Very readily.” Dick Travers studied him a moment, then crawled down under his

blankets and went to sleep.

And Westy went to his bunk to wait for the dawn.

CHAPTER XV WISHING WESTY LUCK

“I’ve heard that old one about faith moving mountains,” Dick Travers said to Ben, “but I never took any stock in it until this morning. I’ve seen faith move snow, that’s one thing. Right before my very eyes. That chap’s got more grit than I’d ever dare to have.”

“How long did he go? Why did you let him go, Mr. Travers?” Ben wailed plaintively.

“I might as well try and stop that spring out there as to stop him this morning. And talking about the spring, he filled the three buckets for us before he left. What energy!”

“And all this time I should be sleeping!” Ben moaned with self-condemnation. “A fine friend I am to Westy! He goes away maybe to his death and I’m not even awake to say goodbye. Why didn’t you wake me, pinch me—anything?”

“He just wouldn’t have it. Said you’d be less hungry sleeping.”

“Isn’t that just like Westy talking! Oh, my! That’s the way he is. Always thinking of others. And you say he made those snowshoes good and strong?”

“As good as any I’ve seen in the stores. He couldn’t have slept much. I could hear him before five o’clock—sort of heard him shoveling in my dreams. Then I woke up and there he was forcing the snow away from the front door. I gave

him a hand then and after two hours we had broken through enough of it to enable him to crawl out.”

“And to go on an empty stomach,” Ben said with misty eyes. “Such a trip on such a stomach!”

“I gave him all the cracker crumbs I could find in those empty boxes. And he drank a lot of water at the spring. The snow wasn’t very deep there he said. What touched me was the way he insisted on making that extra trip to the spring so that we’d have water.”

“Mr. Travers, now you’ll see how he is,” Ben said proudly. “What a friend, hah? He don’t care for himself at all. Now I should keep wishing him good luck all the time so that nothing happens to him.”

“Not a bad idea, Ben,” said the engineer understandingly. “Sort of mental telepathy, eh? Well, there’s a lot more in that than most people think. Heaven knows I wish him well, too. But then again, it’s pretty certain that Providence keeps a steady eye on chaps like Westy Martin.”

And so far, Providence had kept Westy safe for he had already put three miles between the down trail and Reckoning Pass.

CHAPTER XVI

SMOKE

It was a day Westy long remembered. Though the snowfall had ceased around mid-morning the skies remained frowning and downcast throughout the long, dreary hours of his hazardous journey. He longed, as never before in his life, for the warmth and radiance of the sun. His much needed periods of rest were considerably shortened because of this for he found that after a few moments of inactivity he would become drowsy and numb.

At about five o'clock in the afternoon he had stopped for a fleeting second to admire a big tree that reared its giant boughs high above the pine forest down on the lower slope. There had not been as heavy a snowfall down there for at intervals he could see big patches of green indicating that there were many miles of stately pine forest that the storm had not touched.

Suddenly he saw above the tops of the trees, a thin column of smoke, curling its way heavenward. As he watched, the column expanded until he was convinced that it was chimney smoke and not any ordinary camp smoke. And after a few moments' study of the trail he came to the conclusion that it was in the basin, this side of the Gap.

He skimmed over the surface of the hard-packed snow with a new energy and was constantly forming plans, accepting and rejecting them until he hit upon one idea. He'd get help to Ben and Travers somehow! He had to! They

couldn't wait until he got back the next night. They had to have food and that before morning!

With that determined thought constantly before his mind's eye he did not mind the gathering shadows of dusk. He had the location of that smoke firmly fixed in his mind and would not lose track of it despite all the terrors of the elements. What he had most to fear was himself—his growing bodily weakness.

The further he got into the valley, the more lightheaded did he feel. The gnawing in his stomach became so intense that he was at a loss at times to know whether or not he was hungry. And the last drink of water he had taken from his thermos bottle produced a nausea that he had not quite overcome.

Over and over he asked himself how long he could go on feeling as he did. Wave after wave of nausea made him giddy and caused him to stumble and fall. But each time he would catch hold of himself, scramble to his feet and carry on, as he called it.

And thus after dark with his flashlight gleaming over the silent, white basin country he saw the tracks of many cattle that had hurried on to shelter in the fading light of day. Beyond were dim lights and the grim, severe outlines of dilapidated looking ranch buildings, far different from the trim, white structures of Binford's property.

Westy approached the largest of the buildings, a long, low rambling place that looked furtive and unclean against the shining snow. The smell of ill-kept barns and cattle permeated the air and the begrimed ensemble under the shadow of the mountain bespoke a crouched attitude, evil and secretive.

But Westy noticed none of these things for he saw those dim, flickering lights through the eyes of near starvation. The whole filthy place seemed a haven to his dazed and weary mind. It was civilization and it meant rest and food, and help for those two hungry humans in the cabin at Reckoning Pass.

The poignant cry of a hound startled him for a moment. It was a cry indicative of a poorly-fed dog and Westy shook his head pityingly. Perhaps this rancher was poor—perhaps he could give him nothing but bread bread. Even that would be delicious now.

He stooped and released his feet from the homemade snowshoes and stumbled dizzily against the step leading onto the low porch. A terrible nausea all but made it impossible for him to straighten up and he bumped his head with a resounding smack. It was then that he heard a door open softly.

He looked up but could see nothing and reached for his flashlight. But before his hand had touched his pocket he heard a raucous laugh from the porch.

“Keep yore hand away frum that gun, young feller!” a man’s hoarse voice commanded. “I got yuh covered jest as nice as can be. Don’t move a inch or yuh won’t live ter remember it.”

“*Gun?*” Westy said so dazed that his own voice sounded strange and far off. “I....”

“That’s all right, young feller. No ’scuses—I’ll call one o’ th’ boys. Hi, thar, one o’ you lazy cusses, cum out and see what I got covered!”

Before Westy could utter any protest, he heard the heavy shuffling of men’s feet coming toward the porch. It seemed but a second when two male figures loomed up before him.

And there was such a queer sensation in his head and such a profusion of muddled objects dancing before his eyes that the whole scene was blurred. Notwithstanding this, he was vaguely aware that one of the men had the angular physique and hard features of Dolan, the cowpuncher.

He put his hand out unsteadily toward the familiar figure as if to assure himself that it wasn't a dream. "That you, Dolan?" he asked weakly. "That you, huh? Gosh gosh, I can hardly see ... awful dark ... Travers and Ben up in the pass ... need help ... nothing to eat, nothing...." His hand grasped the clothing of the figure and in the next second he slumped to the ground.

Came again the poignant cry of the hound. But Westy did not hear it.

CHAPTER XVII

PETE

“Wa’al, wa’al, yore comin’ ’round so-so,” said the old man whom they addressed as Pete. “And nary a gun hev yuh got on ye. Wa’al, yuh’ll hev tuh forgive me, son—I sho thought yuh wuz one o’ them thar bandits. Feel c’siderable better, heh? We give ye a good swig of hot soup what the Chink made fer supper. Don’t r’member it, heh? Wa’al, now yer will. Guess yer kin sit up an’ eat it reg’lar, heh? After a hour, we’ll give ye some fried chicken what the Chink’s cleanin’ now.”

Westy’s wan-looking cheeks flushed with pleasure and he smiled. “*Boy! Chicken!*” he murmured weakly. Then: “But I can’t—I *can’t!* Not with poor Ben and Mr. Travers starving up there—up there in the pass.” He sat up on the couch and looked from Pete to the two rough-appearing men who stood nearby. “Help, that’s what I stopped here for—not for myself, but for my friends. Oh, gosh, I can’t lose any time feeding myself and feasting when they need it more.”

Pete wagged his gray head and smiled, a peculiar furtive smile. “Ef thar’s any hombre in these parts what needs a pile o’ grub more ’n you do, I’d like tuh see ’em. C’mon, eat, son, an’ then thar’s time ’nuff tuh talk ’bout help fer yore buddies.”

The two onlookers also encouraged Westy to take the soup that Pete was offering him and they spoke kindly

despite their strong, gruff language. After that they left the room, closing the door very carefully.

Westy finished the soup gratefully and looked about the big room. It had seen better days, that much was evident, and the furniture, consisting of the couch, a center table and a few chairs, though in wretched condition, bore mute testimony of having lived through palmier times.

“Kinda pore lookin’ place, heh, young feller?” Pete said apologetically as if he had read the thoughts that were passing through Westy’s mind.

Westy flushed. “*Poor?*” he repeated. “Why, I was just thinking that that must have been pretty expensive furniture when it was new. My grandmother down in Jersey used to have stuff like that when I was a little boy. It’s antique, huh?”

“I don’ know what yuh call it, but I do know it’s nigh on ter bein’ rotten,” said the old man with his raucous laugh. “Bizness wa’nt so good till lately an’ now I reckon we kin git in a few new sticks soon as we git th’ catalogue ter look over what kinda furniture folks are usin’ these days.”

The sound of a telephone out in the hall brought Westy to his feet with a start. Pete rose also standing inquiringly on his short bow-legs.

“You have a ’phone, huh?” Westy queried anxiously.

“Sho’. Gotta have one. Why?” asked the old man curiously.

“It gave me an idea,” Westy answered, sitting down on the couch again. “Gosh, I’m more all in than I thought.” He laughed lightly but got out his handkerchief and mopped his moist forehead.

“Weak, heh?” inquired the old man kindly. “Wa’al, ye see ye need more food and some sleep and then yore goin’ ter

feel fine. We'll hev ter put yer up thar on that couch. Kinda crowded fer room."

"You're awfully kind," said Westy gratefully, "but I want to ask you another favor. Can you send a man up to the Pass so's he could get there before morning? A pony could make it—the snow's good and hard. Major Winton would make it good with you twice over. Just to take enough food until I can get back there tomorrow night—will you?"

Pete shook his head. "Sorry, son, but thar's nary a man in this here outfit what'll move outa here tonight. They just got back from the Crossin' after buckin' th' storm fer three days with a shipment o' cattle I had fer Chi. Every man's son uv 'em is tired. I'll see what I kin do fer you in th' mornin'."

"No, thanks," said Westy. "If you can spare a pony, I can get down to the Gap, get my supplies and be back on the trail before most fellers like to get up this time of year. No, Ben and Mr. Travers need help as soon as they can get it. Morning at the latest and before that if possible. Wait a minute, Mr. Pete, may I use your 'phone and call Major Winton at Boardman?"

The old man stood in thought for a moment, then nodded. "Don' know why you cain't," he said hospitably. "Wait a secunt though, son. I'll see if Nick's through usin' it now. He wuz expectin' thet call all evenin' frum the Gap. His girl lives thar."

"Nick, Nick," Westy mused idly; "that was one of the fellers in here, huh?" And then remembrance flashed across his mind: "Where did Dolan go—*Dolan*?"

The old man frowned. "Dolan? Dolan? Cain't imagine what give yer th' idee that we had anybody here by thet name. Never heard o' him, son. Who is he?"

“Dolan—why, wasn’t he one of the fellers that came out on the porch, huh?” Westy asked. “Why, I’m sure it was he—sick as I felt, I’m sure it was he! Why, I thought I grabbed hold of him!”

“Thet wuz jest yore ’magination,” said Pete sternly. “Things like thet happen to weak folks what’re hungry an’ tired. No, we ain’t got no Dolan in this here outfit—never heard o’ him,” he added, and wagging his gray head he hobbled funnily across the room and out of the door.

Westy stared around the room, nonplussed. He had been so sure that that man was Dolan that he had even refrained from mentioning his well-founded suspicion of the two cowmen. Some inner voice had warned him that condemnation of Binford’s men might not be received kindly, no matter how justified that condemnation might be. He had thought to save his disclosure for someone who could punish them appropriately, but now....

Perhaps Pete was telling the truth. Perhaps he didn’t know Dolan—had never heard of him, as he declared. Well, it was strange that he should have just fancied that he saw Dolan’s hard features and angular form. One didn’t fancy things as easily as that, though. Queer....

The old man’s hobbling footsteps sounded along the hall. Westy sat up and passed his hand across his eyes. Even he—Pete—hadn’t an honest, truthful way, now that he came to think of it. Kind as the old man seemed, there was something strange about him; about the whole place in general. Evil, yes, that was it—*evil*! Still, they were hospitable. Chicken and a place to sleep!

The door opened and Pete’s thin voice said: “Wa’al, c’mon, son. Git yore ’phonin’ done. Nick’s done talkin’.

After ye finish, Hi-Lo'll give yer some more grub in th' kitchen. It's the door 'lonside o' whar th' 'phone is. Lamp's lit so's ye kin see what yore doin'. I'm goin' upstairs ter git ye some extry blankets."

Westy had been standing at the wall phone some time waiting for the connection to Boardman. On the wall opposite, hung a long mirror. Cracked and disfigured by violent usage as it was, it still reflected enough of human vanity to satisfy the chance beholder.

Westy had been studying his wan cheeks and hollow looking eyes, made terrifying and actually distorted by a horizontal crack in the dusty glass. He even added to this awful aspect by opening his mouth and saying "Ah!" at the prospect of enjoying the chicken which Hi-Lo was now preparing for him, for the savory smell had penetrated out into the hall.

He smiled quietly and was about to try some more grimaces when he saw a face other than his own reflected in that mirror. But no, it was a leer, more than a face, and quite familiar.

At that moment the dulcet voice of the telephone operator spoke sweetly into his ear. "Here is Boardman, sir."

"Yes," said Westy. "Hello...."

His eyes, however, were fixed on that face in the mirror, the face of Corcoran, the foreman of Binford's ranch.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FACE

Westy was not frightened, yet he felt chilled and suddenly on guard. Something warned him not to turn, nor to show any sign that he was aware of the foreman's leering presence in that hall. It was apparent that the man, too, had no intention of being surprised in his act of eavesdropping for he was leaning quite cautiously over the newel post at the bottom of the stair and at intervals would draw back into the shadow. And it was quite evident that he had not the least knowledge that his features were so grotesquely reflected in that mirror, if, indeed he had any knowledge of the mirror being there at all.

Westy's wrath rose in that moment. He thought of those three long days of hunger spent in the cabin and of the day just past, a day such as he hoped he'd never know again—hunger, cold and until a few moments ago, complete exhaustion. And all because of that evil looking man behind him! Corcoran and Dolan had proved themselves. Travers was right, they were coyotes of the worst stamp.

Major Winton's pleasant voice broke in upon these musings. "Hello! Hello?" he queried.

Then Pete had lied, thought Westy in a flashing second. Dolan *had* been on that porch. *He had seen him*, after all! What was it all about, anyway?

"Hello!" he cried joyfully. "This you, Major?"

“Yes,” answered the major and his voice, to Westy’s imaginative mind, almost smiled. “This is you, Wes, isn’t it?”

“Me and nobody else, Major,” answered Westy forcing a laugh. His thoughts were flying thick and fast, perverse and yet instinctive. “We’ve had trouble—terrible trouble!”

“Great Scott! How?” The major’s voice was full of anxiety.

Westy looked in the mirror, slyly. Yes, Corcoran was still there, listening.

“Listen,” said Westy, “we’ve been up in the cabin ... in the Pass. Reckoning Pass—do you hear me?”

“Yes, yes. I know—Reckoning Pass. Go on, Wes!”

“Well, we didn’t take a whole lot of food. You know that. You knew Mr. Travers’ plans about coming to the Gap after a week, huh? Yes ... well, there wasn’t any food in the cupboard up there ... not a thing. Then that terrible blizzard snowed us in. We’ve been without food for three whole days and it might have been more if I hadn’t got the idea to make myself a pair of snowshoes. I came all the way down, heaven knows how I did it ... Mr. Travers and Ben are up there now waiting for me to get help ... food....”

“*This is terrible!*” cried the major. “Are you all right, Wes? Are you sure ... where are you now?”

“In the basin above the Gap ... at a man’s place ... name’s Pete ... that’s all I know. He’s been kind to me.... I was kind of all in when I got here. I’ve had soup and in a few minutes the cook’s going to give me fried chicken—yum, yum!” He laughed and looking in the mirror saw that Corcoran’s smile had changed to a frown.

“Wes, I’m simply flabbergasted by this news,” the major said with affectionate concern. “I can’t bear to think that you boys have been through all that ... do you think that Travers and Ben will be all right until morning?”

“That’s it,” Westy answered. “I managed to dig out of the place and I got water for them before I left so they’ll have a little something. But there isn’t any time to waste, Major ... they’ve got to have food and quick! This Pete’s going to lend me a pony and as soon as I get a little rest, I’ll get down to the Gap and get a good bundle of eats ... then I’ll hustle right on back. But even that takes time you see ... I couldn’t possibly make it before afternoon. Now I was thinking if you could get an army man to fly there as soon as it gets light....”

“Capital idea, Wes, capital! I’ll have the wires humming in five minutes. There’s Charlie Rodgers at Cortland Field ... he’s been up at the Pass times without number ... he knows the location like a book. I’m so glad you thought of it ... he can give them a rousing good buzz and drop them a bag full of stuff. Think the snow’s melted much by now?”

“Yes, I burrowed a tunnel and Mr. Travers promised he would keep it clear. Yes, he could get out a few feet ... hope this Rodgers can drop it within their reach....”

“He’s a good shot, I can assure you, and a reckless, good-hearted chap. He’ll fly as low as possible, I know that. Now, Wes, promise me you’ll let me know you’re safe. I’ll have Rodgers fly over there the next morning too. You can give him the high sign so I’ll know, eh? And come back here as soon as possible ... just a minute ... how did that camp happen to have an empty cupboard, eh?”

Westy glanced quickly in the mirror and steeled himself. Corcoran was leaning over the post further than ever, intent,

almost taut. Now was his chance!

“Listen, Major,” Westy said with grim determination, “it’s a long story and we’ll tell you that when we see you. But I’ll tell you this much ... there’s two coyotes ... human ones—who are the cause of it ... we’ve got evidence enough of that ... and they knew we were going up there ... they knew there wasn’t a crumb in that place, too, and they never raised a finger to help us, either. Yes ... we met them ... spoke to them and all the time they knew that the place was cleaned out and never said a word ... that’s the rotten part of it. Of course they’re skunks ... coyotes is what Mr. Travers called them and I agree with him. Yes ... of course they were up there ... more than once, I’m pretty sure.... What for? That’s another story also ... yes, I hope so ... get Rodgers now ... yes ... goodbye ... goodbye!”

Westy put the receiver back on its hook with trembling, icy fingers. He wasn’t afraid nor did he regret what he had just said. Inwardly, he rejoiced. The man, and Dolan too, deserved to hear themselves denounced for their contemptible conduct. No, he was not at all afraid. His fingers trembled and he felt cold because of the strange, ominous atmosphere of the house. That was it. He glanced cautiously into the mirror, without having moved one step away from the phone.

Corcoran was no longer there.

CHAPTER XIX

MYSTERY

“You come have chicken allee same, you plitty hongly, hah?”

Westy started and turned swiftly around only to find that the voice was that of Hi-Lo who was standing at the door in slippered feet, gazing up at him with impassive face and blinking eyes.

“You plitty flightened, hah? Hi-Lo allee same make noise but you no hear, hah? Come!”

Westy went into the kitchen where a dish full of brown fried chicken stood on the long table. Many chairs were pushed up to it but no one save himself and the cook was in the room during the time it took for him to consume the savory-smelling fowl.

Hi-Lo walked to and fro noiselessly from the stove to a cupboard putting away dishes and pots and pans.

After he had finished he came over to Westy with a tall glass of milk and handed it to him with a bland smile.

“Milk better for young homble dats so hongly, hah? Um tinks so, too, hah?”

Westy murmured a gracious thanks, but was afraid to say too much after the episode in the hall. He was continually feeling Corcoran’s presence and could think of nothing else. While he was gulping down the cold, sweet milk the hound cried out dolefully.

Westy shivered visibly. “I wish he wouldn’t do that,” he said to the Chinaman. “I’m kind of tired and upset and it gets on my nerves. I keep thinking that maybe he’s hungry. It’s awful to be hungry and have good friends that are hungry, too. Animals must feel it just the same as we, and worse because they can’t speak for it—they can only cry like that poor mut.”

Hi-Lo laughed and his round, yellow face wrinkled pleasantly. “Doggee no hongly now, Missti—he have plenty glub now. Not like when Missti Pete have no blizness on ranch. Blizness good now and doggee have plenty glub but allee same he cly and cly. He cly doggee, hah?”

Pete came in a few minutes afterward and Westy noticed at once that the old man’s demeanor had changed considerably since he had talked with him before. He scowled when he spoke and wasted no words.

“Yore bed’s ready, buddy,” he said in a growling tone, “Hi-Lo’ll take yer in and Hi-Lo’ll see yer out in th’ mornin’. He’ll give yer th’ pony ’n tend ter everythin’. I won’t be up.” With that he turned on his heel and started hobbling toward the door.

“But, Mr. Pete,” Westy protested, “I’ve got to pay you for all this. I wouldn’t think of accepting all these favors without...”

Pete turned around on his little bow-legs, looking not a little like some pugnacious bull-dog. “Thar ain’t no favors ter thank me fer, young feller. I cain’t turn away a hungry man, ’specially when he faints plump on my doorstep, heh? Jest see that th’ pony gits back here th’ fust time yer come this-away an’ we’ll call it settled. Now I hev ter git ter bed.” And just as unceremoniously he slammed the door.

After the heavy, pounding footsteps had ceased overhead, Hi-Lo chuckled softly. “Ole man, he mad, he angly ’bout blizness, I guess. Not mad at young homble—No?”

“What makes you think he might be angry with me?” Westy demanded as he drained the last drop of milk from the glass.

Hi-Lo’s face became impassive once more and he stepped to the door with the tread of a cat. “You wanna go bleddy now, hah?” he asked evasively. “You wanna go Gap ’bout five o’clock mebbe sho’ nuff, hah?”

“I want to go before that,” Westy answered, feeling thoroughly disgusted with the whole situation. “Knock about half past four, will you? Is that too early for you? If it is, just say so and tell me where I can find the pony and I can get up and be off without bothering anybody. Come to think of it, I could do that anyhow! I’d rather have breakfast at the Gap, in view of the fact that Mr. Pete refuses to be paid for what I’ve already had from him.”

Hi-Lo still stood at the door, smiling quietly. “Hi-Lo get up allee same. Young homble eat blekfast and get on pony. Now Hi-Lo wants to go bleddy too, savvy?”

“Yes, yes,” answered Westy apologetically. “You must excuse me. I suppose you’re tired, too.”

Westy followed the Chinaman out into the hall. It was pitch dark now and he vainly tried to see the mirror as he passed along. The house seemed steeped in silence and though his ears were constantly on the alert, he heard not a sound from the floor above.

Hi-Lo graciously opened the door into the room and Westy was relieved to see that the lamp on the center table

was still burning brightly. Impulsively he went over and tipped it to see if there was still much oil left. There was.

“I’d like a light when I get up in the morning,” he explained to the Chinaman. “I’ll be strange and get all twisted around in the dark.”

Hi-Lo nodded blandly. “Allee same I fix when I clum call —savvy?”

Westy turned to see the Chinaman closing the door quickly and quietly. It irritated him that he had not even so much as said goodnight. Then he heard Pete’s voice, soft and commanding.

“Hi-Lo?”

“You speaky, Missti Pete?”

“Sho. Who’d yer think it wuz? C’mere!”

Westy crossed the room on tiptoe and put his ear against the panel of the door. Although he knew the cook must be ascending the stairs, he could not hear a sound until suddenly the murmur of voices reached him. Nothing was distinct, however, and in disgust he turned away and got ready for bed.

He only partly undressed because of the dampness in the room and as he took off his shoes he looked longingly at a rusted old piece of stovepipe that stuck out of a depression in the soiled wall. What he wouldn’t give to see some roaring flames going up through that stovepipe now!

He turned the lamp down, then blew it out with a sigh of regret and padded swiftly over to the couch before he was likely to forget its exact location in that pitch darkness. The blankets smelled fairly clean and as he rolled himself around to a comfortable position he yielded his tired and aching body to their warmth.

Relaxed and drowsy, he lay listening to the continued murmur of voices. Time and again he tried to distinguish each individual sound but made nothing of it. Finally the voices ceased.

Westy's heavy eyelids snapped open and he strained every effort to catch some further sound, but nothing came. The house again seemed steeped in silence. Suddenly he heard a peculiar clicking sound at his door, a grating sort of sound. Then all was still.

He waited, waited, waited. The house might as well have been a tomb. Surely, he must have imagined that noise. But no, it had been distinct. And then, unable to resist the impulse longer, he got up silently and almost crept across the room.

He felt his way little by little until his hand encountered the cold metal doorknob. In that position he stood for another interminable length of time listening until every nerve in his body seemed ready to snap. Then, convinced that there was no one standing on the other side of that door, he turned the knob, very slowly, very cautiously, until he had turned it completely around, and gave it a forceful yank.

But the door did not yield one inch. It was locked.

CHAPTER XX OUT OF THE BASIN

Westy's exhaustion was heaven-sent that night, it would seem; had it not been for that, he would have spent some long, dreary hours keeping vigil at the locked door. But as it happened, he could not keep his legs steady, so fatigued did he feel. And so after some minutes, unable to think or wonder anymore about this strange house in which he was an unwilling guest, he crept to the couch, rolled himself up in the blankets once more and was soon asleep.

Inert and still he lay until the sound of Hi-Lo's voice brought him out of his deep slumber. The Chinaman had already lighted the lamp on the table.

"Half plast four," said the oriental in his singsong voice. "Clum call like I say. Now I get blekfast for young homble."

Westy was sitting up rubbing his eyes wonderingly. So nothing had happened after all. Then, why the locked door?

"You likee flapjacks, Missti?" Hi-Lo inquired blandly.

"I don't want a thing, Hi-Lo," Westy answered kindly. "Please don't make a thing. It'll only be wasted. Get yourself something, but nothing for me. I mean it! Just get the pony ready and that's the only favor you can do me now."

"Allee same I fix flapjack—you no eat allee same," the Chinaman grinned and disappeared into the hall leaving the door ajar.

Westy stopped in the midst of lacing one shoe. “Well, that looks promising,” he thought, studying the door. “At least they don’t intend to bar me from going on my way. Hmph! I’ll be gol-blamed if I can see what they locked me in for, anyway.”

He was in his clothes and out to the kitchen in less than five minutes. Hi-Lo had apparently been up quite a little while for the stove was red, the griddle smoked on its face and on the table was an enormous bowl full of batter.

The Chinaman was standing with the big coffee pot in his hand when Westy entered but he immediately put it down on the stove and hurried to the far end of the room. In a second he was shuffling back bearing a basin full of water.

“You washee, hah?” he asked solicitously, and set the basin down on the table. “Wait, I glet towel.” When he had performed this service he hovered over Westy. “You sure no want cloffee?”

“No, Hi-Lo,” Westy answered, his face in the folds of the towel. “You’ve been very kind as it is. I must hurry so that I can get down to the Gap and back on the trail by dawn. Thanks, just the same.”

He got into his coat, gathered his snowshoes under his arm and followed Hi-Lo out of the back door and into the shadowy back yard. He heard the stamping of a horse and presently discerned the graceful outlines of a pony tethered to a post just a few feet away.

After he had strapped the shoes to the animal’s back, Westy climbed into the saddle. Hi-Lo stood by, gracious and attentive. “You allee fix’ now, homble?” he asked with concern. “You got blanket for pony fix’ fline, hah?”

“Sure, everything, thanks.” Westy hesitated. “Do I follow the trail right on down to the Gap? No turns?”

Hi-Lo shook his head. “Pony, um take you stlaight to Gap. No turn. Now, you glo, hah?”

Westy delved into his coat pocket and brought out a dollar bill. “Take this, Hi-Lo. It’s for yourself. For cooking me such nice soup and chicken last night and for going to so much trouble this morning. Treat yourself now.”

Hi-Lo pocketed the bill, protesting graciously the while. “Young homble too glood. Hi-Lo greatly pleased. You want asky something, hah?”

“Yes, I do,” Westy said smiling in the darkness. “How did you guess?”

“Hi-Lo gluess much.”

“I guess you do,” Westy said. And then in almost a whisper, he said: “Just tell me one thing, Hi-Lo—why was my door locked last night?”

Westy sensed that the Chinaman was surprised, but when the yellow face peered closer to him in the darkness it looked just as impassive as ever.

“Missti Pete ask me to do that, homble. Hi-Lo lock it and kleep key in plocket all night. Missta Pete say homble Nick come home dlunk from Gap an’ he might bleak in room an’ wake up young homble. Savvy?”

Westy laughed. “I wish I did,” he said sceptically. “Somehow it doesn’t ring true, Hi-Lo. Not that I want to doubt you, nor do I think you want to lie. It’s Mr. Pete that wants you to lie, huh?”

“Me no lie,” Hi-Lo protested blandly. “Me say tlu things allee time.”

“All right,” Westy said graciously. “I can think as I like just the same.”

He gave the pony a gentle pat and reined it out of the yard. His mind was a conglomeration of thoughts, confusing at times, but through it all one thought remained fixed firmly. He voiced it determinedly, once he was on the trail.

“And I don’t believe it!” he shouted decisively.

Long after the hoofbeats of the pony had ceased along the snow-packed trail, there seemed to float in the dark morning hours vague echoes of Westy’s doubt. And just before the black shadows left the foothills, a short, stockily-built man rode out of Pete’s corral with a defiant, swaggering air, and headed straight for the up trail.

CHAPTER XXI INFORMATION

Westy ate ravenously and shopped like a veteran in Tully's Gap. Old Pop Burdett, at whose general store these things were achieved, could serve cooked food as well as he sold uncooked food. His breakfasts were highly praised by home-going cowpunchers from near and far and the kindly old man's presence added zest to his meals for he never failed to beguile the diners with his witty reminiscences.

And so it happened that Westy, feeling the old man's sympathy for those who have been wronged, told him his story. They were loading the pony with provisions while he talked, the store-keeper listening intently and keeping a discreet silence until he had concluded.

"What do you think of it, anyhow?" Westy asked respectfully. "Do you know who this Pete is? He didn't tell me his last name, neither did anybody else. The whole place seemed like one dark secret to me."

Old Pop Burdett smiled and drew his coat collar up around his neck. "Wa'al, wa'al, son," said he, rubbing the pony's nose affectionately, "ain't that some story, now? Hmph, so you wuz at Pete's place, eh? Wa'al, few folks know him by any other name. The ranch used ter belong ter his pap way back in forty-nine. Pete inherited it but he ain't never been much good. Jes' got 'long by th' skin uv his teeth. His pap never'd a thought th' Corcoran Half-Moon

Ranch wuz goin' ter run down so ez it's called jes' Pete's place."

"Corcoran?" Westy repeated. "Is that his name?"

"Yep," said the old man, "and Binford's man, Corcoran, is ole Pete's nephew. Thar's somethin' funny goin' on between them two lately. I've hed suspicions myself. And now that you tell me how you met up with this Corcoran an' that feller Dolan, I'm comin' ter see light through th' thing. Pete's bought more expensive grub off o' me in th' las' three months than I ever knowed him ter buy his whole life an' that's as old as me. He allus drank and gambled every cent he made an' let the ranch run down ter what yer see it looks like now. Wa'al, it's a shame, that rascal Corcoran put yer ter so much trouble and sufferin' an' ef the rangers git wind uv it, he'll hev ter cum ter time."

Westy drove away from Old Pop Burdett's store enlightened and determined. Corcoran was going to pay somehow, and Dolan along with him. It was at least comforting to know that that might be accomplished, but he realized that Pete's gruff manner and Hi-Lo's locking of his door during the night were significant.

Dawn colored the eastern horizon as the pony trotted up the trail. Westy looked straight ahead, awed, and admiring the immensity of the mountains and the foothills in the rose-colored glow of morning. Not once did he turn his head toward the basin, though he could see out of the corner of his eye, a straight column of smoke rising above the treetops.

He could hear the echo of snorting cattle in the distance and wondered whether any of Mr. Binford's animals were among them. More than ever was he convinced of

Corcoran's dishonesty and determined to let Dale know of it at the first opportunity he had.

The pony was making splendid time and Westy felt encouraged. Every now and then, his brown eyes strayed skyward, hoping to catch some glimpse of Rodgers' plane. He thrilled at the thought of the reckless pilot buzzing his engine above the Pass and wondered whether Travers or Benny would hear him.

The snow had melted considerably on the ledges, but was still hard enough to make the pony's burden lighter than if he had been struggling in slush all the way up trail. The sun finally broke through some leaden-colored clouds and seemed to shed its rays immediately on the mountain-side.

The wide, graceful branches of pine and fir trees seemed to sway with new life in the early morning breeze and the big tree that Westy had so admired the previous day seemed to look down upon the forest out of which it grew in much the same manner that a giant looks down upon a pigmy. It was while musing upon these things that Westy's keen eyes detected fresh pony tracks, and reining in Pete's little horse, he clambered down from the saddle.

He examined the ground for a few feet and suddenly decided that the rider and pony had come up that way not very many minutes earlier. Certainly they had not the better of him by more than a half hour. The snow around the tracks proved it.

He hurried back to the pony and into the saddle once more. "G'long now, buddy," he said gently. "Let's see if we can't speed up a little and see who's who. It'd be nice to have someone to talk to for a little way before I have to turn off

for the Pass. And that won't be so long either for the slope's starting to widen out here—see?"

The pony whinnied knowingly and trotted on briskly. Westy kept one eye on the tracks and the other eye on the trail, hoping to catch a distant glimpse of the rider. At each bend he would lean forward in the saddle eagerly, but after two hours had passed and the sun beat down upon the snow, the tracks became entirely obliterated.

About a mile below the beginning of the Pass Trail, there is a fine stand of spruce and fir which grows far back on the slope. The trail widens at about five hundred feet from that spot and continues way beyond this stand.

And so it was just where the trail begins to widen that Westy became aware of the pony's acting strangely. It snorted and sniffed the air and after cavorting around in a circle two or three times, came to a dead stop.

"What's the matter, old scout?" asked Westy. "Seen a coyote or something? You ought to be used to them. Brought up with them almost, huh? Now, now, quiet down! G'long!"

But the pony refused to be quieted. He stood, hoofs planted firmly in the mushy snow, and whinnied incessantly. Westy was nonplussed and, after several vain entreaties, got down out of the saddle to look over the situation.

Suddenly he heard a rustle among the pines and started forward instinctively. He had gone perhaps six feet, certainly not more, when a gun protruded from around one of the majestic trunks, aiming straight at him.

He opened his lips to cry out, but a tongue of blue flame hissed out of the barrel. The pony whinnied fearfully and as Westy attempted to duck to the ground, he felt something strike hot and sharp upon his left shoulder. The next moment

his senses reeled—he felt himself turning crazily about, trying to cry, yet somehow unable to make even the tiniest sound.

And then he felt himself sinking, sinking....

CHAPTER XXII

WHY?

The shock of the moment and the result of the week's privation contributed largely to the faintness and vertigo which Westy experienced. Certainly, when his head cleared and he was able to think of the situation rationally, he realized that his wound could not be serious for it was bleeding but little and when he got to his feet he felt quite strong.

He saw at once that his unknown enemy had fled. The tracks of his pony revealed that he and the animal had hidden together behind the pines. They had been waiting, waiting for him! Why?

At least his borrowed pony had not deserted him and the sight of the valiant little animal standing there in the trail with the sun shining full upon him, was encouraging. The pack with the provisions had not been molested, everything seemed in its place, so why the attack? A little inner voice answered that question for Westy but he was not yet ready to believe it. After all, one shot to kill, and there was no real reason in the world for anyone's wanting to kill him.

He left it at that and climbed into the saddle with some effort. His shoulder hurt him considerably with every move he made, but he gritted his teeth, urged on the pony and tried to forget the whole disturbing episode.

[Illustration: His shoulder hurt him considerably more with every move he made.]

He had no appetite at noontime and did not stop for lunch. Besides they were making very good time—the pony wasn't at all winded and three hours at the most would bring them up to the Pass. Would he ever really get there?

"It's hurting me more than I thought," he admitted grimly. "When a feller wants to get to a place as quickly as I want to get there, there must be something wrong. Of course I'm terribly anxious about Ben and Travers. Terribly. But this gol-blamed thing hurts like anything."

Within a half hour's riding distance of the Pass, he came upon a significant mound, quite clear of snow. There was a tell-tale bit of an animal's tail protruding above the surface and he knew instinctively that it was some unlawful killing, or the culprit would not have gone to the trouble of burying the hide.

"Ought to have made a neater job of it," he said between his teeth. "Been feasting on some poor fawn or mother. Hmph! Why does that Corcoran's name keep coming up all the time? Gosh, I can't get him out of my head!"

He spurred the animal on recklessly as if to lose his thoughts in flight. But it couldn't be done. Dale's words came back to him clearly, "He's just delighted to hunt things down." And Old Pop Burdett's assertion, "They ain't much good, neither of 'em ... thar's somethin' funny goin' on between them two."

"*Corcoran!*" Westy growled aloud. "There's a good many reasons why he couldn't be the feller that did this to me and there's a good many reasons why he could be? Now which reason shall I pick?"

He grinned in spite of his pain and bent down to the pony's ear and calmly asked what would be his opinion of such a man as Corcoran. Was he guilty of having fired that shot or was he not?

In answer, the pony whinnied affectionately and though Westy was not quite satisfied, it was all the answer he ever got to that question.

CHAPTER XXIII

WESTY'S GHOST

“There now,” said Dick Travers with deep concern, “the bullet’s out and it’s only a flesh wound, but I won’t have a good night’s sleep until Doc Bertrand has a look at it. It’s quite a few hours old, Martin, and that’s plenty of time for infection to set in. Of course you’ve got to have a good rest and I’ll keep it cleaned out as well as I can. What do you say about starting the day after tomorrow?”

“I won’t kick about it and I’ll tell you why,” Westy said propping himself up on his good shoulder. “I won’t get a good day in here until I spill what I have on my mind about that coyote. After that I’ll just be tickled silly to come up here and look over the place for you if you want to go on downstream.”

“That’s fine,” said the engineer. “And now about Corcoran, we’ll have to work carefully. We’ve got pretty good evidence, but not enough. But we can get the major to appeal to the rangers for the fix he put us in here. That’s certain. Mr. Binford is the most likely one to go to about this cattle business. He’ll soon be able to tell how many cattle he’s missed in the last three months. Depend on it, Corcoran shot you—he thinks you know too much for his peace of mind and he meant that you shouldn’t do any more snooping or be allowed the power of speech to tell again what you told the major over the phone.”

“Hah, hah,” said Ben joyfully, “he should know that Westy can’t be killed so easy. But how close—oi! If you come up by this place again—I come too. It shouldn’t be safe alone for you anywhere now that that coy—skunk or whatever you call him, it’s just the same—anyway it shouldn’t be safe alone without me. Even if I’m not much good it’s better I come, hah?”

“This whole thing would be a flop without you, anyway, Ben,” Westy said sincerely. “Gosh, but I was glad to get back and know that you two were filled up to the neck. I’d like to meet this Charlie Rodgers and tell him what a good sport I think he is.”

“He’s some shot,” Dick Travers laughed. “He aimed that bag of grub and it didn’t stray but two feet wide of the mark.”

“And you heard him coming, huh?” Westy asked, interested.

“And how!” Ben exclaimed. “In this quiet place a big plane like that sounds like the whole world’s having a thunder storm. We could hear it way off and we went outside.”

“The snow melted like the dickens all day and all night,” Dick Travers explained. “We didn’t have any trouble watching and when she circled so many times I knew it was a signal and that help had come. Man, we ducked for the cabin when that bag came down for it landed like a ton of lead.”

They feasted on beefsteak that night, Dick Travers being the chief cook, and Ben being more trouble than he was worth (as he expressed it himself). Westy lay quietly and luxuriously in his berth watching the preparations with a

great deal of amusement, when suddenly they were startled by a peculiar, wailing cry.

All three listened intently as the cry was repeated.

“Must be a lynx, huh?” Westy asked, sitting up.

“Sounds like it and then again it doesn’t,” said the engineer. “I can’t quite make out what it sounds like to me.”

Three times in all they heard it and as the echoes of the last cry died away in the dusk, Dick Travers grabbed his hat and coat and started for the door.

“Don’t, Mr. Travers!” Westy called. “Don’t go alone. There’s safety in numbers at least.”

“Then, it’s I should go,” said Ben bravely. “You stay by this cabin, Westy. It’s enough that you’ve had in two days without any more.”

“All right, grandma,” Westy laughed, “but stick close to Mr. Travers and if there’s any more shooting, duck to the ground right away. I waited too late, because I never expected it. Now I realize that you can almost expect anything up here.”

Despite his promises, Westy wrapped an almost white-colored blanket about his body and after turning down the lamp wick, went to the front window and opened it about half-way. He was anxious and troubled and stood in a tense position, letting not a single sound escape his keen ears.

He presented a rather spectral aspect, viewing him from the outside. His big brown eyes, still quite hollow, seemed to burn and pierce the very darkness and his long, thin face and dishevelled hair added to this supernatural suggestion. But it was the light-colored blanket covering his tall, slim body from neck to toe that completed the eerie picture for the low,

flickering lamplight sent forth across the room a few meagre rays which rested impishly on his dark, curly head.

He had not the slightest idea that he was appearing as some ethereal spirit until he heard a stifled cry and saw the face of Dolan outside in the darkness, gazing at him with a sort of fascinated horror. Suddenly the man gave a terrible scream and ran blindly into the night.

In the wake of that, there came a shot, clear and distinct. Then Dick Travers' voice: "Martin, where are you? Are you safe? Is that you?"

Westy tried to answer but couldn't and for some reason which he couldn't comprehend, he burst into a fit of uncontrollable laughter. He shut the window and repaired to a nearby chair where he shook until his shoulder began to twinge again. In the midst of this hysteria, Ben and Dick Travers burst into the cabin.

"Thank goodness, you're safe!" the engineer said excitedly. "I—what's the matter?"

Westy stopped immediately at sight of the engineer's worried face. "I'm all right," he said in short breaths. "I just couldn't stop laughing. I saw Dolan ... I was standing by the window and it was open and I had this white looking blanket all wrapped around me...."

"Oh, I'm so glad you're all right," Travers said with real relief in his voice. "You've no idea how frightened I was that they were up here after you again or something."

"Such a scare, Westy," Ben put in. "We were hunting for where that cry came from down by the spring, when all of a sudden that scream came and in a second that no-good Dolan ran right by us."

“We flashed our lights right on him, but he never stopped running,” said the engineer. “I called to him but he went right around the bend and in a second we heard another hoarse voice and then the sound of horses scrambling away. Phew, what a scare!”

“And the steak’ll burn in a minute,” Westy laughed. “Ben, go turn it over or turn it out, huh?”

“Well,” said the engineer, obviously unable to puzzle out this latest angle, “what on earth did Dolan want up here now?”

“Maybe I’m wrong about this,” Westy suggested, “but I can’t help thinking that Dolan came up here to see if I was dying or dead. I could tell it by the look on his face.”

“Did he speak to you or anything?”

“Nope. I told you I must have looked kind of queer, standing in this thing at that window with that little bit of a light shining over my dome. He sort of opened his mouth wide as if he was seeing things. Then he screamed.”

“*And how!*” exclaimed Ben, as he turned over the steak. “Until now I have chills from that scream. I thought you was murdered for sure.”

“Not so’s you can notice it, kiddo,” Westy laughed. “I’m a pretty hungry corpse, I can tell you that. But take my word for it—Dolan thought I was a ghost, and I don’t mean maybe!”

CHAPTER XXIV STARTLING NEWS

“Well, well, well,” said Mr. Nevins genially. “You boys come in on the mules and I go out on one. In the morning, eh Major?”

“Absolutely,” Major Winton laughed. “But don’t go through any such experiences as Wes, here. One in this family is enough.”

Nevins chuckled heartily and finished his soup. “Well, I’m certainly anxious to pike this blackguard, Corcoran, off—he’d make darn good copy, eh?”

“Not if he saw you first, eh, Martin?” Dick Travers asked.

“Neither first nor last,” Westy answered, looking puzzled.

“Well, Doc Bertrand said your shoulder is fine, eh?” the major asked, turning to Westy.

“Thanks to Mr. Travers,” Westy smiled. “And now that that’s all settled, when can Ben and I go back to the Pass?”

“Hmph, kind of like it, eh?” asked Major Winton cheerfully.

“Sure,” Westy admitted naively, “it looked awful nice and bright when we left there this morning. It’s great looking when there isn’t so much snow. Think Ben and I can do it?”

“Don’t see why not. Do you, Travers?”

“Absolutely, O. K. with me,” answered the engineer. “It’ll help me a lot if he can keep an eye on it for a couple of days. Then he can meet me downstream—we’ll settle that later.

Main thing is that they'll have enough to eat and be safe. But I don't think there's much to be apprehended in that direction. At that, we're not sure who fired on him, though we can easily use our imagination."

"But it wouldn't ever stand fire in a court, I can tell you that," Nevins said, busily chewing on a freshly buttered roll. "It's all right to suspect this and that, but what you need when you come down to plain facts is honest-to-goodness evidence and a coupla good witnesses. But if you ask me, this bozo ain't likely to pop at our little friend Martin, again. That Dolan guy spoiled that game for Cork. Cork ... say boys, can't you just close your glimmers and see that name in a headline? *Cork ... bad man and cattle rustler captured, etc. etc....* very good, I must say! Well, I'll turn that over before morning. A newspaperman has got to be careful, too. Even the heroes turn out to be villains sometimes."

Westy watched Nevins at his food with quiet amusement. The man ate with such relish that it was a pleasure to watch him. Ben, also, was watching and as they were served, stopped to observe the effect that each separate dish had upon him.

In the interim, Westy noticed that the dining room had gradually emptied until there was only their own little party around the table. Flushed with fine, appetizing food and a benign look on his round, florid face, it was a most propitious moment to ask Mr. Nevins the question that was puzzling him. He put out what he called a feeler.

"So, Mr. Dobbins is getting along all right, huh?" he asked quite naturally.

"Mm, mm," Nevins mumbled over a deliciously browned drumstick of chicken. Then: "Dobbie's feeling like a two

year old—cranky as ever. Be glad to get him on the train for Chi and let his people put up with him for a change.”

“Then you’re going soon, huh?”

“Soon’s I git back from that ranch at Dawson’s Ridge.”

“Ha, ha,” Westy laughed lightly, yet felt suddenly tense, “on the trail of a story, huh?”

Nevins nodded, put down the shining bone and looked cautiously around the room. Then he smiled. “O. K.,” he boomed. “Everybody’s cleared out. Well, I guess there’s no harm in telling you fellers confidentially that the old man (that’s my big boss, Mr. Harmon) sent me word this afternoon that he’s been turning over and over in his mind that description I gave of young Dale at our little party with Dobbie in the Pullman that night. He says having the red hair and being a six-footer makes him think it’s somebody from Chi.”

“Someone he knows?” Westy asked anxiously.

“Someone everybody ought to know who reads the papers,” answered Mr. Nevins in a hushed voice. “And bye the bye, I got several copies for you boys and very good copy it is too. Well, as I was saying, the old man said that this Dale business appeals to his newspaper mind especially because the feller did that job on Dobbie, all the while saying he wasn’t no professional. Doc Bertrand said he *had to be*, to do a job like that!”

“I don’t see how anybody could get such a vivid impression just from a written description,” Major Winton contended. “There’s thousands of men with curly red hair...”

“But not with a cleft in the chin, and not a six footer and handsome like this Dale guy, eh Martin?” Nevins interposed triumphantly. “And better still, the old man sent me this

description that he got from the copy of this guy that the cops are looking for all over the country.”

The man’s pudgy little hands delved about in his pocket, and after a moment he brought out a piece of paper which he held up to read. “This is the dope, boys,” he said. “Now, listen ... I won’t read it all ... just this.... Stewart, who is wanted in connection with the mysterious death of his former classmate and chum, Alan Cummings, may have gone west. He is decidedly handsome, twenty-three years of age and over six feet tall.... has a cleft in his chin and curly red hair ... smiles wistfully and usually shuts his eyes when talking....”

Westy and Ben looked at each other, exchanging sympathetic glances.

“Now boys,” said Nevins, rubbing his pudgy palms together, “there’s one other card little Charlie’s got up his sleeve and it’s the trump, I think. This Dale feller calls himself Phil Dale, and this Stewart’s name is Dale Stewart. Ha, ha—kind of a coincidence, eh? Now you see why I’m so anxious to go muling it over to Binford’s Ranch and interview this Dale.”

“What are you going to say to him?” Westy asked anxiously.

“Hmph, you don’t think I’m going to let on that I suspect anything or that I’m coming for news, do you? Little Charlie ain’t that kind of a guy—I’m a newspaperman, first and last. What I intend to do is to kid him along that I was sent by the boss to get a story of his noble act, etc., with Dobbie. Then at the crucial moment, I’ll get him to pose for a picture—hero and all that stuff, you know. Oh, yeah, I forgot to tell you the camera man’s due to get here on the Mountain Express any

minute. Our hard luck train. Well, boys, how does that strike you? Things have certainly been popping around here.”

“Popping expresses it rather well,” said Dick Travers in that slow, amiable way of his. “Although I’ve never seen this Dale and probably never will, I feel terribly sorry for him somehow.”

Westy looked over at the engineer and flashed him a quick, grateful smile. Then he turned his attention to Mr. Nevins. “You can’t make me believe a fellow with Dale’s face ever killed anybody or anything!” he said stoutly. “I tramped with him through the blizzard that night and I happen to remember how he shrank back when we came to that dead fawn. Why, he couldn’t even pull the trigger when it came to killing that wolf! Do you mean to say it is at all likely a fellow like that could be guilty of such a thing?”

Mr. Nevins beamed across the table at Westy. “Martin, you’re just a softhearted little feller when it comes down to plain facts,” he said not unkindly. “Can’t you see that it isn’t what a feller does afterward, but what he did before that counts? He might have been pulling that stuff for your benefit or he mighta been conscience stricken, how do you know? ’Nother thing, if he hadn’t anything to hide why did he slip away, instead o’ facing the music? Answer me that?”

But Westy couldn’t answer Mr. Nevins then, nor ever afterward. Only Dale himself could answer that question.

CHAPTER XXV

A CHANCE

Westy felt this charge against Dale very keenly. Time and again after Nevins and the camera man had left on their mules for Dawson's Ridge, he told himself that he, and he alone, was responsible for this new difficulty which was to come to the handsome young cowpuncher.

"I was the one to drag him down to the Pullman that night, Ben," he said. "He didn't want to come, but I made him. And then look what happens after he gets Dobbins out of pain? Look what happens after he does all he can for us, huh?"

"Just like what they say about the dog what bites your hand when you feed him, hah?" Ben returned sympathetically.

Westy patted his friend on the shoulder. "You're all to the mustard, Ben, even if you do get your onions mixed once in a while. I feel terrible about Dale—you can't imagine. I know it all looks pretty black for him—even what he told me himself about listening for the Mountain Express because it kept him balanced with the rest of the world—remember?"

"Yeh, I remember how you told me he looked so sad when he said it," said Ben. "It's enough trouble he's got that he doesn't know about, hah Westy? Such a nice feller."

"That's it, Ben. He is nice and he saved my life too in a sense. I can't forget that and no matter what Nevins said, I know he wasn't just putting on about that fawn. And I could

see with my own eyes that he didn't even know how to properly handle a gun."

"I believe it, Westy. But how did this Cummings feller get killed?"

"The major told me it was a blow like on the back of his head. Now you know it could be accidental, that kind of a whack, huh?"

"Positively, Westy. How many times didn't my mother tell me to stop tipping back chairs that I shouldn't hit the back of my head some day and get killed?"

"Sure," said Westy, "there you are. Now that could have happened and anyhow Major Winton told me it was well known that this Cummings feller wasn't liked by a single feller in his class at college. It was just after they graduated that it happened and before they were ready to go to the hospitals—you know how young doctors do? Well, they were at a party in some swell house in Chicago and this feller's people were away. His name is Brown I think and he's almost a millionaire. This Stewart was poor, but they were good friends just the same. Anyway the newspapers said this Brown testified that there was a quarrel about something and that Stewart got mad and knocked Cummings down. That's all there was to it, as I understand it—an accident."

"Major Winton told you that, Westy?"

"Uh huh. He remembers when it happened—sometime last summer."

"Oi, and that's when you told me this Dale went to the ranch! Does it look black for him!"

"That's what's eating me up, Ben. Here I'm standing doing nothing and all the time Nevins and that other feller

are on their way to make it bad for Dale. Gosh, I at least owe that feller the chance to defend himself, huh? What can I do?”

At that moment a big plane circled overhead a few times, came lower and lower and then loped like some awkward giant bird across the wide meadow that skirted the construction buildings. Westy and Ben watched it admiringly as it rattled to a full stop.

“Phew! Some nerve, huh? Isn’t many aviators would chance a field like this. Wonder who he is?” Westy watched a medium sized young man climb down from the cockpit.

They saw him stride from the field and were about to make more conjectures concerning his identity, when Major Winton came hurrying out of his office and greeted him.

“Come on, Ben,” said Westy curiously, “let’s get in on this. I’d like to meet a feller that can make such a neat landing as that in a mountain town.”

“Yeh, so would I,” Ben agreed, “but believe me, Westy, it’s glad I am that he didn’t miss where he was going. I’m that afraid of airplanes, would you believe it?”

“I’d believe anything about you, you crazy kid,” said Westy and took him across to the Major’s side by force.

Major Winton laughed and winked at the smiling airman. Then he turned to Westy. “You’re right on the job I see. Now what?”

“I just wanted to meet a feller who could land like that,” said Westy frankly. “It was one peachy landing.”

The airman chuckled. “That’s what I like to hear. Praise goes right to the spot sometimes—praise like that, anyway,” he said modestly.

“Well, Wes isn’t given to idle praise, I can tell you that, Charlie,” said the Major. “And by the way, Wes, and you too, Ben, meet Charlie Rodgers, your angel of the clouds the other day.”

Ben was effusive but Westy could only gasp and stare at the pilot in awe. He stood by listening to the talk that went on between Rodgers and the Major until it suddenly occurred to him that the discussion was one of vital interest.

“So the wolves are still pestering their stock, eh?” Major Winton was saying.

Charlie Rodgers nodded. “Binford’s brought the situation to government notice and the Captain’s sending me over to see him and find out possible plans. Government’s going to cooperate with the ranchers in this thing and as Binford’s one of the biggest and best, we’re going to ask his opinion. Want to exterminate as many of the pests as possible. Cattle loss has been terrible.”

“Not only because of the wolves, I guess,” Westy could not refrain from saying. “There’s two kinds in Mr. Binford’s ranch.”

Major Winton gave Rodgers a cursory account of the now renowned Corcoran. And in conclusion, he said, “I guess Wes wouldn’t mind telling Mr. Binford a few things himself, eh Wes?”

“And then some,” said Westy disgusted at the thought of Corcoran. “I’d give a whole lot to fly over to Dawson’s Ridge with you,” he added, realizing that it was not Corcoran at all that he was concerned about, but Dale.

“You really want to go?” Charlie Rodgers asked pleasantly. “Well, I don’t know what’s to prevent you as long as the Major doesn’t mind. And what about Ben, here?”

Ben explained his objections in very few words and concluded with, “By me, Mr. Rodgers, it’s like that joke—the more firmer the less terror, hah? Did I get my onions straight that time, Westy?”

And so it happened that Westy, with parachute firmly adjusted, climbed into the passenger’s seat of the big army plane, ready and thrilled at the prospect of this rather unique journey. As the starter whined and the engines roared his whole being tingled strangely, not with the anticipation of flight, but with the feeling of joy and goodfellowship for that tall, handsome cowpuncher over at Dawson’s Ridge.

At least he was giving Dale the chance to defend himself.

CHAPTER XXVI

DALE TELLS

“I must admit that all this has completely flabbergasted me,” said Mr. Binford upon hearing Westy’s story of Corcoran’s evident intrigue. “It’s true that it has only been within the last few months that we’ve missed the cattle like this and it’s true that most of them have been calves. But I can’t believe that the man has so utterly deceived me! Why only this morning he reported that four more yearlings had been practically eaten by the wolves, and he asked for permission to take the day off tracking them up through the mountains along with our man Dolan.”

Westy smiled at the guileless ranch owner. “Did you know that he had an uncle by the name of Pete Corcoran who owns that awful looking place over at the basin?”

Mr. Binford looked dismayed. “No,” he answered, “I didn’t know there was an uncle. Corcoran never told me. He simply said that they spent the nights they were out in deserted cabins along the way.”

“Well, that much proves he’s been a liar, huh?” said Westy. “And now he’s supposed to be out trailing wolves—that’s a good one.”

“If I could just get conclusive proof—that’s all I need. He’s been very clever working it this way, I must say. Evidently, he’s been selling my cattle and splitting the difference with his uncle if they’ve been shipping from the Crossing as you told me.” Mr. Binford rose from his

comfortable chair and strode across the room to gaze out of the window.

“Well, I’ll get you proof somehow, Mr. Binford,” Westy said determinedly.

The ranch owner turned around and smiled. “That’s kind and I’d appreciate it, but not at the cost of your life. And it’s evident that Cork is quite vindictive. Come to think of it, I’ve never felt completely at ease with the man. I’ve felt all along, I guess, that he never had my real interests at heart. I’m anxious now to be rid of him. Now there’s Dale—he’s a man to trust, upstanding chap, don’t you think so?”

Westy’s heart pounded. “I only saw him once, but I liked him. Where is he now, Mr. Binford? We didn’t see any of the men when we landed.”

“Well, to tell the truth, I had Dale go out with the men right after Cork left here this morning,” said Mr. Binford. “They’re in the corral checking up for me. Perhaps they’re even finished by this time.”

Westy lost no time in excusing himself and, leaving Charlie Rodgers to discuss the real wolf problem, he hurried out of the house and down to the corral. There he found Dale sitting on one of the posts and looking pensively off toward the east.

They exchanged cordial greetings and then, hurriedly, Westy told the cowpuncher of Nevins’ intended visit. Also he lost no time in getting down to the heart of the matter and bluntly asked, “Are you Dale Stewart?”

Dale put his long legs on the ground and stared. Surprise and pain were written all over his face. “Why?” he finally asked. “Do you think I am?”

“I suppose I do, Dale,” Westy admitted. “You just somehow look to be a feller with that name—I don’t know why. Phil doesn’t suit you at all. Dale Stewart just fits, that’s all.”

Dale put his right arm on Westy’s shoulder. “You’re a queer kid,” he said, “to come all the way here by plane just to warn me. What would you say if I admitted I was the cause of Cummings’ death?”

“I wouldn’t believe it,” said Westy stoutly.

“I don’t believe you would,” Dale chuckled. “Will you promise to treat what I’m going to tell you as something strictly confidential?”

“Sure. If I was the kind that wouldn’t—I’d be somewhere else now. I wouldn’t be here warning you to beat it before Nevins trots up to get you in wrong with Mr. Binford, with everybody.”

“I can’t afford to get in wrong with anybody now, Martin,” Dale began. “Particularly I don’t want the papers to get anything on me. It was a promise to an old man, Mr. Brown who has befriended me since I was a little boy. He put me through school, he’s done everything for me that’s humanly possible. And that’s why I want you to promise you’ll not tell.”

“You’ve got my promise all right,” said Westy with an eye on the house. “But you didn’t do it, I know that.”

“No, I didn’t. You see Mr. Brown’s son, Duncan—Donkey—we always called him, had gone right through school with me. He’s bright enough, but sickly and given to long fits of temper and obstinacy. He’s caused his father no end of trouble and expense and just when the poor old man

was so delighted that his son was on the threshold of life, that terrible calamity happened.”

“Gosh!”

“Duncan got in a terrible rage at Cummings that night and I could hardly blame him. Cummings always went too far with his jokes and this time Donkey went completely off, he was so mad. All the rest had gone—there was only the three of us, and even I had gone out of the room for about five minutes. When I came back it had happened.” Dale lit a cigarette, then resumed.

“Well, we wired Mr. Brown to come home, and you can imagine the scene that followed,” Dale said quietly. “There was Donkey just starting on his career and the only son of a rich old man. He had a name to live up to and the knowledge people would get of a doctor killing a man in a rage like that wasn’t going to help at all. He couldn’t possibly live it down in the medical profession. I hadn’t a soul to care about me and I didn’t have any name so I just offered myself in Donkey’s place. That’s all. It was all I could do to repay Mr. Brown for all he had done. I just slipped away to make it appear that I was guilty.”

“But ... but,” Westy protested, “you can’t live like this all your life! You can’t be miserable all your life, being hunted by police and afraid to go out and meet people, just because a feller went and lost his temper. Gosh! That isn’t right.”

“You’d understand that it was something very right if you knew how much I owe to Mr. Brown,” Dale said gently. “Besides, I’m really too softhearted to ever make a good doctor.”

“But, don’t you get lonesome? Don’t you....”

“I’d feel terrible if I ever had to leave this ranch, Martin. And that’s the truth. I’ve been happiest here. That’s why I dread this newspaper feller.”

Charlie Rodgers’ helmeted head appeared around the side of the house and just behind followed Mr. Binford. Westy’s mind raced. “Tell you what, Dale,” he suggested. “Ask Mr. Binford for a few days off—say you have to go somewhere on business. Do it right away and then beat it up to the Pass and stay there until tomorrow night! Savvy?”

Dale smiled gratefully. “What about this Nevins, then? He’ll find out you’ve been here and he’ll find out that you’ve been talking to me? What then? Do you think he’ll spill it all to Mr. Binford?”

“Nevins is a newspaper man, first and last,” Westy said, unconsciously quoting the little fat man. “He’ll never open his mouth, but he won’t be satisfied to come back by mule, I can tell you that! He’ll be borrowing one of Mr. Binford’s cars to get back quick and lace it into me. But don’t you worry, Dale—I’ll be ready for him. I think I know how to handle Mr. Nevins in a pinch.”

Dale put his hand out to Westy and his voice was tense. “All right, Martin. I’ll never forget. And I’ll go up to the Pass. Right?”

“Yep,” smiled Westy clasping the proffered hand. “And you wait in that cabin because Ben and I will be trotting along before dark.”

When Mr. Binford and Charlie Rodgers strolled up to the corral, Westy and Dale were casually discussing the tedious winter months in the mountain country.

CHAPTER XXVII

A NARROW ESCAPE

“Well, I’ve promised Mr. Binford that I’d skim close to that trail on my way back with you and see if I can see anything of that low-down Cork,” Charlie Rodgers chuckled. “We decided that it would be as good a way as any to catch him with the goods, for if he’s driving any cattle ’long there, you’ve only got to get my glasses and give him the once over. Care to do that?”

“Say, I’d care to do anything to that feller,” said Westy, as he strapped on his parachute.

Dale, standing with Mr. Binford beside the big plane, chuckled. “I’ve an idea that Martin isn’t crazy about Cork,” he said lightly.

“And Cork wouldn’t be a thing but crazy if he knew that we were at his heels,” said Rodgers.

“Well, if you see him and things look suspicious, turn right back and give me the high sign by circling,” Mr. Binford said anxiously. “I’ll wait and if you come I’ll get right in my car and be down in that basin ready for him.”

As it happened they had not very far to go along over the zigzag course of the mountain trail when they spotted moving figures. Charlie Rodgers indicated the glasses and Westy was not long in recognizing the swaggering strut of Corcoran and just as plainly could he see Dolan standing for the moment in conversation as evidenced by his gestures.

And not very far ahead of them, lingered a few head of cattle.

For some reason, however, at sight or sound of the big plane, both men mounted their horses and galloped on their way. Rodgers followed them slowly until he saw them approach the cattle, waving their arms at the bewildered animals and frightening them onward. Then he circled high above the peaks and turned the plane back to the ranch.

They took a deep dive in the direction of the corral, but not having been able to pick up speed sufficiently, the airman circled wide, let her climb a little, then dove again. Westy was not conscious of feeling any jar, but he distinctly saw the left wing crumple up as they dipped under the crest of a pine.

He heard Rodgers cry and saw him stand upright in the cockpit, making frantic motions with his arms, his mouth forming the word, "HURRY!"

Westy jumped to his feet blindly and followed Rodgers' motions almost mechanically. When he made the leap he closed his eyes, feeling certain that he would never open them again. Yet instinct persevered and he pulled the 'chute open, experiencing a glorious sense of buoyancy as the wind carried him along.

He finally dared open his eyes in time to see the big plane burst into a hundred tongues of flame. The roar of it brought men out of the buildings below and Westy's heart sank when he saw that the wind was carrying him away.

He had heard many stories of a 'chute jumper being able to direct his own course. Perhaps that was what Rodgers had done for certainly he had made much better progress than his passenger. Westy tried to imitate him and partly succeeded.

He landed safe and sound within a few feet of the railroad tracks and his only comment was, “Gosh, I could have found a better place.”

CHAPTER XXVIII

A RIDERLESS HORSE

Mr. Binford sent Westy and the airman back to Boardman in one of his flivvers and though it was anything but smooth riding along the rough highway, they were thankful to escape without any injury or bruises.

Rodgers took the accident calmly. "It's just like this, Martin," he said good-naturedly. "When a plane starts deciding in mid-air that she's going to curl up and take a nap, why the best thing to do is to kiss her goodbye, pronto. She just got out of my control there for about one minute and she shinnied over to the top of that tree and, *goodnight!*"

"Mr. Binford acted as if he felt it was all his fault," said Westy as they drove into the little camp town. "He said if he hadn't told us to come back it wouldn't have happened."

"Yes, I know," said the airman philosophically, "but that didn't have anything to do with it—those things happen some time or other and I'm glad it was in a good cause. Now Binford's got that rat by the neck, I guess. I'd like to be there and see the fun when he and his pal come riding those cattle down in the basin."

"Well, I can't say that I'd like to be there," Westy admitted. "I had enough of Corcoran and that whole outfit. I did my part and now I got other things to think of."

The excitement over the plane wreck had not completely died down when at about nine o'clock that evening, Major

Winton came hurrying into the cabin with strange news. Westy and Ben were playing checkers.

“I have just been phoning to Binford’s place,” the Major explained breathlessly. “I was naturally anxious about Nevins and particularly I wanted to know if he and that camera man were coming back tonight.”

“Are they?” Westy asked placidly making a strategic move.

“Are they!” the Major repeated. “That’s what I’d like to know—they haven’t even arrived there yet.”

“Goodnight!” Westy turned around in his chair. “Can you beat that? Now where....”

“Mr. Binford said he’d let me know if they came. He was very cheerful and said that he’d just got back from the Gap himself. They caught Dolan and the rest of the gang in that awful ranch, but your friend Cork got away.”

“That would be his luck. Gosh, now I have to worry myself about where he’s gone to.”

Major Winton sat down on the edge of his army cot. “Let that be the least of your worries, Wes. He’s not such a fool that he’ll stay in these parts.”

“Well, it’s for me yet to get excited about something or save somebody,” Ben sighed whimsically. “It’s a disgrace how peaceful I’ve been with Westy getting shot and jumping out of that plane and everything—I got to do something to keep some respect for myself, hah?”

The sound of laughter filled the room and when it had subsided, Westy leaned over and ran his fingers through Ben’s black curly hair. “Listen to me kiddo,” he said with deep feeling, “you don’t have to feel it’s a disgrace to be peaceful or anything else. And you don’t have to get shot to

keep your self respect. All you have to do to make me keep on liking you, is to keep on getting your onions mixed.”

They went to bed without any word of Nevins and the camera man and they got up just as ignorant of their whereabouts as they had been the night before. Westy and Ben, however, went right on with their preparations and were ready to start back for the Pass before seven o'clock.

“I don't know what to think,” the Major said in taking leave of them. “I'd ask you to wait on here in case we got word of trouble, but that Charlie Nevins is such a typical newsman that he's just as likely digressed on a new scent for news as not. No, you're just as well off going up there. Travers will be expecting you downstream in three days anyhow, so there isn't much time to be lost.”

Westy was full of anxiety about Dale and as they progressed along the up trail he talked about it incessantly. “Gosh,” he would say, “I don't know what he's going to do. He can't go on like he's been doing all the time.”

“When you said I was coming by you on this trip he should know that maybe you would have to tell me, hah?”

“Sure. We didn't say anything about that, Ben. There wasn't time. And then when I got back there after the plane took the flop there were too many around to say anything. But I could tell by the way he looked at me that he intended going up to the Pass and that you'd be with me. But now from the looks of things, he wouldn't have had to beat it away from Nevins so quickly after all.”

“We should know why it's happened. Anyhow, me, I'm glad that we're going up there again. After all it's noisy by Boardman when you've been up here. We ought to have some nice peaceful sleep tonight, huh?”

“You said it.” Westy stopped his mule for a moment. “Look, Ben—isn’t that some riders coming toward us?”

“Oi, what a bunch. Now what should you think ’ll happen?” Ben asked in his nervous way. “How many men do you count on those horses, hah, Westy?”

“Ten at least,” Westy answered and spurred on his mule. “Come on, Ben, let’s try and get halfway before we meet them.”

“On a mule we should try and catch up to them, hah?” Benny laughed heartily at the idea.

They didn’t even meet the riders half way because the men had spurred on their horses and galloped up to them. Before the leader came within earshot, Westy murmured, “A posse, I think. That first feller’s got a badge.”

A moment later, the big man hailed them from his saddle. “Howdy, boys!” he called amiably. “Seen anythin’ of a short feller that’s kind o’ dark and hez a nasty fightin’ look in his eye?”

Westy declared that he hadn’t. “Out lookin’ fer someone, huh? A thief?”

“Worse’n thet,” said the big man and opened the front of his coat proudly displaying his badge of office. “He’s a thief an’ a coward an’ we got a summons fer murderous attempt what he tried with one of our men yistiddy when we wuz tryin’ ter catch him. He carries a pow’ful gun an’ thet’s another charge what we’ll hold agin him. Worse n anythin’ an’ a mighty serious charge in these parts.”

Westy mused over it for a second. “I wonder what I could charge against him for rifling the cupboard up in the Pass? He and his pal left it bare and....”

“Yer mean ter say yer know him?” the man asked as if that would indeed be a most extraordinary thing.

“Sure,” Westy laughed. “It’s Corcoran, huh? I thought so. We’re from Boardman.”

“Sure pleased ter meet yer, boys,” said the man genially. “Now it comes ter me thet Mr. Binford told me ’bout th’ way this Corcoran wuz treatin’ yer. Even shot at yer, heh?”

“I’ve thought it was him,” Westy answered. “Yet, I can’t say for sure. Anyhow, I guess you’ve got charges enough against him to keep him going without me putting in anything.”

“Yes siree. Still, another wouldn’t hurt fer good measure. He’s aimin’ ter tire us out, I reckon, but he’s got another guess comin’ fer we’ll comb these here hills ter th’ cows come home. Anyway if yer see anythin’ an’ it’s possible ter let us know, why glad ter git our fingers on him.”

The whole solemn calvacade trotted on and they watched until the last man and horse disappeared around a bend in the trail. After that the mules went on in their steady, even way, giving no heed to anything but themselves.

“After you once ride this trail on a pony you’d feel like kicking a mule all over the place,” Westy remarked shortly afterward. “I got the biggest thrill out of that pony of Pete’s. That’s what you call riding. My horse, my horse, my kingdom for a horse!”

“Say, Westy,” Ben interposed, “calling for a horse, what’s this coming along next, hah?”

“*A horse!*” cried Westy in amazement. “What do you know about that, huh? A horse and not a sign of a rider. Wait Ben, I’m going to catch him. Wonder who he belongs to.”

“Yeah,” said Ben, “that’s luck for you or what Mr. Travers calls tel ... telepathy. All of a sudden you start calling for a horse and right away you got results, hah? Westy, I never saw the beat of it.”

CHAPTER XXIX

THE LOST ARE FOUND

Westy rode the horse until they came into the clearing at the Pass. He dismounted very quietly thinking to give a surprise, but Dale had come out of the cabin and caught him in the act.

“Whose?” he asked curiously.

Westy told him. “Poor devil,” he said rubbing the animal’s nose. “He looked mighty lonesome. Does he look familiar to you?”

“Yes,” said Dale, “I knew him when you rode up here. He’s Cork’s, all right. Have my pony out in the back too.”

“What I wouldn’t give to have a pony,” Westy said wistfully. “The government can’t afford them, I guess.”

“It’s good, Westy,” said Ben, always practical, “if you should have a pony then I’d be left the trouble with the mules all alone, making them always do what they don’t want to do.”

“Well, don’t worry, Ben,” Westy assured him, “it won’t happen. No such luck for me. I’ll just hold on to this poor old fellow until the sheriff tells me what to do with him, huh Dale?”

“Hmph,” Dale said thoughtfully, “I wonder where Cork has gone. Some humiliation for him to be without his horse—that’s the one thing he loved, I guess. Vain little devil, Cork.”

“Well, he’s had some of it scared out of him, huh? I think he’s beat it out of the mountains, don’t you?” Westy asked.

They all walked round to the shed and proceeded to tether and unload the animals. It wasn’t until this was done that Dale spoke.

“Tell you the truth, I don’t know where he would go,” he said sympathetically. “Much as I disliked the man I feel sorry for him to think that after spending all his life in and around these parts, he has to leave them. I know how much I would hate to do it now.”

Westy gathered up some of the baggage. “Well, we’ll go inside and talk about it, Dale. I forgot to tell you that I’d have to let Ben in on some of this—there wasn’t any other way.”

“That’s all right,” Dale said more cheerfully than usual. “I realize it’s become necessary for me to tell the secret to a few in order to actually keep the secret.”

Westy looked at him, puzzled.

“Get away from the ranch O.K.?”

“Yep. Mr. Binford says I need two or three days rest anyhow. I’m to be foreman when I go back.”

“Congratulations!” said Westy sincerely. “That’s fine. Came up last night, then, huh?”

“Yep.”

“Bet you were lonesome.”

“Hardly,” said Dale in a quizzical manner. “Come inside and I’ll show you why.”

Westy and Ben followed him in, their arms laden with things. When he got inside the door, he stood aside and smiled mischievously. Suddenly Westy heard a familiar, booming voice.

“Well, well, well,” said Charlie Nevins and came forward chuckling with pleasure. “You ain’t had a bigger surprise in years, eh? Never expected to see li’l ol’ Charlie up in this neck of the woods. Well, to tell you the truth, neither did I. Here, meet our cameraman, Somers,” he said as a quiet, swarthy-skinned man stepped out of the shadow.

Westy scratched his head and looked from Nevins to Dale. “What is this, anyway?”

“Just this,” said Nevins, considerately taking the parcels and packages out of Westy’s hands, “Somers and I got lost somehow—we took the wrong trail and yet it was the right one ’cause it landed us plunk into Dale here. He steered us up hill and down dale,” he laughed uproariously at this juncture, “and of course it wasn’t two minutes before he knew who we were.”

“Wasn’t that luck?” Dale asked gayly.

Westy and Ben nodded with surprise.

“So we came up here to talk it over,” Nevins continued. “Now we understand each other like real old buddies and all I got to say is that there are some things a newspaper man can do and some things he can’t do. This happens to be one of the things I can’t do. Somers and I are ready to give the old man (that’s my big boss, Mr. Stewart—Mr. Dale, I mean) some cock and bull story about his red hair being a wig and that he’s bald from having lost his hair with typhoid or some other disease. I’ll turn that over in my mind.”

“And don’t forget, Nevins—this Dale’s got a Texas twang if the old man should ask us,” said Somers, who was a very serious man. “Now let’s forget about this whole business and think of something we can turn in. Be a good idea if we could get something out of this posse and Corcoran business,

eh? I'd like to flash one at least before we start back in the morning."

"Well, take Martin," Dale suggested. "*Young man risks life to get food for snowbound companions ... would I do?*"

"Fine, fine," said Nevins, sorting the packages out on the table with an affectionate concern. "Now boys, we'll turn that over and get somewhere with it afterward. Just now the really chummy thing to do is for us to get together over a good hearty snack. What say?"

Westy laughed outright. "Mr. Nevins," he said with his brown eyes twinkling, "as a newspaper reporter you sure can stow away the grub. *And how!*"

CHAPTER XXX

HOOF BEATS

They got together over a friendly little game of pinochle after supper and whiled away a good many of the evening hours. Now and then their voices would rise to a high pitch in laughter or conversation and then for long periods there would not be a sound save for the passing and repassing of the cards.

The moon came out full, spreading its silver radiance over the Pass and into the many canyons. Nocturnal prowlers filled the entire region with their dismal cries and at intervals there came to them the distant sound of hoof beats.

“Taking the short cut to the Gap,” said Dale at first. “On a clear moonlight night like this you can hear it awfully plain.”

“I didn’t know there was a short cut to the Gap,” said Westy.

“Sure. It’s pretty rough traveling though. Rocky passes galore.” Dale stopped in the shuffling of his cards to listen. Then: “Hmph, it isn’t the short cut after all. It’s someone coming up here.”

There was no more card playing that evening. Everyone sat strained and tense, listening. Nearer and nearer came the hoofbeats, echoing in the still moonlight night with queer metallic reverberations. In between the echoes, Westy fancied he could hear the swish of a waterfall and he told Dale of it.

“You can hear it on a clear night,” said the prospective foreman of Binford’s Ranch. “It’s right above on the next slope and it falls partly over on the other side. The rest of it feeds the creek. But, come on, fellows, our visitor is passing the spring. At least we can give him true western hospitality before he shoots our heads off.”

“Well, well, well, so that’s it, eh?” Charlie Nevins asked sceptically. “I ain’t ever had much use for a coward but, believe me, little Charlie will do the disappearing act if there’s any shooting going on. I don’t see any sense in being a bull’s eye for any guy living.”

Notwithstanding this declaration, Mr. Nevins stepped outside the cabin with the rest, and seemed no more fearful of those approaching hoofbeats than the others. Westy noted this particularly and decided that the newspaperman was, first and last, a thoroughly good fellow.

There was something almost ludicrous about the little group standing there so tense, waiting for that lone horseman. The strained, anxious look on each individual face seemed to indicate that they were waiting for some vast army to approach and attack them maliciously.

Somers murmured audibly, “Don’t you think we ought to kind of stand a little under cover? Why, we’re open target for any one that comes along.”

Charlie Nevins’ sense of humor came to the fore, “Say, Somers, you ain’t expectin’ a gang war or something, are you?”

Westy laughed and Ben giggled and before their mirth had subsided Major Winton swung around the bend.

CHAPTER XXXI

DALE IN LUCK

Major Winton listened to Nevins' explanation of his and Somers' disappearance. Nevins dwelt at length on the principles of the newspaper game, winding up with the suggestion that they have a nice little snack before they bunk away for the night.

The Major laughed. "Nevins," said he amiably, "the wonder to me is that you don't burst with your midnight snacks and light lunches. Yes, I can eat a little something, but first I've got something to say. You know I never expected to find you here and just came on the chance that perhaps Wes had learned of your whereabouts."

"A li'l angel watches over Charlie Nevins, Major," said the man quizzically. "Never fear."

"Well, I'm glad to know that," laughed the Major, "but next time don't leave it to the angels. Let me know where you are. And now in lieu of what you just told me about Dale, I'm glad to bring the message to you from your editor that you weren't to go ahead with that anyway."

"No?" Nevins' mouth gaped open in surprise. "Why, what did the old man say?"

"He wired that the papers just going to press were printing a full length account of the tragic motor car accident of Duncan Brown, Sr., and Duncan Brown, Jr., early this morning. They were both instantly killed and shortly after

noon today Mr. Brown's lawyer made public a confession that had long been in his possession."

Dale gasped audibly.

"Yes, Dale," the Major smiled sympathetically, "you've been completely exonerated of having any guilt in the Cummings affair. The knowledge that you were suffering for his son must have weighed heavily on the old man's conscience and the lawyer said he must have had a premonition that neither one of them was going to live long. What's more, Dale, you're the sole heir to the Brown fortune."

"Oh, boy!" Westy yelled. "What a break!"

Ben seemed to be having some sort of a convulsion and murmured something about all the people having the luck. Nevins, however, immediately suggested a little banquet in honor of the heir and being as good as his word went straight to the stove and prepared the coffee.

Dale was a little dazed and sad over the loss of his kind friend and benefactor, but on the whole he managed to grace the occasion very nobly, as Nevins put it. Consequently they all retired for the night with over full stomachs.

"I'll blame it on you if I have any bad dreams," the Major called from his bunk.

"See if I care, Maj," Nevins answered jovially. "I've only been in the company of big heirs once in a blue moon and I've got to celebrate. I feel pleasantly full of sardines and cream cheese—I ought to dream I'm climbing the golden stairs."

"Not on sardines, Mr. Nevins," Westy called from the other end of the cabin where he and Ben had made an impromptu bunk out of the cabin's rugs and skins. "You're

most likely to take a good tumble down if you do succeed in getting up very far. I've been through that before."

Mr. Nevins, who slept as soundly as he ate, did not hear for he was already deep in slumber and snoring. Dale, Somers and the Major had also relaxed into that significant silence which betokens the approach of slumber. But Westy and Ben talked on.

After a time, Westy too, dallied on the brink of lethargy and before long was dead to the world. Ben, however, lay sleepless, bewailing the fact that he had taken too much coffee. His eyes blinked and winked in the darkness and after a time he kept his ear attuned to the queer little whisperings of a mountain night.

A howl pierced the silence once and after that, Ben was aware of a soft, shuffling noise at the back of the cabin. For a time, he thought it to be the sounds of the animals in the shed but after listening intently decided that it was not.

Some inner sense bade him get up quickly. He leaned over Westy and hearing him breathe heavily, decided not to wake him. "Anyway, I shouldn't wake him for foolishness, when he's sleeping so nice. Maybe it's nothing, but I'll go by the back and see," he thought in his quaint way.

He slipped on his warm sheepskin jacket over his pajamas and crept noiselessly out of the door and into the brilliant night. He hugged the side of the rustic building cautiously as he walked.

As he approached the shed he heard the restless animals stamping incessantly and just as he got to the door, a man's figure glided out and stopped short at sight of him.

"So!" Ben cried with dismay. "*So!*"

It was meaningless, that exclamation, but it carried more weight than any question he could have asked. The man turned on his heel and swept around the side of the shed and toward the trail.

Ben rushed after him with a cry that would have wakened the dead.

CHAPTER XXXII

BEN'S TRIUMPH

The whole camp was up in a second, but Westy was first to get out the cabin and see the flimsily clad legs of Ben in flight around the ledge. He was still crying in that funny little way he had when greatly excited, but there was a poignancy to the cry now that had never been there before.

Suddenly the roused sleepers were startled by a hoarse shout and in the wake of that came Ben's voice, so shrill, so tense that it echoed interminably in the canyon below the Pass. Westy was running barefooted but gave no thought to it, so anxious was he to overtake Ben.

The Major was almost at his heels and when they rounded the narrow ledge above the Pass, he barely avoided colliding with Westy. As it was, they groped for each other's support as they turned the ledge for they were confronted by an empty trail, devoid of any human presence save themselves.

Dale, who had come up with Nevins and Somers, pointed suddenly toward the precipice. Westy stared at him for a moment, unable to comprehend.

"Look!" Dale cried. *"Just look!"*

They did not need to lean over very far—they did not need to concentrate any special attention on whether or not those huddled looking objects down in the shallow dip of the precipice were moving. They knew that they were not.

Westy was over the side of the cliff slipping and sliding in his bare feet despite the Major's entreaties. Dale came right behind him and they both thanked their stars that the dip was there to break the precipice for they could hardly have climbed much further down such steep, slippery rocks.

The dip was filled with snow for it was a spot that the sun never reached except in midsummer. And in it was Ben, still breathing, and a mountain ram upon which he had fallen. The animal's fine horns had become entangled in some peculiar manner in the cloth of Corcoran's jacket and all three lay there in a circle with the moon smiling enigmatically upon them.

Corcoran was dead.

CHAPTER XXXIII

ALL'S WELL

“Corcoran was probably dead before he struck the dip,” Dale explained to the anxious Ben. “And you’re not to move until I get this bandage tight around your ribs. Only one is broken and you’re darn lucky, believe me. Your arm is fractured, but it’s a small break and you can consider that poor ram your savior. He broke your fall and if you hadn’t landed on him you’d be smiling up at the stars the same as poor Cork is now.”

“Oi, do I feel terrible about that!” Ben sighed. “I didn’t mean I should cause that feller’s death and even now I don’t know how it happened. I said nothing at the shed back there to make him act so crazy—I guess he was so afraid of being caught that it made him off a little—yes? Anyway, I got off my head when I saw him run and before I knew it we were both rounding that ledge where it’s so narrow.”

“And the ram?” Major Winton asked.

“That poor Cork bunched right into him, smash,” Ben told them. “And I bunched into them already—what a crash. So before I got my senses I felt my feet slip and away I went. So I didn’t know nothing till I looked up and saw Dale like a good doctor fixing up my arm.”

“Cork came back for his horse, that’s what he was after,” Dale said thoughtfully. “Well the poor devil is past any more rustling now.” Then: “Where’s Somers?”

“He’s out on the ledge with his camera,” Nevins called from the stove. “Boy, I’m chilled to the bone. Somers is taking a flash of that place and in the morning he’s going to take a flash at us. Now at last we’ve got some real copy ... *cattle rustler and western bad man comes to his just end at last* ... well, I could improve on that ... I never know until I start ticking the old Corona. Anyhow I’ll turn that over in my mind. Glad the kid’s safe, eh Maj? Sure did give me a turn. All’s well that end’s well. Hmph ... *great mountain ram saves life of Ben Stein* ... *thrilling battle on narrow ledge* ... ho hum, well, that’s a little page from the book of life, eh boys? Say, we ought to celebrate the kid’s miraculous escape ... that’s the word, I’ll use ... *miraculous!*”

“Celebrate, did you say, Nevins,” the Major asked whimsically.

“Sure,” said Nevins reaching for the coffee pot. “We ought to have just a little bit anyway. Besides, it’s morning already ... four o’clock and time for a little breakfast as long as we’re awake.”

“Nevins,” said the Major with a chuckle, “I’m surer than ever that you’re going to bust.”

“I’ll have to treat him for indigestion, I know that,” said Dale.

“Don’t worry about me,” Nevins assured him. “The trouble with you fellers—you ain’t never seen me eat real hearty. Yes, that’s the trouble.”

“Goodnight,” said Westy with a yawn. “I think Ben said something about us getting a nice sleep tonight.”

“Yeh, I did, Westy,” Ben said, “but I didn’t know how I was going to bunk into Cork and then into a big goat.”

“Ram,” Westy corrected whimsically.

“Oi, it could have been a mountain lion,” said Ben tragically. “Anyhow I kept my respect, hah, Westy? You shouldn’t feel ashamed that I can’t do things. At least I wasn’t afraid to chase that feller Cork and....”

“At least you weren’t afraid to beat the goat to it, huh?” Westy asked.

“Hah, that’s a joke when you didn’t try to make it,” Ben laughed.

Charlie Nevins waved his pudgy hands toward the table. “Come on folks ... coffee’s ready, sandwiches made,” he said amiably. “There’s nothing like good food and good hot coffee in the stomach when times are troubled. Gather round the festive board! Now as I was saying before, Maj., this will make very good copy....”

And so into this atmosphere crept the dawn—the dawn of a Sierra day.

THE END

[Transcriber’s note: Due to copyright restrictions, the illustrations for this book are not included.]

[The end of *Westy Martin in the Sierras* by Percy Keese Fitzhugh]